

WEALTH *OF THE* VOID

Vargo
Statten



SCION
SCIENCE
FICTION
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Wealth of the Void

By

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Writing under the pseudonym *Vargo Statten*.

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CHAPTER ONE

There was no sound in the lawyer's big private office beyond the deep breathing of that legal gentleman himself. Anybody outside the office, not knowing the circumstances, would have found it impossible to realise that there were four other people present beside the lawyer himself—but they were so concentrated upon him that they might have been graven images. For this was a most vital moment—the reading of a very important last will and testament.

Professor Amos Brailsford had come to the sudden termination of his brilliant scientific career, and there were very few outside the closely knit scientific circle in which he had moved who knew how he had spent his time in the last few years. But what *had* been known was that he had been a man of considerable wealth, a great deal of brilliance, and the possessor of scientific equipment well beyond the range of existing inventions. Though what his actual preoccupation had been up to the time of his death was a mystery. Even to Nancy Brailsford, his daughter, who was now present in the office.

Nancy, a slim, matter-of-fact blonde of twenty-five, although she had lived in the same great house as her father, had very rarely seen him, especially during the last eighteen months. Beside her in the office there sat Isobelle Sutton, her step-sister, composed, dark-headed, waiting with introspective calm for the lawyer to commence the preliminaries.

At the opposite side of the desk were Alec Carter, a rising young constructional engineer and fiancé of Nancy; and next to him Clifford Ashton—tall, well-groomed, never for an instant allowing his emotions to find expression either upon his face or in his movements.

Then presently the lawyer looked up quickly and laid the will on the desk before him.

"I take it," he said, glancing at Isobelle and Nancy in turn, "that neither of you two young ladies had much knowledge of what Professor Brailsford did with his time during the eighteen months leading up to his death?"

"No idea at all," Nancy replied, whilst Isobelle contented herself with a negative shake of her dark head. "I hardly saw my father at all in the last two years, and he was not the kind of man who ever explained his movements. Most of the time he was either in the big laboratory which he had built on to the house, or else he was out of town altogether, or even abroad, upon scientific pursuits or lectures. When we did finally see him it was a fortnight ago. . . ." Nancy's voice broke a little, and she averted her face. "He seemed to be in reasonably good health, except for the fact that he appeared to be exceptionally tired and very much in need of a rest. He did not explain how he had been occupying himself, but from one or two hints that he allowed to drop to Isobelle and I, we gathered that he had been making a most important exploration somewhere. Only he never said *where*. And before there was any opportunity for him to explain himself he died suddenly of heart failure."

The lawyer nodded slowly, a peculiarly rapid smile about his sunken mouth.

"It would surprise you two young ladies to know, and also you two gentlemen, that Professor Brailsford will go down in scientific history as being the first man to leave the Earth and return to it."

Alec Carter gave a start and stared blankly. He was young, good-looking, clean-shaven, with the dark blue eyes of both a thinker and a doer.

"D'you mean to say that he actually conquered interplanetary space?"

"That is exactly what I mean," the lawyer conceded.

“But this is incredible,” Nancy exclaimed. “If he accomplished such a marvellous thing, why in the world did he have to keep it to himself?”

“For the very obvious reason, Miss Brailsford, that there are avaricious men and women—in all quarters of the world who would have put your father’s life in extreme jeopardy had they known what he did.”

“Just what *did* he know?” Clifford Ashton asked quietly, his dark eyes pinning the lawyer steadily.

The lawyer cleared his throat. “Perhaps it will be more to the point if I read you his will, omitting the legal preamble and coming straight to the point. I would ask you to give your most careful attention to this. . .

“I wish it to be known to my daughter Nancy Brailsford and my step-daughter, Isobelle Sutton, together with Clifford Ashton and Alexander Carter that I, Amos Brailsford, am the only man on this planet Earth who has ventured into outer space, not for what might be called the somewhat conventional purpose of visiting the Moon or Mars or Venus, but to visit a planetoid which I have named ZK/70. This planetoid is invisible telescopically from the surface of the Earth and follows a somewhat erratic orbit between Mars, the outermost of the inner planets, and Jupiter the innermost of the outer planets. ZK/70 is a small, twilight planetoid belonging I believe, to the great Asteroidal belt which exists between Mars and Jupiter. I discovered its presence and approximate dimensions purely by the process of mathematics, for I noticed certain perturbations in different quarters of the asteroids which could only be explained by the gravity of a fairly large body. Thus it was by mathematical computation that I determined the approximate position of ZK/70 and arrived at the conclusion that it must be a world of something like fifteen hundred miles in diameter, and because of its smallness, and its distance from the sun, together with the fact that its surface has very little light reflecting quality it had escaped astronomical observation. Certainly one or two astronomers in the past have reported the presence of such a body, but have never been sufficiently confident about it to be able to state its location precisely. Added to this discovery there came shortly afterwards the perfecting of a space projectile, probably the first guided machine in scientific history. I claim no particular credit for this since I created the space projectile upon the various ideas of experts before me, all of which experts had missed some vital point which I, purely by the process of scientific inference, was able to supply. The result was that I built the first atomic power space machine. To have advertised the fact at this point would not have been prudent, since it seemed to me to be a much better plan to test the machine first. What more natural than that I decided to set out for ZK/70?

“To reach ZK/70 took me nearly three weeks moving at very high velocity. I do not propose to explain all the technical details of the landing and my subsequent exploration, but I will say this; planetoid ZK/70 has a breathable air, about the same density as Earth, and more or less in the same composition, and it also has a sub-tropical temperature, not by reason of its proximity to the sun, but by reason of extreme internal volcanic warmth which has not yet died away. Indeed as far as heat from the sun was concerned I found it practically negligible, since planetoid ZK/70 is so far away from the sun that daylight on this tiny little world is little better than full moonlight on Earth. This also means that the stars shine perpetually both by night and by day. Night on planetoid ZK/70 is a rather grim business, since there is nothing but a multitude of stars to light this strange little world, and one has the feeling of being on the rim of Eternity. Day is little better, the sun merely appearing as an extra brilliant star amongst the inconceivable myriads of stars dusted over the eternally cloudless sky.

“But to come now to the essentially vital points—ZK/70 is a *planetoid of gold*! What first appeared to me to be desert of endless sand I discovered afterwards to be nothing more than *gold dust*. This fact is by no means difficult to understand for that an entire world made of gold can exist is entirely as logical as there being a planet with a core made up entirely of nickel iron, as in the case of our own Earth. My analysis showed that ZK/70 has a core of molten gold, whilst the upper stratifications are made up of solid gold rocks. The upper surface, therefore, has been eroded down into dust, as in the case of our earth where the soil is comprised of eroded rocks, but in the case of ZK/70 the eroded gold rocks have of course become gold dust. Therefore planetoid ZK/70 is a world of inconceivable wealth cloaked in endless deserts of priceless yellow dust.

“To my daughter, Nancy, I bequeath this space projectile and all that it contains together with the formulae and specifications belonging thereto. Whilst I am aware that my daughter is not scientific enough to understand the workings of the machine I feel that her fiancé Alexander Carter will readily grasp the details and method of controlling the machine through space. In my laboratory in the steel drawer marked ZK/70 will be found all the necessary cosmic charts for reaching this planetoid. I leave it to my daughter Nancy and her fiancé, Alexander Carter, to decide whether or not they will avail themselves of the possibilities of this space projectile to visit this planetoid as I did. I also leave it open for my step-daughter, Isobelle Sutton, to accompany my daughter and Alexander Carter on their journey; nor have I any objection should Clifford Ashton, the fiancé of my step-daughter, wish to be present on the voyage. Beyond this particular statement all my bequeathments, my financial resources and the residue of my estate at the time of my death I bequeath to my daughter Nancy with certain disposals to my step-daughter as underlined hereunder. . . .”

The lawyer looked up and studied the four faces. At this particular moment the two girls were looking at their respective fiancés, then they turned to the lawyer as he coughed primly.

“There,” he said, “you have the details. If you have any particular question to ask I will do my best to answer it.”

“I have one question anyway,” Nancy exclaimed. “Father here talks of a journey into space to this mysterious planetoid, ZK/70, and then refers to the fact that it is made of solid gold. If that be so, and it is entirely covered with gold dust, why in the world did he not bring some gold dust back with him?”

The lawyer shrugged. “I am a legal man, Miss Brailsford, and not a scientist. I cannot explain why your father took the particular action that he did, or why after visiting a planet fabulously wealthy beyond the dream of avarice, he did not avail himself of the colossal opportunity that he had in his hands.”

Alec Carter gave a sharp glance. “Are we sure that he *didn't* bring back any gold dust?”

“Well I never saw any,” Nancy told him. “And I'm quite sure I didn't,” Isobelle added. “It surely would have been mentioned if he had.”

“You may take it from me,” the lawyer said quietly, “that Professor Brailsford did *not* bring back any gold dust with him. I handled all his affairs, as you know, including his financial resources—and this I can tell you in confidence. His wealth was purely the accumulation produced by his scientific offerings during a long and distinguished career. Had he brought back any gold dust with him from this remote planetoid I would certainly have been the medium through which he would have passed it. As a matter of fact I raised the same question myself when he told me the story of ZK/70 before committing it to his Will, but his

only response when I queried the fact that he had brought no gold dust back with him was to smile.”

“Smile!” Clifford Ashton ejaculated staring. “What on earth was there to smile at? Why couldn’t he explain himself?”

“I just don’t know, Mr. Ashton. That smile is something that I can never quite forget,” the lawyer continued reflecting. “It was whimsical in some way—almost ironic. From it I was left to assume that there was some reason why the fabulous wealth of the planetoid cannot be touched, though what the reason is I am of course quite unqualified to say.”

“I am afraid,” Nancy Brailsford sighed, “that father was a queer old stick in many of the things he did. It would probably be like him to think that digging gold dust from a deserted planet would amount to—er—cosmic theft, so he didn’t do anything about it. But I certainly know what we are going to do about it!”

And, catching her glance, Alec gave her a determined nod.

“I expected,” the lawyer said half smiling, “that would be your reaction. Now I had better give you the remainder of these details which apart from the bequeathments, also include implicit directions on how to reach the site where this space machine of your father’s can be located. . . .”

It was nearing dusk on that same biting January afternoon when the four who had been in the lawyer’s office drove out to the Brailsford hangar in Alec Carter’s powerful saloon. The hangar was situated on a completely isolated field set well back from the main road, and at first glance the big hoarding over the immense double doors nearly caused Alec to go driving straight on down the road. The hoardings said “THE APEX BISCUIT COMPANY” which evidently was one of Professor Brailsford’s neat dodges for keeping an inquisitive public at bay.

“Biscuit Company my foot!” Clifford Ashton muttered, as he sat hunched in the back of the car with Isobelle close beside him.

“Good gag anyway,” Alec Carter commented swinging the wheel of the car so that it turned abruptly to the left from the main road and bounced and bumped down an unmade lane which ended in the open field where the huge hangar stood. Within a few minutes Alec had brought the car to a halt outside the enormous doors. He clambered out, helped Nancy out after him, and then hurried over to the small normal door at the side of the building. It was only a matter of seconds for him to unfasten the complicated, specially made lock—the key for which the lawyer had provided—and then he and Nancy stepped into the vast and gloomy interior. Behind them Clifford and Isobelle came slowly and curiously.

After a certain amount of hunting round Alec finally discovered the power switch and snapped it on. Immediately brilliant light, generated from a source unknown, flooded the hangar with its effulgence.

“I didn’t notice any power wires leading to this place,” Clifford Ashton commented glancing about him. “How do you suppose the old boy got such a marvellous lighting equipment?”

“Seems to me there’s not much of a riddle about that,” Isobelle told him. “Father was absolute dead nuts on atomic power, and from what we’ve seen his space machine is driven by that process, so it’s not a very long stretch of imagination to think that the lighting equipment in here is probably the outcome of atomic batteries. You are supposed to be a bright boy in the electronic world so why not hunt around and see what you can find?”

Clifford's keen eyes gave her a rather doubting glance, but he made no move to implement the suggestion which she had made. In fact his attention and hers, together with that of Alec and Nancy, was centred entirely upon the superbly designed projectile which now loomed before them in the brilliant glare from the roof. The space machine which Professor Brailsford had designed was certainly a masterpiece of streamlined engineering. The outer plates were of a highly polished metal and so neatly positioned that it was almost impossible to see where the welding and riveting came. In appearance the space projectile was shuttle-shaped, with the six powerful jet exhausts grouped in the shape of fins at the rear. In the sides were portholes deeply sunken—three portholes to each side—together with a very large observation window at the front. The glass apparently—if glass it was—was of tremendous thickness, and gave back the reflections of the quartet as they tried to peer into the vessel's darkened interior.

"Well," Clifford said finally, when they had finished their preliminary exterior examination. "There isn't much point in wandering about out here trying to look into Fairyland. That's what it amounts to! You've got the key to the control room, Alec, so why not get busy and get the airlock opened?"

Alec nodded, produced the second key which the lawyer had handed over, and then went to work on the massive clamp which sealed the projectile's airlock on the outside. After perhaps four minutes of fumbling with the unfamiliar locking system he finally got the immensely thick door to move.

It swung open easily and smoothly on perfectly balanced hinges, and as it did so the lighting within the vessel automatically switched itself on, presumably through the action of a photoelectric cell system. Wondering, fascinated, the four entered the control room one by one and looked about them in the soft glow of the sunken lights set deep in the curving roof.

The control room was not particularly large, but it was certainly well constructed. Over the main control bench which in itself was littered with all manner of keys, levers and switches there stretched the main navigating panel. Upon this were all the indicators for velocity, fuel consumption, power-generating voltage, together with the apparatus for giving the reading of external conditions, in the shape of thermometers, humidity-registers, air content analysers, and so forth. From the control bench there led a multitude of massively thick cables all snaking back to an entirely enclosed area at the very far end of the control room. To this Alec immediately moved, and after a moment or two he found that a touch on a switch caused the lead sheath cowling to swing back and reveal the small but immensely efficient power plant within.

"Apparently," he said as Nancy drifted to his side, "your father thought of everything, Nan. This cowling with its heavy lead lining is to prevent any stray radiations from escaping into the control room and causing damage, which is something I have not yet heard of in suggested designs of other space machines."

Nan gave a puzzled little smile.

"As a matter of fact, Alec, I don't know a thing about power generation, atomic force, space flight, or anything else. I'm leaving all that to you because I know that if you don't understand it now you'll take good care that you do in double quick time!"

At the further end of the control room Clifford gave Isobelle a significant glance as, together, they inspected the various switches. They were close enough together for Clifford's next remark not to be overheard by the two who were still inspecting the generating plant.

"If we play our cards properly," Clifford murmured, "all the wealth of this distant planetoid can be ours for the asking. That sister of yours has no more brains than a fly when it

comes to understanding the implications.”

Isabelle gave a quick glance. “Don’t underrate her, Cliff,” she responded, her voice low. “She may not be particularly scientific—which is rather surprising considering her father’s abilities—but she certainly knows how to look after herself. I haven’t lived with her all these years not to know that. And, anyway,” Isabelle continued, vaguely puzzled, “what are you talking about?”

“Tell you later,” Cliff murmured as Alec and Nancy began to return slowly. “I have something very important on my mind, believe me!”

“Altogether,” Alec said as he stood rubbing his hands and glancing about him, “a most excellently designed power system as far as I can see at the moment. Your father, Nan, seems to have designed everything so that it is thoroughly get-attable. If anything goes wrong we can easily rectify it, though since your father made the trip to ZK/70 and came back safely I can’t think why anything *should* go wrong.”

“Suppose we look further,” Isabelle suggested. “As far as I’m concerned, being a woman, I’m not interested in all these mechanics and technicalities, I’m more interested in, shall we say, the domestic sphere. The galley or the bedrooms, for instance. . . . Let’s go, Cliff, and see what we can find.”

She led the way out through the control room’s doorway, a narrow space with a massively thick door swinging on perfectly balanced hinges, and so into the confined catwalk corridor which led through the centre of the ship to the extreme stern. Clifford glanced after her and then followed.

Alec gave Nancy a glance.

“There are times,” he said slowly, “when I rather wish that your sister had not taken on Cliff Ashton as her fiancé. There’s something about the fellow that I just cannot trust. I don’t know whether she sees it or not, but *I* certainly do!”

“I don’t think there’s anything particularly wrong with Cliff,” Nancy replied slowly. “It’s just that he’s naturally possessive, and of course when he is in your company he feels that he has to air his knowledge for both you and he are about on a par as far as scientific accomplishments go.”

Alec reflected. “It isn’t a matter of his accomplishments—Nan—it’s the fellow himself that I’m talking about. There’s something extremely deep about him, and up to now I haven’t discovered what it is. Anyway,” he continued, abruptly changing the subject, “we certainly didn’t come to this space machine to discuss Cliff, so I think we’d better follow him and Isabelle and see what the bedrooms have to offer.”

So the examination of the ship from stem to stern continued. They found six rest rooms in all that could either be used as bedroom, or just normal little living rooms on their own. There was also a much larger chamber which was evidently to be devoted to the business of eating, and, finally, at the rear of the machine, there was the huge storage space which also included the internal part of the atomic exhaust jets. It was in here, as he looked about him, that Cliff Ashton rubbed his hands slowly together in anticipation.

“Now what?” Isabelle asked, giving him a brief glance.

“I was just thinking of the glorious prospect of this store-room loaded to the roof with crates of gold dust! For some reason it doesn’t seem to have occurred to any of you three that we have it in our power to buy and sell the Earth once we have made this trip to ZK/70.”

“For myself,” Alec said rather gruffly, “I’d be more inclined not to count my chickens before they’re hatched.”

Clifford gave him a surprised glance.

“What on earth do you mean by that? We know where the planetoid is, we know that it’s of nothing else but gold, we know that Professor Brailsford visited it and that he returned, and we also know that he wouldn’t tell a story like that just for the sake of it.”

“We also know,” Alec pointed out, “that he did not bring back any gold dust with him! And the reason why he didn’t has not been solved. That is why I say we shouldn’t count our chickens before they’re hatched.”

“I think,” Nancy put it, “that the explanation for Dad not bringing any dust back with him is the perfectly simple one that he probably considered that he was wealthy enough already. And in that he wasn’t far wrong! Dad had a profound disregard for money as such, as I well remember. His interests were entirely scientific, and probably the thought of being able to buy and sell the Earth with the gold dust didn’t interest him in the slightest.”

“Well it interests me,” Clifford exclaimed. “And if you three are anything like the people I think you are it will interest you too!”

Then as there was no response he nodded his head towards the control room. “Let’s get in there and discuss this thing properly. Seems to me that we need to get ourselves sorted out.” With that he turned towards the door, allowed the two girls to go ahead of him, then he followed them up into the control room, Alec behind him. Here under the bright roof light they looked at one another.

“Of course,” Clifford admitted with a quick glance out of his dark eyes, “I fully admit that I am probably talking out of turn since if I do come on this trip it will only be with the permission of you three. Or, if we are to split hairs, you alone, Nancy, can say whether I can come or not.”

“Well of course you can!” Nancy exclaimed, spreading her hands. “What in the world is there to prevent it. After all, Isabelle will certainly be coming—I suppose?”

“You suppose right,” Isabelle conceded promptly. “And if we’re going to get down to technicalities, Nan, I would, remind you that Dad said that Cliff would come on the trip, which is enough reason why he should.”

“In that case then,” Clifford said, “there is nothing more to be settled except the date of departure. Any ideas on that, Alec?”

Alec gave a moody glance. “I haven’t had time to think it out yet.”

“Think it out!” Cliff looked at him blankly. “Seems to me that this matter doesn’t *require* thinking out. We’ve got everything here that we need—except for provisions of course, which we could very soon fix. Then, off we go!”

“Just like that, eh?” Alec gave a wry smile. “You seem to forget that one can’t suddenly leap into space and let it go at that. If I’m to be in charge of this vessel——”

“Most certainly you are,” Nancy declared firmly. “I wouldn’t have it otherwise.”

“All right then. If I’m to be in charge of this vessel I’ve got to find out how it works, and I don’t expect to do that in five minutes. A space machine is something right outside my ordinary knowledge, and it will take me a little time to work out the details. Probably I’ll have a pretty good system worked out by the time another week’s passed, and during that period the necessary provisions, weapons and all the rest of it can be obtained, and the route we are to take to ZK/70 can be thoroughly examined.”

“Fair enough,” Cliff agreed spreading his hands. “As for our particular commitments on Earth here, we can very soon deal with those—at least as far as I’m concerned. You see, we have to adapt ourselves to the extraordinary thought that nothing on Earth here really matters

any more, for when we return we shall have so much wealth we shall be able to decide upon what we wish to do for the rest of our lives. And as far as I am concerned I have a particular leaning towards a life of absolute luxury—with you by my side of course, Isobelle,” he added, glancing at her and smiling.

“I’m glad you managed to think of me amidst it all,” Isobelle responded coolly.

“Oh, come now, you don’t have to take it like that! I’m only trying to think for all of us since Alec here seems to have been plunged into the deepest gloom ever since hearing that he can visit a planet full of gold dust. No accounting for some people I suppose!”

Alec sighed and gave Nancy a glance from under his eyes, “I’m trying,” he said deliberately, “to keep things in their proper perspective. I’ve no intentions of dashing off half-cocked to another world without having every detail worked out before hand. And, believe it or not, I cannot rid myself of a constant uneasiness every time I think of Professor Brailsford’s failure to bring back gold dust with him. *Why?* Why didn’t he bring it back when he had the opportunity? In no possible way that I can think of does it make sense. . . .”

CHAPTER TWO

It was late that evening when the four returned to the Brailsford residence. Immediately dinner was over they retired to the lounge to consider in more detail their plans for departure a week hence. As usual it was Cliff who did most of the talking whilst Alex contented himself with merely nodding or putting in an observation here and there. To Nancy, knowing him so well, it was plain that his intolerance of Clifford was ever deepening.

"I believe," Clifford said, the brightness in his dark eyes being the only betrayal of his emotions, "that when we have visited ZK/70 and gathered all the gold we reasonably can we should return to Earth and form a financial company. It is, of course, a fact that if we unload unlimited gold dust on the financial market we'll kill our own chances, for the simple reason that an unlimited supply of gold will wreck the financial basis of currency, at least as far as those countries who use the gold standard are concerned. So we'll have to take care how we handle things: I am quite prepared to——"

"I think," Alex intervened with a certain irritation, "that it would be a good idea if, in these early stages, we confined ourselves to working out *how* we are going to get to ZK/70 and leave the prospects of this cosmic Eldorado until last."

"As you like," Clifford shrugged. "You seem so damned gloomy about the whole business I thought I'd better try and put some life into things."

"Alec isn't gloomy," Nancy hastened to explain, "he's just doing a lot of thinking for all of us."

"Why?" Alec muttered driving his fist into his palm. "Why? Professor Brailsford had before him a world full of gold, and he didn't bring back a single nugget! If only I could think of a *reason*."

"I thought Nan had already covered that," Isobelle said rather wearily. "For heaven's sake, Alex, let us keep on the track. What about the navigation side of this journey? Are you going to handle that, Cliff?"

"I certainly am," he nodded promptly. "I've never done any navigating in my life before, mind you, but I'll try anything once! Beside, it strikes me as being a darn sight easier than trying to fly a space machine. I prefer to leave that to Alec's engineering genius. After all, I am not an engineer—only an electronics specialist, which may come in handy in the matter of radio and the analysis of cosmic radiations when we are in space."

"As far as I can see from the Professor's observations," Alec said slowly, wading through the sheafs of notes that had been extracted from the special drawer in the laboratory annex to the house, "the Professor makes no particular reference to any dangers in outer space. I always thought that there would be some from radiations, meteorites and so forth, but that apparently is an ungrounded fear. The course of the journey itself seems plain enough, straight on from Earth, charting it so that we miss the orbit of Mars, or rather the *proximity* of Mars, and by so doing side-step the unpleasant prospect of being caught in his gravitation. Then straight on towards the asteroids and, at a distance of four million miles from ZK/70 it should become visible telescopically. At least he did to the Professor so I suppose he will do to us."

Alec seemed suddenly to brighten as though he had resolutely cast overboard whatever personal distaste he had for Cliff Ashton. He continued: "It's settled then. You, Cliff, take over the navigation and radio side, and I'll take over the control of the vessel and become the

nominal commander thereof. You, Nan, I delegate to make arrangements for all the necessary food, clothing and weapons which we may need—you can consult me about the weapons, of course—and you, Isabelle, will have the job of being a kind of glorified domestic.”

“Kind of you,” Isabelle said, and raised her eyebrows sharply. “For your information, Alec, I’ve never done any domestic work in my life, and I don’t intend to start now!”

“And for your information, Isabelle,” Alec told her doggedly, “as the commander of the vessel I delegate you to that task! Everybody has to do a particular share.”

“Well, then, find me something else! I don’t intend to be head cook and bottle-washer on a space flight for anybody!”

“Better do as he says,” Clifford grinned. “One can’t argue with the captain you know!”

“I have a personal stake in it just the same,” Isabelle retorted hotly. “What’s wrong with Nancy doing that job? When she’s made all the arrangements for provisions, clothing and all the rest of it she’ll have nothing more to do, unless you suggest that she sit and guard them all the way to ZK/70 or something like that!”

“Nancy’s job,” Alec said patiently, “will be that of our loggist. It will be her duty to record all the details of the space flight in the form of a ship’s log, make whatever photographs I decide shall be made, and all the rest of the detailed work. I am choosing her to do that particular task because she is much more at my side than you are, Isabelle. During that time somebody has got to look after the meals and see that the travellers are fed. And that, Isabelle, is to be your task!”

Isabelle reflected, her cold, sophisticated face plainly revealing her inward bitterness of her reaction to Alec’s suggestion. Apparently she was not going to take the thing in a good spirit: she simply regarded the assignment which had been given her as a slight upon her dignity.

“No use looking like that,” Cliff told her bluntly. “On a trip like this you have to earn your passage, and if it has to be done by becoming head cook and bottle washer the thing to do is put a good face on it and let it go at that!”

Isabelle wrinkled her nose slightly. “Well, considering that there is an infinity of gold dust at the end of it, I suppose I can tolerate the beastly job of providing food and clearing it away again!”

Alec gave her a glance but said no more upon the subject, his decision having been made. From hereon, if he was to get everything properly organised, he would have no opportunity of considering the personalities involved in his arrangements. Flying into outer space to an unknown world was hardly a project where he could consider the personal whims of the travellers concerned. He, too, had his personal problems if it came to that, for he had to swallow his inward dislike of Cliff Ashton and consult with him upon the route they would take for the journey.

So the initial details began to take shape and were hammered out in the warm comfort of the great lounge. It was in the early hours of the morning when matters were organised to Alec’s satisfaction that he and Cliff took their departure.

The following day, acting under Alec’s directions, Nancy set about ordering the necessary provisions, clothes and weapons for the journey whilst Alec himself went into the complicated problem of working out exactly how the space machine was controlled. In this it was essential that he had Cliff with him in case of an emergency so that he, too, would know how to handle matters should Alec by any means become incapacitated.

Nan and Isobelle, never on particularly good terms even in normal circumstances, were almost estranged in the week that followed. Plainly Isobelle regarded herself as the “odd girl out” in that she had nothing whatever to do until aboard the vessel. She made it plain that she did not in the least like Nan having a job of doing all the buying of the ship, while she—Isobelle—could only perambulate between the house and the hangar and watch the slow development of the initial preparations.

But a week later all these personal idiosyncrasies were forgotten in the excitement of the departure moment, which Alex had fixed for eight o’clock in the evening of January 21st. Every detail complete and all personal matters and responsibilities either settled or left in abeyance the four arrived at the hangar at seven forty-five p.m., Alec driving his car straight into the great hangar itself and afterwards lowering the great doors to the closed position.

It was not a very long task to garage the car in the special section of the hangar devoted to that purpose, then Alec led the way to the space machine and, after a moment or two, Nancy, Isobelle and Cliff followed him into the control-room. There was a moment’s pause as Alec pressed the switch which controlled the photo-electric cell which caused the two halves of the hangar roof to open wide. Overhead, clearly visible in the prismatic scanners in front of the control-board was the open starry sky. The night was cold and clear, ideally suited for the departure.

“Well,” Alec said after a moment or two, “this is *it!* I’m not trying to be melodramatic, or anything like that, but the fact does remain that we stand on the threshold of an adventure never before experienced except by Professor Brailsford himself. It is the sort of moment when we should bury all personal idiosyncrasies and prepare ourselves for——”

“Oh for heaven’s sake cut it out!” Clifford exclaimed. “You sound like a school-teacher, man! We know exactly what we’re facing and not one of us is afraid of either, so let’s get started.”

“I was going to say,” Alec continued doggedly, “that there is a certain solemnity about this moment which we ought to recognise. So much so that I don’t think a few words of prayer would do any harm.”

The others did not speak, but so earnest was Alec in his attitude and so devout the prayer with which he followed it up, that they bowed their heads and waited until he was finished.

“Ready now?” Cliff asked him rather drily.

“This control-room,” Alex replied, “in the first place was obviously designed for only one person—Professor Brailsford himself—therefore there is only one controlling seat. I am the commander of the vessel, and I shall be at the switches. But I do not consider that I should use my superior position to advantage. You can take the seat, Cliff, and I’ll stand. The girls can go along to their respective rooms and lie down. Believe me, it’s going to be necessary whilst we’re in the midst of the take-off. Our velocity has naturally got to be pretty high for us to escape Earth’s gravitational field.”

“We’ll stay right where we are,” Isobelle said flatly. “We’re in this adventure just as much as you men are, and what you two can stand, so can we.”

“That,” Cliff told her bluntly, “isn’t even common-sense! You’ll go and lie down and like it!”

“He’s right,” Alec confirmed as Nan gave him a questioning glance. “It’s going to take us all our time to stand up to what’s coming. We don’t want the added burden of you two on our hands as well. Go along to your rooms, like good girls. We’ll meet you again when the take-off velocity has ceased.”

There was a momentary hesitation, Isobelle being obviously the most reluctant to comply, but at length she turned from the control room and followed Nancy along the narrow corridor which led to the sleeping quarters. After a moment their respective steel doors shut tightly, then Alec gave Cliff a glance.

“Take the seat, Cliff, it’s all yours.”

Cliff grinned. “What kind of a weak-kneed jellyfish do you think I am? What you can take, so can I—and probably a damned sight more too!”

“I am not thinking so much of you particularly, as of all of us,” Alec told him. “It’s essential that one of us should remain conscious during this take-off, even though most of the controlling will be automatic. If I should black-out, you will be able to carry on—that is, if you put yourself in that seat which will absorb a great deal of the strain.”

In response Cliff turned away and took up his position before the navigational charts. He put his feet a little apart and his powerful hands gripped the edge of the control bench. Alec gave him a long look.

“I’m staying right here,” Cliff said resolutely. “I can stand the take-off whether standing here or lying down, and so can you. So let’s leave the seat for a time when it might be needed, which certainly isn’t now!”

Alec did not argue any further. He moved to a position directly in front of the control switches and then gave a final glance about him to be assured that all was in order. After a moment he pressed the button of the intercom telephone and asked a question which was immediately relayed to the nearby bedrooms.

“Everything all right in there, girls?”

“Everything,” came Nancy’s cheerful voice.

“What are we waiting for?” came Isobelle’s.

Alec grinned a little then switched off before moving the lever which automatically closed the massive airlock. The clamps shut tightly, there was a faint hiss of air as the rubber sheathing sealed itself. The dye was cast. . . .

“Ready?” Alec asked briefly with a glance towards Cliff.

“Entirely.” Cliff’s face was taut, his hands still gripping the edge of the control board, his eyes fixed on the cosmic chart spread out on the board below him.

A switch snapped, and immediately the electrical current was transferred to the generating plant. It announced itself in a deep throbbing moan which rapidly climbed up the scale until it became the ear-splitting whine of maximum output. Once this stage was reached, clearly indicated on one of the many meters immediately above Alec’s head, he moved the power lever into the first notch. This meant that the entire output of the generating plant was instantly transferred to the rocket jets at the rear of the vessel.

The machine quivered, then with a sense of ever-mounting speed it travelled diagonally through the roof of the hangar and cleaved upwards into the starry night. The cabin being gyroscopically controlled it remained quite level, but through the outlook window there was the astonishing vision of a myriad lights dancing and swaying as the projectile hurtled with ever-increasing rapidity towards the sky.

Upon two separate screens, controlled by prisms which gave a rear view of the vessel there came the awe-inspiring vision of cascades of exhaust sparks from the jets, exhausts which became brighter and redder and fiercer as power was piled upon power with the moving of the lever to its maximum position.

Undoubtedly one of the major distractions of the take-off was the appalling noise. The power plant itself made such a whining din that it would have been impossible for the two men to hear themselves speak had they chosen—which they didn't—but added to this was the soul-shaking whistle of the rocket exhausts themselves, the ear-splitting output of four banks of jets working at maximum. And linked to this intolerable row was the overwhelming downward pressure which existed as the normal fourteen pounds to the square inch began to double and treble itself, weighing down the two men as they resolutely stood at the switchboards their feet straddled, their faces white, their eyes staring fixedly at the instruments or else straining to peer through the observation window.

This was hell itself, this hurtling into the abyss which lay beyond the Earth's atmosphere.

In the two bedrooms, the girls had already perforce given up the struggle. Entirely uninitiated in the strains of acceleration they had already flattened out in the air beds on which they lay. Nancy had made something of a fight against the overwhelming tide of blackness which had now completely enveloped her, but Isabelle had accepted the whole thing calmly and had gone down without a struggle as though she were under an anesthetic. And, so far, the upward movement of the take-off was only half completed.

After several anguishing moments Cliff turned a rigid, drawn face upon which droplets of perspiration stood out in the bright lights.

"Bet you one thing," he gasped out, his jaw hardly able to move under the terrific strain, "and that is, that I'll beat you to the deadline."

Alec turned his head slowly to look at him.

"The sooner you get it through your thick head that this is not an endurance test between us two but just a normal take-off, the better!"

Cliff smiled tautly and turned back to the charts, then with a tremendous effort he heaved himself up a little and peered downwards through the great outlook window. All suggestion of a horizon had gone, and there was an enormous arc in the void upon which were patterned the twinkling entirely unfamiliar lights of the night side of Earth. Down there was spread England, all the map of Europe, and indeed most of the United States and Canada and right out to the Arctic Circle. Apparently the weather was fine over practically all of the nightward hemisphere. Then gradually even this effort of concentration was too much for Cliff, and he could begin to feel his knees begin to shake appallingly with the continued, unrelieved strain. Alec was obviously undergoing the same physical anguish, but he kept at his post, his feet wide apart and his powerful hands gripping the control switches. Had he been alone he would probably have succumbed quite a while back and let the automatic control do everything, but in spite of the fact that he had said that this was not an endurance test between him and Cliff, he would not allow his senses to black out as long as Cliff's remained in being. It had somehow become a matter of personal pride to both men that they survive together to the deadline—or in other words, the extremity of the escape velocity when the acceleration would cease.

And to reach this deadline seemed to take an eternity. By the time it was finally gained both men were nearly on their knees, hanging desperately to the instrument bench, and by sheer will-power and nothing else forcing themselves to remain conscious.

Then, with startling abruptness the automatic control operated and cut out the current to the jets. Acceleration instantly ceased, and from labouring under the terrific strain both men suddenly found themselves as light as air and nearly lifting towards the ceiling. The gravity as such had completely gone, for what there was was somewhere in the centre of the ship which

in itself had become a tiny little world and therefore had mass. Alec was entirely ready for this occurrence, and catching hold of one of the switchboard stanchions he pulled himself down in much the same way as an underwater swimmer propels himself towards the surface. He lay for a moment, horizontal and operated the switches quickly, slowly increasing the velocity until there was an acceleration sufficient to produce a pressure identical to that existing on the surface of the Earth. This done he relaxed and drew his forearm over his moist face.

“Well,” Cliff grinned, pushing back his disordered hair. “We made it, and come to think of it old Professor Brailsford must have been something of a tough nut to stand a take-off as violent as that!”

“Brailsford,” Alec said, “was a wily old bird, and I will gamble everything I’ve got that he spent the take-off lying down as comfortably as the girls are doing, letting the automatic controls do the rest. We’re the fools for throwing such a terrific amount of strain on to our constitutions—anyway let’s forget it and see how the girls are getting on.”

They both turned towards the control-room doorway, but at that moment Nancy and Isobelle themselves came in. They were looking white and strained, their eyes seeming incredibly dark in the powerful top light beaming down from the roof.

“From the look of things,” Isobelle said, her voice a trifle shaken but still by no means nervous. “We’ve accomplished the first step. That is if the view from the porthole in my bedroom is any guide.”

Cliff moved over to her and put an arm about her shoulders, not so much affectionately as protectingly.

“At the moment,” he said, glancing towards the meters, “we’re many thousands of miles from Earth and going strong. We continue to maintain our present velocity until we come within range of ZK/70, which certainly won’t be for quite a while yet. Eh, Alec?”

“Be about two weeks, as near as I can tell,” Alec responded, and Nancy came over to his side.

“I suppose,” she said, peering through the outlook port, “that we have now done the worst part of the trip?”

Alec gave her a dubious glance.

“I’m afraid, Nan, that I’d be a bit of a fool to say that. Let’s say that we’ve taken the first hurdle. We don’t know what there is ahead of us in space, and your father’s notes were by no means conclusive. The next problem will be to counteract the gravity of the Moon, across whose orbit we shall very soon pass, and after that we shall have to circumnavigate the gravity field of Mars and last of all we face the real problem of the asteroids.”

“I maintain that the asteroids are not a problem,” Cliff said. “They are merely comprised of tens of thousands of small meteoric bodies and as such they don’t represent a mass attraction that don’t need to worry us.”

“That’s true enough,” Alec acknowledged, “but you mustn’t forget that those tens of thousands of meteoric rocks have to be avoided somehow for the simple reason that ZK/70 is in the midst of them. Going through those asteroids and all of them moving in various directions and each having a particular gravitating field—slight as it may be—will be something like trying to nose one’s way through a minefield.”

“Well,” Cliff said, “since we got this far we certainly finish the job, or at any rate one or two of us will . . .”

Isobelle caught his brief significant glance, and her mouth tightened a little. Alec and Nan, for their part, were too absorbed for the moment in the majestic view from the window to

notice Isobelle's and Cliff's exchange.

"This," Alec declared, his arm about Nancy's shoulder, "is a sight for the Gods! Look at the sweep of it, the majesty, and the depthlessness!"

Nancy did not reply; she was satisfied enough with the strong arm which was about her shoulders. Cliff looked at them for a moment or two, studied his charts, and then asked a question.

"Is there any particular need to remain on duty, commander, or can one stroll about and view the void from different directions?"

"Do just as you like," Alec answered him. "There's nothing particular which needs looking after at the moment. It's just a case of going on and on and taking it in turn at the controls."

To which Cliff gave a nod then motioned his head sideways, a signal which Isobelle understood. She went out of the control-room ahead of him, and after a moment or two they entered the section of the ship which could be regarded as the "living-room".

"The cooing of the turtle doves rather gets on my nerves," Cliff said, pulling a cigarette from his case, "but then I suppose romance is a pretty silly business at the best of times. Damn!—" he broke off, looking at his cigarette. "I'd forgotten that no smoking is allowed in a space ship. Ah, well, have to put it down to privation number one."

He put it back in his case then wandered over to where Isobelle had seated herself on the broad padded seat under the main porthole. She surveyed the view outside in silence, finding it hard to realise that this was the real thing and not some cleverly painted backdrop. Out there were the icily glittering stars and the three-quarter moon towards which they were hurtling. Almost to the rear, so blindingly brilliant that only the briefest glance could be directed towards it, was the prominence-edged sun, with his supremely beautiful corona flashing out into untold millions of miles into space. Here was something which Earth-born dwellers could never have conceived even with the wildest of imaginations. Something which had the impress of the Almighty Himself.

"We have things to talk about, my dear," Cliff said, settling himself beside Isobelle and joining her in gazing through the window.

"Meaning Alec and Nancy I suppose?"

"Naturally. Our plans are not even formulated yet, but I think you have a pretty good idea at what I am driving at."

Isabelle made a restless movement. "To be perfectly frank, I cannot find a good deal of favour with the scheme that is at the back of your mind, Cliff. Though you haven't come out into the open and told me exactly what you intend to do, you certainly intimated plainly enough that you do not agree to the gold of the Planetoid ZK/70 being divided between four people."

"Why should it be when two people, you and I, can handle it so much better? Gold in the quantity that we are going to get it means nothing less than world domination, and believe me, Isobelle, when world domination is at stake I have not got a single scruple!"

"You seem to have forgotten, that after all, Nan *is* my half-sister."

"I hadn't forgotten anything. Nan is a nice girl and Alec is a thorough-paced fellow, but in the matter of a Planetoid filled with gold, one cannot allow one's heart to rule one's head. That is the first law of business."

Isabelle got to her feet. She seemed suddenly to have tired of the view from the window and instead began a slow walk round the confined area of the room. Cliff's dark, keen eyes

watched her every movement, then after a moment or two he also rose and moved swiftly to her. He rested her in mid movement, his hands gripping her shoulders.

"I hope," he said slowly, "that you are not thinking of backing out in any way?"

"I didn't say that."

"True, but forgive me if I'm saying that your manner is not overwhelmingly enthusiastic. I'm afraid you're in this, Isabelle, up to the neck as much as I am, it would be a thousand pities if the control of Planetoid ZK/70 fell entirely to one person instead of two."

Isabelle's eyes were suddenly wide and startled.

"Are you—are you daring to threaten *me*, Cliff?"

Cliff laughed. "I am not threatening anything. I'm merely pointing out a most obvious fact—namely, that if you don't tag along with me you will obviously side with Alec and Nancy, and believe me I don't intend to stand for that! I have quite a regard for you, Isabelle, and I am fully prepared to let you share in whatever gains there are to be made from unlimited supplies of gold, but on the other hand I must have the assurance that you *are* with me. I could find myself in a most unenviable position if you decided to tell Alec or Nancy of my plans."

"It wouldn't be very easy to do that, for the simple reason that I don't know what your plans are."

Cliff considered his finger-nails for a moment. "I intend, when we reach ZK/70, to 'dispose' of Nan and Alec in the cleanest and swiftest way possible. I don't intend anything messy or lingering, just the complete removal of both of them from the scheme of things. You know," Cliff continued, "it is a most unique thought, that one can commit murder in space and not be responsible to the law for having done it. When we return to Earth, the absence of Alec and Nancy can most easily be explained as one of the accidents of exploration, and no questions asked because nobody will be able to prove otherwise. And they, on the other hand, will have been removed from this world of cares, leaving us with all the gold that can possibly be amassed. I hope I don't shock you too much, my dear?"

Isabelle did not respond. She still seemed to be having immense difficulty in bringing her mind in line with Cliff's. Though she would not admit it, even to herself, something had happened since she had left Earth. Despite a strangely hardened outlook towards life, which had lent to her, in her normal sphere, an almost intolerable sophistication, the tremendous impact of infinity had left its mark. She was at heart a sensitive enough woman, though in a very different way from Nancy. She also knew that she had never been in Professor Brailsford's thoughts as Nancy had been, for after all she had been his own daughter. It had been this feeling of being slightly out of things which had led Isabelle to adopt her worldly attitude. But now . . . there *was* something different, and she was not psychologist enough to realise that it was space itself which was responsible. The immensity and grandeur of it had impressed itself deeply upon her sensitive mind with the result that Cliff's entirely worldly plans now seemed somehow nauseating.

"One would think," Cliff remarked, "that I had never said a word! At least do me the courtesy of making a comment after all I have had to say!"

"I'm sorry, Cliff, but I don't just know what comment to make."

"For a girl of your intelligence that is a particularly ridiculous remark!"

"Maybe it is, but I still can't help wondering if the original idea of a company run by four people is so outlandish after all. This planetoid has more gold than you or I can use no matter what we do, so why do you have to resort to violence in order to retain control over everything? So why not let things pan out as arranged, and let it go at that?"

“And do you think for one moment that Alec would be content to let control be equally divided among the four of us? If you do you are a far bigger simpleton than I ever gave you credit for. Alec has only one idea in mind, and that is the exercise of complete authority as to what should be done with planetoid ZK/70. Nancy, of course, will not be able to get a word in edgeways. He’ll see to that!”

Cliff, who had dropped his hands from Isobelle’s shoulders, suddenly got up again and gripped her—fiercely this time.

“Don’t be such a little fool, Isobelle. You know perfectly well that I am mature enough to be able to handle anything that may be connected with this planetoid, and you, for your allegiance, can be the wife of the richest man on Earth. Why, great heavens, the money that we shall have will make the most influential Indian Rajah seem like a pauper by comparison! Don’t tell me you’re going to turn down a chance like that just because of a lot of silly sentiment. . . . What is Nan to you, anyway? She’s only your step-sister, and from what I’ve been able to gather she isn’t frightfully enamoured of you. As for Alec, he doesn’t mean a thing as far as you’re concerned!”

“Oh, don’t I?” Alec had just come in at the doorway, and he looked at the two in some curiosity. “And what have I done, Isobelle, to suddenly merit the cold shoulder?”

“Nothing,” Isobelle muttered. “It’s just one of Cliff’s fool remarks.”

“I suppose,” Cliff said, lounging forward, “to ask to what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?”

Alec eyed him. “Whether it be a pleasure or not, Cliff, it is for you to say. My reason for coming along is simply to tell you that it is time we had a meal. And since Isobelle has consented to be the head cook and bottle-washer it is time she did a little work.”

“All right,” Isobelle assented. “I’ll go and see what I can rustle together.”

She left the room and Alec lounged forward towards the table. He seated himself and then sat looking at Cliff as he gazed thoughtfully out of the porthole.

“Dreaming dreams, Cliff?”

Cliff turned abruptly and gave his disarming smile.

“Who wouldn’t be when there’s a whole world of gold ahead of us. Incidentally, I’ve just been thinking—since this planetoid is composed entirely of gold instead of iron like most planets, I assume that it must be densely heavy?”

“Very heavy indeed,” Alec agreed. “In fact it was its extreme heaviness and therefore its pretty powerful gravitational field, that made its presence noticeable to Professor Brailsford. When you come to think of it the weight of iron, atomically that is, is only 55.8, whereas the weight of gold is 197.2. And that is one hell of a difference! On the other hand, though we have the advantage that this planetoid is only small, whereas Earth is by comparison quite large, so I anticipate that the gravity will be quite heavy but not insupportably so. In any event we’ll find out soon enough when we get there.”

To this Cliff made no response. He returned to his window-gazing, lost in thought. Then presently Isobelle reappeared and began to silently set out the table for a meal. In the midst of it a thought suddenly seemed to strike her.

“Incidentally, where’s Nan all this time?”

“Looking after the control-room. Seemed to me that this was as good a chance as any for her to get accustomed to the task since we shall all have to take it in turns during the journey while the others get some rest. As I said earlier there is not much chance of us running into

any trouble in the early part of the trip, since the control itself is automatic we've nothing very much to worry about."

Isabelle nodded and said no more. When at length the meal was set out in readiness, mainly composed of concentrates and special restorative liquids in special sealed vessels, Alec got to his feet and left the room. It was the signal for Cliff to turn from the observation window and come to take his seat at the table. He gave Isabelle a brief glance as she settled beside him.

"Remember what I told you," he said quietly. "You're in this as much as I am, Isabelle, and I would hate to have to use all my gold on my own."

Isabelle gave him a contemptuous glance.

"That I find particularly hard to believe."

They had no chance for a further exchange for at that moment Alec returned with Nan beside him. They took their seats at the table, and the meal began.

"D'you think there might be any chance of finding life on this planetoid?" Nan asked after a while.

"According to your father there isn't any," Alec replied. "Of course there's no guarantee that he stayed long enough to fully examine the planetoid, which might account for his assertion. In any case there's no point in us conjecturing what we're going to find. We'll discover everything soon enough."

"Yes," Isabelle agreed thoughtfully. "I suppose we shall. . . ."

"What have you been up to?" Nan asked her sharply, giving her a glance.

"Up to?" Isabelle looked surprised. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"My dear Izzy, I know you so well. For some reason you're decidedly worried, and I can't think why on earth you should be. You've got Cliff here, and ahead of you there is untold wealth, so why do you have to be so depressed?"

"I'm not depressed," Isabelle retorted impatiently. "After all you can hardly expect me to be resolutely normal after what we have been through, and indeed what we are still to go through. Not everybody is gifted with your placid outlook, unfortunately."

Nan laughed slightly. "I'm not placid by any means, don't you think it! But at least I haven't got something on my mind as you have."

"What is this?" Cliff asked, raising his eyebrows. "A psychoanalysis or what?"

"I'm doing a bit of rooting," Nan explained. "On this journey into space there ought to be absolute team spirit and comradeship—but I'm afraid there isn't—so all I can do is get my mind to work and ask myself—what can the trouble be? It cannot be financial worries, health worries, or even romantic worries—unless you and Cliff have fallen out about something."

"That's a good one," Cliff remarked, busy with his meal. "Isabelle and I mean far too much to each other to ever fall out."

"Then," Nan decided, "it must be the gold. When you come to think of it gold has caused more trouble than almost anything else in history. Not necessarily gold itself, but at least wealth and power. I hope, Izzy, that you're not getting any delusions of grandeur about this project?"

Isabelle did not reply. She went on eating steadily, but she gave an occasional covert glance towards Cliff. He remained entirely unmoved, even though he must have been aware of the intense scrutiny being directed towards him, both by Nan and by Alec.

"I think," Alec said presently, "that our time can be spent to much better advantage than in analysing each others reactions to this journey. It is only natural that our nervous systems have

been under tremendous strain, and therefore the reaction is now setting in. As the leader of this expedition I am making a law—namely, that we do not question each other or comment upon our behaviour for the simple reason that, surrounded completely by unparalleled circumstances, we cannot be expected to behave as we would on Earth. We'll do our jobs, remain as friendly as we possibly can, and leave it at that.”

“Suits me,” Cliff said, grinning. “No use picking on Isobelle anyway. She’s a woman remember, and you know how moody they get at times!”

Isobelle’s eyes flashed for a moment in resentment, and then she cooled down again. Cliff was smiling at her, completely bland, and she wondered in her innermost heart how he could look so supremely sublime. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

So the journey through space continued. Maintaining a constant velocity, which produced an Earth-norm gravity, the space projectile finally crossed the orbit of the Moon, being at a distance of some five thousand miles from the satellite. It was at this point that the obviously strained relationships of the quartet were submerged for a while in the interest of surveying Earth's satellite at close quarters. Not that the Moon appeared any different now that it was being viewed at short range.

The side turned towards the travellers was drenched in the blazing light of noonday, and therefore the depression and craters of the surface were not so clear as they would have been had the sunlight been diagonal. All that they saw, as the space machine hurtled onwards, was the everlasting glaring whiteness of the volcanic plains, and the sprawling darker grey areas of the dead sea bottoms. That the satellite was utterly dead and airless was more than obvious, the hosts of the stars riding straight to the edge of the rocky globe, a phenomenon which would not have been possible had there been an intervening luna atmosphere.

When the moon was behind gradually receding into the gulf, there lay ahead a blank stretch of nearly thirty-six million miles to the orbit of Mars. Mars itself hung at the moment like an inconceivably distant ruby, the absolute airlessness of space making it possible even at this distance to behold Mars as a disc instead of the glimmering speck which marked the presence of a star.

"It seems a pity," Nan remarked at length, "that we can't visit Mars after all the talk there has been about it, to say nothing of the various assumptions there have been concerning it. Can we not detour and just have a look?"

"Not on this journey," Alec decided firmly. "It's not as though I'm not just as anxious as you are to have a look at the planet, but we have only a certain amount of fuel, and if we start frittering it away on quests that don't really count, it may run out, then what sort of a mess should we be in?"

"Good old Alec," Cliff murmured, grinning. "Always thinks of the details. If I'd been the commander of this ship I'd have said let's go to Mars and be damned to the consequences."

"And probably leave us stranded in the void," Isobelle commented, glancing at him.

Cliff said no more, and neither did the others. The thrill of having seen the moon at close quarters was now dying away, and since there was nothing ahead of them except the prospect of a long journey they broke up once again and returned to the varied tasks upon which they had been engaged when the proximity of the Moon had caused them to forget everything else. For there was quite a deal to be done. Nancy was kept very busy during the duty periods with logging all the particular details of the journey—the velocity, the mathematical angles of the stars as seen from space, the quality of the light and spectroscope readings of the more important fixed stars, and indeed everything that was liable to be of use to astronomical experts when the return to Earth had been made.

Cliff for his part was kept busy constantly charting the course, and Isobelle, as she had agreed, was doing her best to keep the domestic side of the trip on an even keel. When these tasks were done there was nothing else for it but to sleep or sit at the windows and view Infinity or, more rarely, to engage in conversation. Not that there was much time for this as far as Nancy and Alec were concerned, for one or other of them was always separated by the

demands of duty, and Cliff and Isobelle seemed to have little to say to each other. They both knew why, of course, but since Cliff had the whip hand of the situation he was not in the least troubled by Isobelle's studied efforts to avoid him. She knew, too, that she must do exactly as he had ordered, otherwise her life would be in jeopardy. There was no question whatever but that Cliff had become completely blinded to everything but the overpowering lure of infinite gold. And, as he had said himself, he was prepared to throw everything and everybody overboard to make his control of that gold absolute.

There came a time when at last the machine, completely unhindered by anything untoward in the depths of space, crossed the orbit of Mars but at such a distance from him, that whatever observations there were to be made had to be done telescopically. Nan did most of this and found it an extremely interesting task, even though the appearance of Mars was in no way different from what it had always been. In any case Mars was not the objective: all attention was now concentrated upon the far distant asteroids in the midst of which haze of countless thousands of meteoric bodies there reposed their goal—planetoid ZK/70. At this distance it was not possible to distinguish it individually amidst the haze of heavenly bodies. The only way in which its presence could be detected was by means of the specially devised mathematical calculators aboard the ship which responded only to atomic weight—that is to say, the main instrument sent forth a radar beam for many millions of miles, at least to the point where ZK/70 was known to exist, and once contact was established an echo was promoted in the calculating equipment. This reacting on hyper-sensitive variable controls made it possible for an atomic reading to be made.

The four found themselves gazing at the figures 197.2 or, in other words the atomic weight of gold.

To this mathematical calculator was linked the directional finder, which now swung to the most eastern point of the cosmos. All that had to be done now was keep the vessel heading in this north-easterly direction and finally they would inevitably contact the particular planetoid they sought. It was these devices that gave each one of them an insight into the extraordinary scientific genius which Professor Brailsford had possessed, in that he had thought out such amazingly complicated and yet foolproof instruments by which to find the way through the otherwise utterly trackless void.

“Well, we've got this far, anyway,” Isobelle commented, when observations were over. “How long do you think it will take us to finish the trip now, Alec?”

“Oh, I should think about another four or five days ought to see the journey over. In fact, if it comes to that, we can speed things up and do it in much shorter time by using acceleration—but if we do that it will also mean that we'll suffer the physical strain occasioned thereby. It's up to you. Either we pursue our present leisurely course, or else we put ourselves through it and finish the trip in half the time.”

Nan, Isobelle, and Cliff all looked at each other questioningly, and it was not particularly surprising that Cliff was the one who answered for them.

“I can't see that there'll be any sense in tearing through space at twice our present speed. It isn't as though time were an important factor in the business, or that anybody else is likely to get to ZK/70 ahead of us. We also need to be fighting fit when we do reach that planetoid which we certainly wouldn't be if we'd undergone the physical strain of extreme velocity, so far as I'm concerned I plump for continuing as we are.”

So it was agreed and the vessel continued its journey through the void at its same identical speed, neither slowing down nor speeding up since a velocity, once achieved in free space

remains constant unless altered unexpectedly by the pull of a planet or nearby meteorite.

Isabelle, for her part, was glad of the opportunity for delayed action in getting to the planetoid for she felt that this might perhaps give her the opportunity to try to argue things out with Cliff. Isabelle indeed was a completely changed woman because she saw much more clearly than she usually did, that Cliff was nothing more than an adventurer with homicidal tendencies. Back on Earth she had never had this impression of him though she had known that he had always been almost arrogantly self-assured, but before the days of the space journey she had considered this something of a virtue instead of a detriment. At any rate it had appealed very strongly to her own sophisticated outlook. Now it was very different: somehow she had got to dissuade Cliff from the plan he was intending to put into operation.

"I'm warning you, Cliff," she said, when they had an opportunity to be together in the "living-room" of the vessel, "that if you go through with this mad plan of yours to eliminate Alec and Nan, I—in turn—will eliminate you and myself!"

Cliff smiled coldly. "Quite the little heroine, aren't you? I shouldn't wear that mantle if I were you, my dear. It doesn't suit you in the least. Indeed I should think you were several kinds of a fool if, after I have eliminated Nan and Alec you decided to put an end to me and yourself. You'd be much more sensible to put an end to me and then carry on back to Earth and have the entire control to yourself."

"Doesn't it occur to your avaricious brain that I might not *want* entire control of such a vast amount of gold? I've discovered something during this trip, Cliff, and it is the rather surprising fact that I have a conscience. It was a thing that never used to bother me back at home, but since we've started floating out here through Infinity I've come to realise more clearly than ever in my life before what miserable, insignificant little things we human beings are. Look at those great stars out there!"

Isabelle spread her hands towards the porthole, and with her sweeping gesture she took in the entire view.

"How can you look upon those mighty creations of nature, or the Almighty if you prefer, and still think about the control of gold and the killing of two people who are so close to us?"

"Speak for yourself, Isabelle! Nan and Alec are not close to me, and never will be. And let me tell you this: If you start getting any bright ideas about finishing me off I'll take damned good care that I get in first! There are two things you have got to realise, Isabelle, and though I don't want to be repetitive I may as well try and drive them home to you. The first is that you know of my plans and therefore must either remain loyal to me or be eliminated completely, and the second thing is that granting you are sensible I intend to make you my wife. And that, in case you haven't realised it, is a very considerable concession when on returning to Earth I shall be virtually the master of the world."

Isabelle hesitated, searching Cliff's grim face. "You haven't told me yet, Cliff, what you really intend to do. I know you have said 'eliminate' Nan and Alec, but in what way?"

"To put it quite briefly, I intend to strand them on ZK/70. It will simply mean if Professor Brailsford's report on ZK/70 is correct, that they will be on a cosmic desert island with not the slightest possible hope of ever being rescued therefrom. The first thing I shall do is catch them unawares, and then I shall either knock them senseless or something of that nature just to give me enough time to get back to the ship with whatever quantity of gold dust I have managed to get. You will remain in the vessel here ready for the take-off and in that way we shall perform one of the smartest cosmic smash-and-grabs ever attempted."

Isabelle smiled cynically. "You certainly flatter yourself, Cliff! Do you suppose that I would sit by this switchboard waiting for you to return, knowing that you have wiped out Alec and Nan? What kind of a fool do you think I am?"

"I don't think you're a fool, my dear; I think you're extremely sensible. I happen to know that there cannot be a woman living who can resist the thought of endless gold dust and the riches that it can bring. You'll not make any sudden dash into space with the idea of stranding me, because if you do you will also strand Nan and Alec, and until I return to the vessel you will have no guarantee whether they are dead or alive. You see it is a matter of all or nothing. If you strand me you also automatically strand them, and you get no gold either. And there is also one other point that you do not seem to have understood. You do not know how to control this space machine. . . ."

Isabelle gave a little start and looked at Cliff's harshly smiling face. This was something which in her emotional state she had completely overlooked. And Cliff was correct. She did *not* know how to control the space machine therefore there was not the slightest chance of her putting any scheme of her own into action. At least, not as matters stood at present.

"I know what you're thinking," Cliff told her drily. "You're thinking that between now and the time when we reach the planetoid you will set yourself out to learn all there is to know about controlling this vessel. All right, go ahead, and see what Alec thinks of the idea. I think you'll be in for a surprise if you tackle him on that score. . . ."

With that Cliff swung away and left the living-room. Instead of heading towards his own quarters as was the original intention, he turned and went into the control-room. Alec was on duty, gazing thoughtfully through the observation window, pausing only now and again to glance at the instruments. Nan was in her room taking full advantage of the rest period.

Alec glanced up as Cliff entered.

"Hello, Cliff! Anything wrong?"

"Not exactly wrong," Cliff answered slowly. "I've been having a few words with Isabelle. To tell the truth, I'm more than a little worried about her."

"Worried? Why, what's the matter with her?"

"Physically, nothing, but the more I talk to her at any great length the more I feel that this space journeying is having an effect on her mentality. You must have noticed that she's anything but the same girl that she used to be before we ventured into space."

"Just reaction trouble, that's all." Alec did not appear in the least concerned. "I think I said a little while ago that I had made a law that we would not discuss the——"

"Oh yes, I know all about that, but this is not an ordinary kind of matter, Alec. Isabelle, for some reason that I cannot explain, has got it firmly fixed in her head that I am intending to grab all the gold I can from planetoid ZK/70 and leave everybody else in the lurch. Now——" Cliff spread his hands—"I *ask* you!"

"Well," Alec answered, pondering, "I suppose she's entitled to her opinion. That surely doesn't show any mental aberration, does it?"

Cliff's expression changed. "What the devil do you mean by that? You can't think for one moment that she could have any conceivable grounds for such a suspicion?"

"I can." Alec gave a rather rueful grin. "I happen to appreciate what an enormous temptation all this gold must be. It may even interest you to know, Cliff, that I have myself once or twice had to fight very strongly against the idea of taking all the gold possible aboard and then making a dash for it on my own. You know, there's something about gold and the tremendous wealth which it can supply which outweighs physical responsibilities and

attractions. By that I mean, that though I love Nan very dearly, I would under certain circumstances be prepared to entirely break with her if instead I could have unlimited gold and power.”

Cliff just stared, quite unable to comprehend the situation. This was a side to Alec which he had never even suspected existed.

“If for one moment,” Alec continued, “I could dare to conceive of doing such a thing to Nan, you could surely realise how little you or Isobelle enter into my calculations. You are simply my friend, whereas Isobelle is simply Nan’s step-sister, and for her I have never had the remotest kinship, so I am afraid I could, without answering to my conscience, easily contemplate the idea of being rid of you two. . . .”

“Well,” Cliff said slowly, “thank you for the warning, anyway.”

“I said,” Alec continued, “that I had to fight against this inclination. I believe that it is a temptation born of space itself. Out here, as we realised when we first made the leap into the void, strange things happen to our bodies and our minds. We no longer have the control over either of them as completely as we do when on Earth, for the simple reason that every circumstance surrounding us is different. And in Isobelle we see this effect very clearly drawn, because she has visibly changed from the sophisticated girl which she was at home. Even Nan has undergone changes in a less obvious way, as witness her peculiar capacity to analyse another’s emotions. You remember how she took Isobelle to task during the first meal we had on our outward trip?”

“Yes, I remember,” Cliff acknowledged, reflecting.

“Very well then, that is just one example of what is happening. The only solution is to fight against the strange and utterly unnatural temptations—and they *can* be fought against, for inherent in every living one of us is the power to combat good or evil as our inclinations lead us.” Alec gave a rather grim smile. “Don’t think I’m sitting here preaching, Cliff, I am simply saying or rather I am outlining the kind of emotions that have been passing through me whilst I have been sitting here through the endless hours of my particular turn of duty. I had no intention of ditching Nan or you or Isobelle on planetoid ZK/70, but I can understand Isobelle thinking along the same lines. The only thing that surprises me is that she should ascribe such a tendency to you instead of identifying it with herself.”

“Do you mean by that,” Cliff asked, “that you think that Isobelle would do such a thing?”

“As for that,” Alec answered, thinking, “I suppose any of us *could* do it. Gold is such an overwhelming temptation.”

Cliff did not say any more. As a matter of fact he was not quite sure where he stood. He had come in here to pave the way for Isobelle perhaps warning Alec of what was intended, and instead he had received the extraordinary revelation that Alec himself was fighting against a similar temptation. But was it a temptation? Cliff, with his cold, logical brain could hardly believe this aspect of the matter. His own plan was so meticulously, cold-bloodedly thought out. There was no temptation about this, he knew exactly what he was going to do, and certainly he had no intentions of fighting against it.

“I think,” he said after a pause, “that I’ll be getting along for my rest. I feel very much as though I could do with it.”

“Okay,” Alec acknowledged, nodding. “I’ll see you later.”

Thoughtfully Cliff took his departure, and after a few moments there was the faint clang of the metal door of his bedroom closing behind him. It was also the signal for Isobelle to arouse herself from her contemplation through the living-room observation window. She had noticed

that Cliff had gone towards the control room so had deliberately refrained from following after him. Now that she knew the way was clear she hurried down the outer corridor and in a moment or two was at Alec's side. He glanced up at her enquiringly.

"For folks who should be indulging in the rest period," Alec said, "you all seem to be doing a tremendous lot of dashing about. Just what do you want, Isobelle?"

"To warn you, Alec, nothing more."

"To warn me? Why, what have I done?"

"You haven't done anything, but Cliff certainly has it in his mind to do plenty, and I'm taking a considerable risk in telling you what I know."

Alec raised an eyebrow and waited for the next.

"Oh, I fully expect to be disbelieved!" Isobelle continued bitterly. "You have never had any particular liking for me, Alec, and I'm well aware of it—but when your life and Nan's are both in danger I can't just stand by and do nothing about it."

"Very commendable of you," Alec acknowledged. "And from what and from whom are we in danger? Or are you trying to tell me that Cliff perhaps is planning to run off with the whole caboodle and leave the rest of us stranded?"

Isobelle gave a little start. "How on earth did you guess that?"

"No guesswork about it, my dear. Cliff just came in and told me all about it himself. And I in turn told him that I had precisely the same idea, but that I had had the good sense to fight against the temptation, for that's all it is, Isobelle, believe me. Just temptation. Cosmic radiations at work upon us, affecting our minds, leading us straight up the garden path."

Isobelle gave a rather weary smile. "Cliff's plans have nothing to do with cosmic radiations, of that I am sure. Ever since he knew that he had been permitted to come on this journey he has been thinking of nothing else but complete control of the gold which we can get from the planetoid, and I'm telling you now for what it's worth that he is planning to eliminate you and Nan and then return to Earth with me. I have as good as told him that I will not stand by him and that if possible I will ditch him also on the planetoid and——"

"Oh, you will, will you." Alec's eyebrows rose in some surprise. "If you do that, how do you suppose Nan and I are going to carry on? We have no other means of returning to Earth except by this space ship, remember."

Isobelle was silent and a rather frantic look crossed her face. "What I meant to say was, that if he did or if he does eliminate you and Nan I shall feel it my duty to drive off into space and strand him."

Alec looked mystified. "You're still not making sense, Isobelle. How could you know whether Cliff will have eliminated Nan and me till he is in the space ship to tell you so? If I were you, my girl, I should go to bed and sleep it off. You've got yourself all mixed up mentally, and you can blame it all on cosmic radiations. You see you have the same idea as Cliff has, and I have had and fought against. You'd better do the same. It'll be healthier."

Isobelle stared dumbly for a moment, realising that she had not in the least driven home the point that she had intended. She gave Alec one last bewildered glance, then hurried from the control-room and down the outer corridor. Alec turned his head leisurely to watch her go then he smiled to himself. It was a strange smile, one more enigmatic than any he had ever given.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was exactly one hundred and twenty seven hours later when the space projectile came within measurable range of the asteroid belt—at least, near enough to notice the first perturbations of that titanic field of shifting, moving planetoids and asteroids of every conceivable size and shape. Here, lighted but dimly by a now very distant sun, there stretched infinite thousands of miles of cosmic debris. Here there lay the graveyard of a forgotten inner planet, a world which had once existed in an orbit between the planets of Jupiter and Mars, and of which the only measurable traces now existing were these multimillions of small bodies of every shape and size. Through the main observation window, as the four crowded round it, the vision was like that of a gigantic curtain of faintly glittering spangles. What appears from Earth as merely a fine nebulous dust stretched across the face of the void was now seen clearly in each individual facet, and since the one-time planet which had now collapsed had been composed of some mineral substance of a fairly high light value, it meant that each individual piece now glittered very slightly. The effect was uncanny and yet at the same time extremely beautiful—but there also lurked here the grave menace of collision, for only a distance of perhaps a hundred miles at the most separated these rocks from each other, and so delicately is the balance of the universe maintained that each individual one always maintained its position whilst the entire mass follows a slow, indefinable orbit of its own.

“Yes,” Alec observed, slowly, as he surveyed this awful cosmic minefield ahead, “we’re certainly not going to have a picnic in trying to wade through that lot. If you look at the meters there you’ll see that we’re already getting in the perturbations from the gravity field that they’re setting up. This is the point where we’d better all stay on duty. You carry on with the navigation Cliff; you, Nan, keep your eye glued to that telescope and tell us how we’re heading; and you, Isobelle, had better do what you can with the still and movie cameras. There’s never been such a chance before of recording the asteroids at such close quarters and deciding their real positions and movements. Now let’s get busy: time’s running short!”

Immediately the others moved to the tasks assigned to them, each one knowing that there was very real danger ahead and that upon circumventing it there depended an absolute team spirit.

Alec moved swiftly to the control-board and watched the meters intently at the same time cutting down their speed as rapidly as possible by releasing the two forward braking jets at maximum power. This had the effect of cushioning the vessel’s onrush and acting as a brake. Nor had Alec done it a moment too soon, for it required a full hour of this constant decelerating pressure to make an effect, and by this time the asteroids had swirled dangerously close. The needles on the various indicators were jumping significantly, and the directional indicator which gave the position of ZK/70 was slightly deflected from the vertical which meant that the vessel had to move from the directly-forward course to one diagonal. This, as Alec well knew, meant a most tricky manoeuvre in celestial mechanics. However, it had to be done, so he set himself quickly about the task.

By degrees, as the others watched through the observation windows, the vessel began to swing round, and then all of a sudden it entered the outermost edge of the asteroid belt. Immediately the effect was rather like that of driving in a car through a snow-storm. The “flakes” were of course of stupendous size, but the distances between them made it possible

for the space projectile to thread its way carefully, now at a tremendously reduced velocity, now at little more than two thousand miles an hour. As the journey continued the various-sized pieces of rock flew past soundlessly and plunged the hearts of the travellers into their mouths as they feared every minute they would be struck by one of these cosmic derelicts.

Unfortunately the space projectile was only of the most primitive type and the day had yet to come when a repulsive shield, to deflect these external objects, would be created. His face rigid with strain, Alec watched the meters intently, or listened to Nan or Isobelle's observations as they worked at their particular tasks. Cliff, too, had his hands full in charting and re-charting the course as the vessel swung around so as to be directly in line with ZK/70. Little by little, mile by mile, the gauntlet of the asteroids was run. They seemed to be everywhere, under the ship, over the ship, at the sides, hurtling straight at them, then missing them by some miracle or other, always in complete soundlessness which seemed the most incredible thing, for each one of the travellers was so accustomed to a passing object making a noise that it was hard to comprehend that, space being a total vacuum, there could be no sound whatever as these rocks fled by.

Then, gradually, ZK/70 itself floated into the line of vision. At first it was barely distinguishable from the hundreds of other planetoids, asteroids, and meteorite grouped around it, but as the distance between it and the projectile gradually lessened it took on a more reasonable form than its neighbours. It was correctly circular as indeed any world should be, and not of the rough, shapely contour of its fellows. It had little light reflection—or albedo, to be more technical—but what there was seemed to be of a pearly-grey shade. That there was an atmosphere of sorts was plainly obvious, in that the starry back-drop behind the asteroids themselves did not come entirely to the edge of this little world, sure enough proof that an atmospheric envelope was present, even as Professor Brailsford had stated.

"I do believe," Cliff said, turning his head for a moment, "that we're actually going to make it after all! The asteroids ahead of us seem to be thinning out considerably, so there doesn't seem to be much reason why we——"

Just as he had spoken there came a sudden resounding concussion in the rear of the vessel, and it swayed violently under a tremendous impact. Immediately Alec put the machine under control again, and it swayed back onto course. He studied the instruments for a moment and then gave a quick look towards Nan as she turned a startled face.

"From the sound of things," Alec said briefly, "that was a direct hit. Just dash along and have a look around, Nan, will you? If our air's escaping we've got to act quickly."

Nan did not hesitate a moment. She deserted her job and left the control room at a run, taking with her a delicate instrument which would show any drop in air pressure much more quickly than the human constitution would be able to detect it. After perhaps three minutes she returned, a look of infinite relief upon her face.

"Nothing wrong," she announced putting the instrument down. "But I do notice that the upper part of the roof at the far end of the corridor has bent inwards, so we evidently got a tidy wallop. I don't think there is any chance of it breaking down though."

Alec nodded. This was all he needed to know—that the vessel was still space-worthy. And to his relief, and everybody else's no further serious incidents happened as they threaded their way with infinite care towards their destination. Until at last there came the moment when the final meteorite had been circumvented and ZK/70 was directly ahead of them at a distance of no more than perhaps five hundred miles, the merest leap compared to normal cosmic distances.

“What kind of a view are you getting through that telescope, Nan?” Alec asked, as she quickly adjusted the eyepiece.

“Quite an interesting one. I can see the surface of the planetoid fairly clearly, but unfortunately it looks rather as though it’s moonlight. That I suppose is caused by the considerable distance of the sun.”

“Did you say the planet’s surface?” Cliff asked surprised. “I rather thought that all that we could see from here was a dense atmospheric envelope of clouds, hence the pearly-grey light.”

“The pearly-grey light,” Nan replied without looking up, “is the direct reflection of the planetoid’s surface itself. As far as I can see there isn’t a trace of a cloud anywhere. Here—have a look for yourselves.”

There was no hesitation on the part of the other members of the party to do so, and one by one they gazed down on that strangely lost world which, until Professor Brailsford had discovered it, had been completely unknown—or at least unseen, by the astronomers of Earth. Indeed nobody on Earth knew about it even now, except the lawyer to whom the Will had been entrusted, and he, of course, would be silence itself.

“Looks like a regular desert island of a place to me,” Alec observed when the others had satisfied themselves. “I can dimly descry what looks to be endless desert, and if those deserts which look to be composed of sand in this uncertain light are actually gold dust, then the amount of wealth that planet represents just staggers the senses.”

There was nothing more that could be said. The thing to do now was to make the preparations for the landing on the planetoid, and this was precisely what Nan, Cliff, and Isabelle set about doing. From the storage locker they produced weapons together with three heavy belts which contained a variety of instruments for making all the tests that would be necessary on the planetoid both from the astronomical point of view and also in regard for testing the sand which they hoped would prove to be gold dust. Alec, for his part, remained at the controls, steering the vessel carefully forward, until at last he was near enough to this remote little world to start attempting the descent.

This did not prove a particularly difficult matter since the gravity of the golden planetoid was almost identical to that of Earth. In other words, Alec’s original computation which had suggested that the density of this world would compensate for lack of gravity, was correct. The similarity to Earth’s attraction made it easier for Alec to handle the situation, for he knew exactly what stresses and strains to expect.

So gradually he nosed the vessel down until a faint whistling from without announced that the atmospheric envelope had been contacted.

“Remember,” Cliff said, as Isabelle stood by his side and watched the surface of the twilight world hurtling ever nearer, “that you are to volunteer to stay within this space machine. No matter what Alec may tell you, you have got to remain adamant.”

Isabelle gave a doubting glance. “Since Alec is the commander, I don’t see how I am going to disobey his orders if he tells me I am to come with the party. Besides, if it comes to that, there seems to me to be no good reason why anybody should stay aboard the space ship in any case. There’s no life on this planetoid, or at least according to Professor Brailsford.”

“That’s only one man’s opinion, Izzy. If there does happen to be some alien life on this planet which doesn’t like the idea of our visiting them, it would be the height of folly to leave the machine unattended and allow alien presences to go to work on it. Remember it’s our only link with home. Yes,” Cliff decided thinking further. “You stay here no matter what and leave me to handle the rest.”

Isabelle said no more, chiefly because she wasn't at all sure how things were going to work out. She remained beside the window moodily watching the flyer's steady but unswerving descent. Nan in the meantime moved across to Alec's side, and stood by him, more interested in watching the instruments than in the view outside. By the instruments it was possible to tell just how far distant they were from the surface of the planet. And at the moment the reading was as little as one hundred miles. In a matter of five minutes, or even less, the immense journey across the gulf of space would be finished.

"Whatever happens," Cliff said, glancing round from the window, "we shall have to take great pains to see to it that nobody ever knows the correct course to this planetoid. Indeed, even more than that, we must watch that the planetoid itself remains completely unpublicised. I shudder to think what would happen if unscrupulous criminal elements got to know the location of this world of pure gold. The repercussions on our social structure back on Earth would be appalling."

"That's a good one, coming from you," Isabelle murmured, close beside him.

Alec hardly appeared to hear the comment, he was too busy with the controls, and it was just as well that his mind was on the job, for despite his concentration he nearly collided with an upthrusting wall of solid, dimly-lit yellow rock straight in the projectile's path. By a fraction he managed to avoid it, but his face was pale with reaction when the obstacle had been hurdled. He gave Nan—drawn and tense—a quick look.

"Be the very devil if we came all this distance then finished ourselves by colliding with a cliff!" he exclaimed.

At that Cliff turned and looked at him. "Somebody taking my name in vain?"

"Colliding with a cliff is about right," Isabelle commented. But since none of the others knew exactly what she meant—except Cliff himself—and also because the landing was about to be made on the surface of a ploughed-up desert of what appeared to be greyish yellow sand, the subject was not pursued. They had escaped death by inches, but to Isabelle that had seemed somehow an ironical portent, that having escaped death at the hands of a natural cliff they were still threatened by the machinations of a human possessing the same name.

Then suddenly there came the jarring impact which announced their arrival. The four jolted backwards under the shock, but it was only momentary. With masterly skill Alec cut out the power plant at exactly the right moment, and the machine skidded along in a tremendous trough in the sand and finally slithered to a halt in a more or less upright position. The journey was complete.

Immediately there was a general move to the observation window, and in silence the quartet surveyed the quaint little world to which they had come. Since, by the very nature of things they were compelled to draw their parallels from Earth, they could only think that this far-flung planetoid looked exactly like a section of the Sahara desert seen under a cloudless full moon. As far as the eye could reach there was undulating sand, sometimes reaching up in dunes and other times towering up into enormous cliffs at least five to eight hundred feet in height. The stars were brilliantly visible, yes—even Earth itself as a faint green speck infinitely far away in the void to the left of a single brilliant star which was the sun itself. The four found it a rather remarkable fact that for the first time in their lives they could look upon the sun without the least difficulty, since it was so far away its intense effulgence failed to dazzle the eye. "Well," Alec said finally, "it's not such a tremendous thrill now that we have got here. I only hope that Professor Brailsford wasn't pulling our legs and everybody else's

when he said that this was a planet of gold. I have had the uneasy feeling ever since the start that the only reason he didn't bring gold back was that there wasn't any to bring! As I remember him he used to be rather good at practical jokes and this might be his greatest one ever."

Nancy gave a reproachful glance. "I remain absolutely convinced, Alec, that Dad would never have joked over a matter as important as this. He wouldn't be such a fool to let us risk our lives in dashing across space just to see a collection of sand dunes."

"Surely," Cliff said, "the obvious way to settle the difficulty is to go outside and see what there is. How are the conditions out there, anyway?"

He crossed to the instrument board and looked at the indicators which registered the external conditions. Atmospheric pressure was 12½ lbs. to the square inch, which was near enough to Earth's own as could be. Humidity point too was roughly the same as Earth's, but the temperature was nearly one hundred and ten fahrenheit degrees—an extraordinary high range considering the planet's distance from the sun. Then Cliff remembered that Professor Brailsford had said something about the planetoid receiving its warmth from internal volcanic activity. That which could have proved a major difficulty—namely, the atmospheric content—proved to be no difficulty at all, for the automatic analyser showed that ZK/70 had atmospheric gases similar to Earth's own for the high preponderance of oxygen and hydrogen, there being a trifle more matter than was normal in Earth's envelope. The only effect of this would probably be to produce an exhilaration beyond normal, such as might be experienced at the top of a mountain.

"Now is the time when the fun starts," Alec said, turning from the window. "Nan, did you get all the necessary equipment that we're liable to need outside?"

She nodded. "Yes, I've got everything out for the four of us—they're over on the table there."

Alec glanced towards them and then considered for a moment or two. "I don't think it's altogether safe for us to wander off from the machine and leave it deserted——"

"Neither do I," Cliff put in promptly. "In fact I had already mentioned that fact to Isobelle, and if it hadn't occurred to you I was going to suggest it. We don't know what kind of alien life there may be on this planet, and to leave the ship unguarded would be the height of folly."

"Okay then," Alec decided, "you'd better stay here, Cliff, and I'll go along with the two girls and see what we can find."

Isobelle glanced round sharply, and Nan went across to the nearby small table to collect the instruments and weapons. Cliff gave Isobelle a quick glance. Instead of taking up the subject however, she remained silent as though trying to make up her mind what she ought to do.

"You may think it is a good idea for you to go along with the girls and see what there is outside," Cliff commented, "but I think it ridiculous! How do you suppose you are going to handle the situation if you're suddenly attacked by alien life?"

"We've all got weapons, so I'm sure we'll be able to tackle it."

"Well, I'm by no means convinced of the rightness of that. It takes men to tackle alien life, especially on a strange world. I see no reason why I should stop here and just cool my heels, when I ought to be out there with you tackling whatever there is to tackle."

Alec strapped an instrument and weapon belt around his waist, meantime eyeing Cliff steadily.

"It so happens, Cliff," Alec said at length, "that I have been thinking a great deal of what Isobelle had to tell me concerning your plans for ditching us on this planetoid. How much may be due to Isobelle's imagination, and how much to actual truth I don't know, but at least I think I would be very foolish if I didn't take every necessary precaution. Don't think I am blaming you personally for whatever scheme you have in mind, because I realise the cosmic radiation can completely blind one to all scruples. However, if you remain within this ship, guarding it for us, it seems to me a reasonable insurance against you getting up to any monkey tricks."

"Thanks," Cliff said coldly.

"It is also a fact," Alec continued, "that you are not as much a member of this expedition as Nan, Isobelle and myself. Remember that in the will you were given permission to come on the expedition but nothing more. Therefore I feel that the responsibility is evenly spread over the two girls and myself. However, be that as it may, those are my orders. You stay here, Cliff, and take care of the vessel. I know you won't run away, because if you do you will have no chance of getting at any of the gold."

"Just what," Nan asked, bewildered, "is all this about? What's suddenly given you the idea that Cliff might want to put some deep-laid plot into operation?"

"Never mind about that," Alec told her briefly, "the facts are a trifle too sordid to repeat—and there may not be any truth in them, anyway. I don't think any of us are particularly responsible for our actions——"

"I don't think it's much of an insurance leaving Cliff here in charge of the ship," Isobelle remarked, coming forward to the table. "What is to prevent him from taking off into space and staying there, maybe for several weeks, circling the planetoid, waiting until we have died through lack of food and water, or through the effects of exposure, or whatever it may be, and then collecting all the necessary gold that he requires and then making off for home? Don't overlook, Alec, that Cliff knows how to drive this space machine just as well as you do. On the other hand I *do not* know how to drive it any more than Nancy does."

Cliff gave Isobelle an approving glance and Alec lapsed into thought. There was a long and awkward silence.

"I think," Alec said finally, "that it comes to this: we none of us trust each other at the moment, not only because of the gold dust that we hope to find, but also because of the cosmic radiations making us so different from what we normally are. I certainly believe that somebody should stay upon this ship and I have nominated Cliff, but I'm also willing to admit that my judgment may be clouded for the reasons that I have already mentioned, therefore suppose we take a vote on it, or better still, make a draw as one does in a sweepstake, and do it that way. Tell you what to do, Nan—tear a sheet of paper from that scratch pad, and write our names separately on each slip of paper and hold those strips in your hand. Isobelle can select one which will make it that there is not the slightest possible chance of my getting up to any trickery."

"Trickery!" Nan exclaimed, giving a hurt glance. "Why ever should we wish to think such a thing about you?"

"Damned if I know, Nan. Just a thought, that's all."

Cliff gave a cynical grin then watched as Nan hurried to obey Alec's orders. Within a few moments she had torn up the necessary papers and had written the names on each, then she closed her fists round them and held them forth to Isobelle. Isobelle hesitated for a moment and then carefully selected a slip and peered at it.

“Well?” Alec asked her briefly.

“Nan,” she said, handing the paper over for Alec to see it himself.

He looked at it, crumpled it up, then tossed it on the floor. Nan came forward, throwing the rest of the papers into the waste basket.

“But I don’t want to be stuck here while the rest of you have all the fun,” she protested. “Besides if there should be an attack by some kind of alien life, what kind of a fight do you suppose *I* could put up? One woman against heaven knows what!”

“We’re not going into all that again,” Alec told her, shrugging. “The decision has been made, entirely independently of anything I might say, so we must abide by it. You stay here, Nan, and Cliff, Isobelle and myself will go and see what this planetoid has to offer. All right, we’ve wasted time enough as it is, so let’s be on our way.”

Cliff crossed over from beside the switchboard to join Isobelle, he gave her a grim look even though he did not make any observation. Indeed he hardly could with Alec so close beside him, but Alec did not particularly like the decision, and it seemed more than obvious from the grim set of his jaw. It was also quite plain that he had no intention of going back on the decision which chance had made. He handed over weapon and instrument belts to Isobelle and Cliff each in turn, then he crossed over to the switchboard and pulled forward the lever which unsealed the airlock.

Since the density of the atmosphere outside was almost the same as that within the vessel there was no sudden whistle due to change of pressure. Indeed rather the other way about, for a warm, sticky breeze blew through the opening into the control room and enervating though it was it was also a relief after the many weeks in the artificial atmosphere of the space machine.

“Well, at least we shan’t freeze to death,” Cliff commented, “and I suppose that’s something to be thankful for. Best of luck, Nan, and we’ll see you later—I hope!”

With that Cliff stepped outside and helped Isobelle out after him to make the necessary jump to the sandy ground below. Alec watched her descend into the twilight, then he turned back briefly to Nan as she stood beside the switchboard. He caught her shoulders with impulsive fierceness for a moment and then kissed her lightly on the forehead.

“Shan’t be long,” he said, and with that he leapt out of the airlock and dropped beside Cliff and Isobelle as they waited for him. Looking back again towards the space machine they could see Nan’s slim figure in the shirt and slacks silhouetted against the bright light inside the control room, whilst the many portholes of the space projectile loomed like eyes in the alien twilight of this lost outpost of a world.

CHAPTER FIVE

For a moment or two the trio stood looking about them, contemplating the endless dunes rising their humped backs against the placidly clear starlit sky, then Cliff made an observation:

“There’s no particular reason why we should wander to any great distance to look for gold dust, is there? I suppose it will be all right here where we’re standing as much as anywhere else, and there’s no sense in getting too far away from the ship, is there?”

“No sense at all,” Alec agreed. “And besides, this planet is far too much of a turkish bath for us to start wandering too far!”

Accordingly Cliff removed an instrument from his belt, and then went down on his knees in the sand—at least he assumed it was sand, and proceeded to take up a scoop full of it in the instrument he was using. He was just about to put it back in his belt when Alec’s voice said curtly:

“I’ll take that, Cliff, thank you.”

Cliff hesitated. “What do you mean—you’ll take it? I’m as much entitled to gather my own gold dust as you are, surely?”

“With the sort of plans you have had against Nan and myself, you are not entitled to *anything!*” Alec retorted, and it became noticeable at this moment in the starlight that he had his beam-automatic in his hand. It glinted as he moved slightly.

Isabelle’s taut voice floated in out of the gloom.

“What’s the meaning of this, Alec? You don’t have to hold us up at the point of a gun?”

“That’s a matter of opinion, Isabelle. All I needed was for Cliff to turn his back on me for a few moments while he scooped up some gold dust or sand, or whatever it proves to be, to give me a chance to draw my weapon without him drawing one first. You see, what it boils down to is this: you two have considered yourselves wonderfully smart in trying to work out a plan to ditch Nan and I, but I suppose it never dawned upon you, Isabelle, that your quiet little step-sister might also be capable of evolving a scheme very similar to the one thought out by Cliff and yourself?”

“I—I don’t understand——” Isabelle’s voice was faltering somewhat and Cliff swore under his breath.

“What it amounts to is this,” Alec went on holding his gun steadily. “Nan and I decided long ago that if anybody should have the benefit of this golden planetoid it should be her, and of course myself, as her future husband. She alone is really entitled to it because she is the daughter of the late Professor Brailsford and therefore his next of kin. You two, who haven’t the slightest relationship to the Professor, worked out a rather grandiose plan to ditch Nan and I on this planetoid, so it’s simply a matter of the tables being turned insofar as I have acted quicker than you have.”

“But I can’t believe that Nan would do a thing like this!” Isabelle cried.

“That’s because she’s quiet. She’s far more expert at controlling her emotions when it comes to it than you are, Isabelle.”

“And you really mean,” Cliff asked deliberately, “that you would really leave Isabelle and myself on this planetoid?”

“With the greatest of pleasure.” Alec’s voice hardly sounded like his own; it was as hard as tempered steel. “You might have got away with this scheme of yours if Isabelle hadn’t lost

her nerve and come and blurted everything out to me. I told her then that I had a similar plan in mind, but she hadn't the wit to grasp that I was trying to warn her, so I——”

“Why on earth should you want to warn anyone of a secret plan?” Isobelle demanded.

“Merely the satisfaction of my conscience. I'm not the kind of man to contemplate deliberate murder—for that is what it really is—without making some sort of concession to my conscience. I gave you the hint plainly enough, but you didn't see it. Now I'll take that scoop of gold dust, Cliff, if you don't mind.”

With the beam-automatic trained upon him, Cliff had no alternative but to hand over. Alec took the scooplike instrument and then glanced towards the nearby airlock where Nan was still standing looking down.

“Can you catch up there?” Alec called, without removing his eyes from either Cliff or Isobelle.

“I doubt it,” Nan's voice floated back. “It would be more to the point if I came down and took whatever it is that you want to give me.”

“Doesn't she *know*?” Isobelle asked, bewildered.

Alec did not answer. After a moment there was a thud as Nancy's body dropped to the sand nearby. Then she came over to the trio with shambling, awkward footsteps.

“What are you all standing here for?” she asked in surprise. “I've been watching you for about the last ten minutes. Aren't you going to explore and look for gold dust, what did we come here for, anyway?”

“Here,” Alec said briefly handing over the scoop. “Take this back into the ship right away and analyse it. You know what to do, put it through the spectroscope and let me know what the reading is. I've work to do just here, or is that more than obvious?”

“But Alec, I don't see why——”

“Do as you're told,” Alec roared at her, then he swung back just in time before Cliff could spring at him. It seemed more than plain to both Cliff and Isobelle that Nancy had not the slightest idea what Alec was really trying to do, or even what he was driving at; nevertheless, she took the scoop as ordered and then clambered back over the projections on the outside of the vessel and so through the airlock into the control room once more. In the twilight below there followed a grim silence, with Alec's gun still levelled unwaveringly.

“There's something very phoney about this,” Cliff commented after a while. “I don't believe that Nancy knows the first thing about what you're aiming to do, Alec. That makes you a damned sight worse than me, since I did at least take Isobelle into my confidence——”

“Yes, and a damned mess you made of it at that,” Alec retorted. “The first thing she did when she started to panic was to give the whole thing away. You should know better than trust a woman at any time anywhere!”

Cliff and Isobelle glanced at each other in the twilight, and although it was too dim to see each other's expressions, they could sense the unspoken thought which passed between them—and it was that they were both wrestling to try and understand the unbelievable change which had come over Alec. From being the genial, apparently intensely honest and forthright commander of the expedition, he had changed into a hard, grasping adventurer more subtle and indeed more ruthless than Cliff himself. It just did not make sense no matter how they looked at it.

It seemed an incredibly long time before Nancy's figure reappeared in the lighted airlock above, and her voice floated forth. It was an excited, eager voice, noticeably shaken with emotion.

"It's gold, Alec! *Gold!*"

"All of it?" Alec called back without removing his eyes from either Cliff or Isobelle.

"Well, seventy-five per cent. of it, anyway. The rest of it is just ordinary sand, but there's no doubt that the heaviest percentage is gold dust. That is if the spectroscope is telling the truth and I've never heard of one that didn't."

"That's all I want to know," Alec said slowly. "You can make yourself busy, Nan, instead of guarding the ship. There is work to be done. In the storage room at the rear of the ship you'll find a large-sized crate specially prepared for this moment. Just bring it down here and bring a shovel with you."

In the airlock Nan visibly hesitated then after a moment or two her figure vanished. Cliff shifted uncomfortably with Isobelle beside him.

"I bet you two are surprised," Alec remarked drily. "You never suspected that Honest Alec Carter could behave like this, did you? You thought that was the special prerogative of Clifford Ashton and Isobelle Sutton, didn't you? Just goes to show how very wrong you can be sometimes."

Cliff did not reply, for the simple reason that he was making a desperate effort to analyse his emotions. There was something remarkably queer going on on this strange planet, and it wasn't entirely applicable to the theft of gold dust, either. For a reason that he could not define, he realised quite clearly at this moment that he no longer had any real wish to ditch Alec and Nan upon this planetoid, even if the chance presented itself—which at the present moment seemed anything but likely. There was also the puzzling factor that his interest in Isobelle—for he certainly *had* an interest in her despite the offhand way he treated her—was at an extremely low ebb, and it could not be accounted for by the fact that she had failed to carry out the original orders that he had given her. Even more extraordinary, to Cliff's mind anyway, was the fact that he was conscious of a deep emotional stirring when he thought of *Nancy*. This in itself was an extraordinary state of affairs, for in all the time he had known Nancy up to now she had not presented the slightest attraction. How, then, to explain this sudden and baffling metamorphosis in his emotions?

"Did you say," he asked abruptly, "that the cosmic radiations might affect us in an unexplained way?"

"I did, and they do. But if you think that explains away the present situation you're very much mistaken."

"I'm not so sure that I am," Cliff replied slowly. "What ever may be your personal ambitions, Alec, you are at heart a scientist as much as I am, therefore, I am going to put a very pertinent question to you, and it is this: are you still enough in love with Nancy to wish to marry her?"

"Of course I am. That's a damned fool question to——"

Alec paused a moment as though a thought had struck him. He spent several seconds in complete silence and then he said slowly: "As a matter of fact I'm not quite sure, but in any case she is a part of my life so I suppose I shall marry her as originally planned. In any case, what the devil has it got to do with you?"

"It might have a great deal more to do with me than you realise, Alec, for the simple reason that I believe that some mysterious interchange of personalities has come about. Putting it bluntly, I think you have taken on my personality together with all the plans I have made and I have taken on yours. Whether Isobelle and Nancy have interchanged I don't know, but it has been more than obvious to all of us—Isobelle herself included—that from almost

the very start of this space journey Isobelle's personality underwent a mysterious change. She altered from being the sophisticated worldly girl we knew on Earth to much more sensitive temperament, very much akin to Nancy's own, yet not quite her personality. But nevertheless, something different! For my part I no longer have any ambitions to cheat you and Nan out of the gold dust inheritance, yet on the other hand you have exactly a plan that I originally had and are prepared to see it through apparently to the bitter end."

"Exactly," Alec conceded, but there was something of a slowness in the way he spoke, as though he were faltering in his confidence, or at least trying to carefully analyse what Cliff had said.

Then Nan appeared in the ship's airlock and tossed down first an empty crate and then a shovel. With a flying leap she followed them, picked them both up, and then came over to where Alec was standing. "Well, here they are," she said; "What do you want done with them?"

"I want you to fill up that crate with the sand that is lying around us, or at any rate with that stuff that looks like sand. I'd do it myself only I've got to keep these two covered to make sure that they don't get the drop on me."

Again came Nancy's look of complete bewilderment, but realising from Alec's voice that he meant every word that he said she quickly went to work to follow his instructions. In the space of perhaps fifteen minutes she had the crate completely full of sand, with the result that its weight was so immense that she could not even budge it from the ground.

"Get the portable winch and use that," Alec instructed her as he saw her struggling desperately. "Fix the winch in the airlock and toss down the cable and the rest is easy. You'll have to do the whole lot yourself, Nan, because I can't for one minute relax my vigilance."

"At least," Nan said, "I'm surely entitled to know what is going on? What happened? Did Cliff pull a gun on you or what?"

"No," Cliff told her bitterly, "he pulled one on us. He still seems to be under the crazy delusion that Izzy and I were planning to ditch you and Alec on this planetoid."

"That was your plan," Alec told him coldly, "and you know it. All right, Nan, get busy. We shan't need more than a crate full of this to begin with, and then we can decide what we're going to do. Hurry it up, please!"

Her curiosity unsatisfied and her bewilderment complete, Nan continued to obey instructions. In the meantime Cliff stood in the gloom and watched intently for his chance, Isobelle beside him, likewise keyed up for the remotest opportunity to overpower Alec and get his gun from him. Both she and Cliff knew that if they did not turn the tables somehow there was not the slightest doubt that they were going to be left on this planetoid—the very thing which Cliff had originally planned for Alec and Nan. The whirlwind turning of the tables was something which neither of them had fully grasped even yet. As for Cliff's vague explanation of the situation Isobelle did not understand it in the slightest, and whether Alec did or not was not clear. Certainly he showed no signs of relaxing his vigilance.

As far as Cliff was concerned, however, his chance came when Nan, in endeavouring to wind up the crate by means of the winch accidentally allowed the ratchet to miss the engaging claw. As a result the heavy crate which had just reached the lip of the airlock crashed down again into the sand, and the sudden rattling din of the cables spinning round the drum caused Alec to glance momentarily over his shoulder to discover the cause. Instantly Cliff acted and hurled himself forward, his right hand out-thrust to seize the weapon from Alec's hand.

Alec, taken off guard, was sent flying backwards from a smashing uppercut to the jaw. There was nothing he could do to save himself or to stop his weapon flying from his hand. At the same moment Cliff dived upon him and punched savagely with left and right hands battering at Alec's face with all the power at his command. Isobelle, in the meantime, went down on her knees and began a quick search for the weapon which Alec had dropped, not that she needed it for herself, for she already had one, but in order to stop Alec ever retrieving it. In this she was more than successful for in the scuffle grains of sand had covered it for all times. Things would certainly have gone badly for Alec had not Nan been in the airlock and seen what was transpiring. Instantly she stepped back into the control room and whipped one of the many weapons from the rack of guns near the switchboard, then she returned to the airlock with a long-distance, high-velocity ray gun pressed to her shoulder. Though the twilight was hardly the best illumination for target practise it was nevertheless bright enough for her to be able to clearly sight Cliff as he pounded relentlessly at Alec's fallen form.

"Stand up, Cliff, and leave him alone," Nan commanded. "If you don't I'll fire—and don't think that my aim isn't good, either."

Whether Nan's aim was likely to be good or otherwise, Cliff did not propose to take the chance of finding out. The glance he gave over his shoulder satisfied him as to the deadly accuracy and power of the gun Nan was holding, so he got slowly to his feet, watching while Alec struggled up, rubbing at the end of his bleeding nose. Isobelle stood nearby, regretting bitterly that she had not drawn her own weapon instead of endeavouring to dispose of Alec's.

"Thanks," Alec called briefly, glancing towards the airlock. "You've just saved an awful lot of trouble. And it seems to me," he added, "that you two will be a lot safer without guns in your belts."

He reached forward, took the weapons from Cliff and Isobelle, and stuffed them in his own belt. Then he began to move towards the space machine, walking backwards, and watched by the sullen pair as he did so.

"Are you still keeping me covered, Nan?" he asked without glancing back over his shoulder.

"Yes," Nan answered, "even though I don't understand the reason for all this."

"I'll tell you the reason later on."

With that, satisfied that Nan was keeping things under control, Alec refixed the cable about the crate of gold dust and then made a proper job of the task which Nan had attempted to do, and had failed. In five minutes he had the crate of gold dust over the lip of the airlock and dragged it into the centre of the control room. Throughout this period Nan remained where she was in the airlock, with the high velocity rifle still pressed to her shoulder and her eye peering intently through the sight.

"All right," Alec said, moving to the airlock and taking the weapon from Nan, "it's about time we were on our way. We don't need any more gold dust for the moment. Get the airlock closed, will you? I'll keep these two covered until the last moment."

Nan turned a bewildered face. "But you don't mean that you're going to leave Cliff and Isobelle behind, do you?"

"That's just what I mean, the same as they were going to do to us. Rather poetic, don't you think?"

"Matter of fact I don't know *what* to think," Nan answered, dazed. "All I do know is that it's absolutely inhuman to leave Cliff and Is——"

“Oh, stop talking!” Alec said roughly, compelling Nan out of the way as she fumbled with the airlock screws. “I suppose I shall have to do the job myself as usual.”

He threw down the high velocity rifle and made a leap towards the control board. In one quick movement he snapped over the switch which controlled the airlock just as Cliff, taking advantage of the momentary chance, hurled himself up towards the airlock and endeavoured to struggle over the edge and into the control room. Instead he received the impact of Alec’s boot straight under his jaw, which slammed him back into the sand with half the sense battered out of him. Then with a clang the airlock shut and the sealing cover slid into place with a faint hiss. Alec did not hesitate to return to the control board, threw in the main switches and listened in grim triumph to the throbbing of the atomic power plant. In another moment he closed the circuit which fired the jets and there followed the gradually increasing pressure of the take-off, which within seconds plunged the almost unprepared Nan into the blackness of unconsciousness.

Down on the planetoid ZK/70, Cliff got slowly on to his feet holding his savagely throbbing jaw. Fortunate indeed it had been for him that the space machine in taking off had moved away from him instead of across him otherwise he would have received the full fiery blast from the escape jets; as it was his first consciousness of the departure of the space machine came as he and Isobelle heard the appalling roar of the rocket discharge and then they stood shielding their faces from the hot gases as the vessel cleaved upwards into the starry sky. Within seconds it had become little more than a remote, cascading speck of fire—and then it was gone.

Down below, the surface of the planet stirred as hot winds began to settle down after the impact of the space machine’s exodus. Isobelle, completely at a loss for words, clung on to Cliff’s left arm as with his right arm he carefully massaged his aching jaw.

“Apparently,” he said at last, “Alec has done it! And if we ever see him come back again I shall be very much surprised.”

“Not of his own accord, perhaps,” Isobelle agreed, “but I have the frantic hope that Nan may be able to do something with him. That his entire outlook and nature has changed is no longer in doubt, otherwise he wouldn’t have done what he did do.”

Cliff gave a ghost of his old cynical smile. “Come to think of it, I suppose really that it serves us right to be in this damned predicament after the plot that I laid for Alec. The only puzzling point is that the plot no longer interests me, nor did it for quite a while before this happened—and there is also the mystery of Alec’s complete metamorphosis.”

Isobelle did not say any more for the moment. She took her eyes from the desolate spot in the sky where the space machine had disappeared. Then she looked towards the infinitely remote green star of Earth, and at last lowered her gaze to the funereal deserts around her. The sense of overwhelming loneliness was appalling, even though Cliff was alive and active at her side. Certainly it had not yet fully dawned upon Isobelle that she and Cliff were probably stranded for all time and that they would die here on this remote outpost of the solar system.

“Wealth, wealth, wealth!” Cliff made this observation after stirring the heavy sand at his feet. “I doubt if there could be any more position more unique than this! Here are we surrounded by more wealth than any living being dreamed of, and quite unable to do anything with it! Seems to me that the fellow who had ten pounds on top of a mountain and therefore could not spend it had nothing on us! The only thing we can hope for is as you said that Nan might be able to do something to make Alec change his mind. Frankly I very much doubt it,

for it seems to me that the transmutation of personalities is complete, and I can't think of any way in which they might be reversed."

"Transmutation of personalities?" Isabelle repeated, after a moment or two. "Yes, that is what you said earlier, but I still haven't grasped what you meant by it. In any case it sounds to me to be pretty ridiculous. Personalities just *couldn't* change places!"

"One might say the same thing about inorganic elements," Cliff answered, "but it happens just the same. For instance, at one period in its life we have the element known as lead. A little later on we find that it has become known as radium, transmuted by the laws of mutational revolution. On the other hand, in the laboratory, we have either by adding or subtracting a certain number of electrons from the atomic make-up. If then, elements can be made to change places by scientific or rather electronic processes, why not personalities? The only difference is that elements are inorganic whereas personalities are organic. Indeed one might go a shade further than that and say that personalities are mental not physical."

Isabelle stirred restlessly, too worried to concentrate on Cliff's apparent ramblings, and also finding that the crushing, enervating heat of the planetoid was exhausting in the extreme.

"I think, given time, that I might be able to solve the problem of what has happened to Alec and myself," Cliff said after a while.

"Given time?" Isabelle repeated, then she gave a hollow laugh. "It seems to me that from here on you'll have all the time you need. For the immediate moment suppose we forget the scientific implications of you and Alec apparently changing places and instead concentrate on ourselves. What are we going to *do*? We didn't bring any provisions with us because we didn't consider there was any need."

"True," Cliff admitted looking about him. "And from the look of this planet it is not exactly flowing with milk and honey even though it is richer than any Eldorado ever dreamed of. Where we're going to find sustenance on a planetoid like this, I just don't know!"

Isabelle looked again towards the stars, as though she hoped vainly to see a sweeping of exhaust that would announce the return of the space machine. But there was no such evidences there. Only the everlasting star, and as though it hovered on the rim of Eternity, the green spot that was Earth.

"We should have taken more desperate chances than we did!" Isabelle decided at last, fighting to get her emotions under control. "There were two of us. The moment we had realised that the game was up we should have rushed Alec together and be hanged to that long-range gun which Nan was holding. In any case it would have been better for us to have been wiped out by that than for us to have a lingering death here."

Cliff did not reply for a moment or two. When he did, he said slowly, "Maybe it doesn't have to be such a lingering death as all that. Somewhere around this spot, buried in the sand, is Alec's beam-automatic. I know you did your best to be rid of it and bury it in the sand, but with all the time we have on our hands we ought to be able to unearth it. When we do it will at least provide us with a quick way out of our difficulties."

Isabelle did not respond. She was too completely depressed. For that matter Cliff was not overflowing with good spirits either. But he had the good sense to realise that under the present circumstances it was better to occupy himself with some task, no matter how macabre that task might be, than give full range to his fears. So, more to pass the time than anything else, he went to work to assiduously search for the vanished beam-automatic. As he did so he smiled bitterly at the thought of turning over hundreds of pounds worth of gold dust in his

hands and flinging it aside as a child flings aside the sand in the building of a castle by the seashore. And, suddenly, he came upon the gun. He lifted it free, shook the grains away from it, and then, taking the torch from his belt, he inspected the weapon carefully in the narrow beam. Apparently it was in order, and the sealed outer casing had prevented any of the grains from working their way into the vital spring mechanism.

“Fully loaded,” he said, as Isobelle looked at him moodily in the twilight. “I suppose the best idea will be to test it once and make sure it’s all right, then we can keep it by us against the time when it is our quick way out of inevitable doom.”

Since Isobelle made no comment, Cliff raised the gun and fired it at the sand grains some fifty feet away. Immediately a violent blue beam stabbed from the weapon across the intervening space and blasted an area of the grains for a radius of perhaps five feet, leaving behind a blackened circle where the beam had struck. Cliff grinned a little and thrust the gun into his belt.

“Fortunately,” he said, “the self-timing automatic device upon it is in good condition, so there won’t arise the problem of which of us will be left to fire the last shot. We’ll set the thing up somehow, stand in its radius, and then let the thing do its work. If you see any reason why we should delay the performance I should be glad to know what it is. For myself, I think that we should do it right now.”

Isobelle’s head was dimly visible shaking from side to side. “Not yet, Cliff. Give Nan a chance to try to knock some sense into Alec. I know Nan infinitely better than you do, and since it’s obvious that she doesn’t really know what Alec is driving at I think she will do everything within her power to make him turn back for us. I suggest we give it as long as we can, as long as our constitutions can hold out against the need for food and drink, and if by then nothing has happened then we shall have to take the inevitable plunge——”

“In the meantime then,” Cliff said, “I think we can’t do better than just wander around and see what there is to see. I’m aware that there’s precious little else but sand, or rather gold dust, but there is a certain satisfaction to be obtained from the thought of wandering ankle deep in countless millions of pounds worth of wealth. Besides, you never know, we might happen upon some area somewhere where there is something edible. It may just be chance that we’ve landed in this particularly barren area—so let’s get along and see what we can find. As we go I’ll tell you what I think about this exchange of personalities. I’ve been giving it quite a bit of thought.”

Isobelle did not respond, but on the other hand she did not raise any objections either, so Cliff put an arm about her waist—which she made no attempt to resist—and together they began to move through the sand—or rather the gold dust—in no particular direction.

“I suppose that deep down you blame all this on me?” Cliff asked as they trudged slowly along beneath the stars, the hot enervating wind blowing in their faces.

“Matter of fact I don’t know who to blame. There seems to have been such an extraordinary mix-up all round, commencing with your own decidedly murderous plot and finishing up with you behaving like a good little boy and Alec as the toughest in the outfit. My mind is going round in circles, and can you wonder at it?”

“There is one thing,” Cliff observed as they reached the area where his beam-automatic had blasted, “this weapon is in fine fettle. Look at the mess it’s made of this gold dust.”

He went down on his knees and dug his hands into the dusty brown sawdust-like substance which had been left behind from the onslaught of the beam-automatic. The stuff ran

through his fingers like coffee grains, something totally different from the all-surrounding gold dust which reached in every direction.

“That’s funny,” Cliff remarked after a moment or two, and Isobelle looked at him quickly in the starlight.

“What is?”

“About this sand, or is it gold dust, where the beam-automatic has blasted. Strangely enough this stuff is a great deal lighter in weight than the stuff that *hasn’t* been

[Transcriber’s Note: A line appears to be missing here.]

“I’m not quite sure.” Cliff spoke very slowly, his mind obviously pre-occupied, then after a moment he took one of the several analysing instruments from his belt, placed some of the blackened sand into it, and then switched on his torch to observe what the analysing mechanism revealed. When presently the final analysis had been reached he gave a little whistle of surprise. This immediately brought Isobelle to his side, and in the torch light she looked at the register and she, too, raised her eyebrows in some astonishment. The needle on the indicator pointed quite clearly to the one word: “Sand”.

“I don’t understand it,” she said, puzzled. “Unless of course that instrument is cock-eyed. It’s only a make-shift sort of idea anyway, for on-the-minute experiments.”

“Make-shift or otherwise, it’s entirely correct. Look at all the other designations round the dial: Stone, Iron, Steel, Tungsten, Granite, Gold, Sand—— They’re all here, Isobelle, and if this stuff were gold dust it would be registering on the gold section, as it is it’s on ‘*Sand*’. Now I just wonder——”

CHAPTER SIX

Just what Cliff was wondering he did not immediately make clear. Isobelle for her part was thinking of the extraordinary possibility that perhaps, by the sheerest chance there was only one small area on the whole of this planetoid that contained actual gold dust, and it had happened to be the one spot where Cliff had dug his scoop on the first occasion. Everywhere else on the planet was perhaps sand. Which meant there also existed the possibility that the crate of dust which Nan had loaded up had in truth been nothing but plain rubbish! This thought, and sudden, overwhelming reaction to her present predicament, suddenly set Isobelle laughing with hysterical violence. Cliff made no attempt to stop her though in the starlight he looked at her with dour interest.

"I could appreciate a joke," he said finally as her merriment slowly began to subside. "What's so funny, anyway?"

"Oh, nothing—and I'm probably wrong, anyway. It just happened to occur to me was that probably all Nan did was take away a crate full of sand, which means that Alec made himself all tough for nothing. Probably when they discover their mistake they'll come back for us, shake hands, and let bygones be bygones."

"Crate of dust?" Cliff repeated. "What in sanity do you mean by that?"

Isobelle told him of the theory that had come to her mind, but Cliff did not seem deeply impressed.

"No, Isobelle, I can't agree with that idea at all. The coincidence is too enormous to be admitted. In any case we can very soon find out by testing some of the sand—if sand it really is—beyond this blackened area. Let's see what we get."

They moved beyond the area where the destructive beam had struck, and very soon reached the waste of yellow grains which swept away in undulating dunes towards the starlit horizon. The moment they were beyond the blackened area, Cliff paused again, used his analytical instrument, and tested some of the yellow dust. After a moment or two in the torch light, the indicator on the instrument swung to the one word "Gold" and remained there steadily.

"So much for your theory, my dear," he said, looking at Isobelle. "You may take it for granted that from hereon this entire planet is covered in gold dust. It was not coincidence that caused me to sweep up the first lot, and we can also be reasonably sure that Nan filled up an entire crate full of the stuff."

"All right then, if that be so, why is it that where your beam has struck we get sand?" Isobelle's voice was frankly puzzled. "Back on Earth were they to fire the beam-automatic at a mass of gold dust it would smoke probably under the impact but it certainly wouldn't change itself into sand in that fashion. It's beyond all reason!"

"I wonder if it really is?" There was a faraway note in Cliff's voice as he spoke, as though he were pondering the most profound issues.

"We have to remember, Isobelle, that gold is something of an unstable element. It is number seventy-nine in the Periodic Table, and in scientific circles the higher one rises in number of the element the more unstable is the element concerned—until we finally finish the table on uranium at number ninety-two. What I am wondering is, is there something in the atomic reaction of the beam-automatic which causes the atoms of gold to become so

completely unstable as to revert back into sand. Let me think now—sand is the dust of rocks, the by-product of granite feldspar and various minerals, all of which elements might basically exist before the actual atomic weight of gold—and therefore gold itself—is reached. It would seem——”

“I wish,” Isobelle broke in, “that I knew exactly what you are talking about! Or maybe you don’t know yourself?”

“There may be some truth in that,” Cliff admitted ruefully. “I am just trying to figure out why gold under the impact of a very weak atomic beam—for the beam of this gun is decidedly weak compared to atomic force as such—should be converted into sand. It would seem to suggest that there is a certain atomic disintegrated power which—— No,” Cliff sighed, “I haven’t got it worked out even now. Maybe it will come to me in time.”

“Well, until it does, perhaps you wouldn’t mind explaining what you mean by that exchange of personalities. You promised me you would.”

Cliff nodded, and together they went on again in the twilight, amidst the warm, cloying wind. He found it something of an effort to keep his mind on the subject which Isobelle had requested. For in one pocket he had a handful of blackened sand, and in the other pocket a handful of pure gold dust. Back in his mind all the time he was trying to reconcile this strange mutation of gold dust into sand, whilst he wrestled also with the problem of trying to explain away the mystery which Isobelle found so baffling.

“I look at it this way,” he said, thinking carefully. “Everything in nature exists under what has been designated as the Law of Probability. This law asserts that a certain aggregate of atoms exists purely as a probability and not as a fact. By this the scientist means to imply that since atoms of themselves cannot be observed by any visual means, they can only be said to exist because of the *probability* that they are in a certain place at a certain time. In the case of atoms it is not a matter of “seeing is believing” for one can never see what one knows to be there, therefore one agrees with the probability that such an atom, or aggregate of atoms, is in a certain place at a certain time. It is only when all these atoms are congregated into a form of matter that we see the finished result in a rock, a world, or a human being. Basically then, we are all made up of atoms, or more precisely of *Probabilities*. For that reason any counterbalancing vibration or cosmical force might easily change that Probability—or in other words a probability of a mass of atoms existing in one place might yield in the twinkling of an eye to the Probability that they exist somewhere else. The whole of Nature is entirely unstable, and built on shifting sand, for the simple reason that an unknown factor—in the form of radiation in the cosmos, to name but one instance, might cause what seems a perfectly balanced structure to go through a complete change. That is how we have it from the organic point of view, which of course also embraces human beings.

“By that means, Isobelle, you can probably see that human personalities *could* be exchanged under the influence of cosmical radiation.”

“I’m afraid that I find this far too deep for me,” Isobelle said, as they trudged slowly up a long rise towards the stars, “because I find it quite impossible to grasp why personalities should be *exchanged*. If they were broken down into something different, or even atomised into something bestial and unrecognisable, I could better understand it. But that two people should each change their personalities in the way that you and Alec have done seems to me an utterly impossible phenomenon.”

“To explain that,” Cliff replied, “I think we have to delve into the science of forces and explain it away by the action of two electrical forces trying to find a balance with each other.

Try and look at it this way, Isabelle: we know that every living thing is made up of a mass of electrical forces. So much so that the electrical forces generated from a hand can play an electronic instrument. All right then—conceive that out in space cosmic radiation upsets the balanced forces of two people—Alec and myself for instance—and the result is a sudden fluidity in the forces making up the two men concerned. It is inevitable law that forces will find a balance. Whether those forces find the balance in the original object from which they have been disturbed is a matter for a trained physicist to work out, and it *is* known that forces do exchange themselves along the line of least resistance.

“Hazily,” Isabelle confessed, “I do see what you mean. In the normal way the electrical charges of a body are perfectly balanced. If one suddenly collides with a tremendous electric voltage, such as a high-powered cable, all the electricity in the body is blasted along a new path and instant death results.”

“Exactly so,” Cliff agreed, “but in this case the radiations in space are not severe enough to cause a complete breakdown in the electrical make-up of a body; they are merely violently disturbed and immediately try to find a fresh balance. Inevitably, as it is always the law of electricity, they seek the line of least resistance which might quite easily be in another living body close at hand. All it really boils down to is that I have some of Alec’s original electrical energies, and he has some of mine. The result of that operating on the blood stream, which includes the brain, has caused a complete about turn in personalities.”

“I thought you said earlier that the whole business would probably boil down to a mental condition?”

“Well, when you come to think of it, that’s what it really is. Call it mentality, call it the brain, call it electrical forces, it all amounts to the same thing.”

“But how does all this come about when the space machine is so heavily insulated against outside radiations?”

Cliff laughed shortly. “The space machine which is absolutely insulated against *all* radiations has yet to be built, Izzy. I don’t doubt that Professor Brailsford put everything he could into the design of the machine in which we travelled, but even so, the nature of *all* the radiations of space is not even known. There might be radiations infinitely more destructive and disturbing than even the cosmic rays, which at the moment are the most deadly ones we know.”

“It surprises me,” Isabelle said, “that you know so much about the matter. I know that you have a fair knowledge of science and electronics, but I never thought you’d be able to theorise to this extent!”

“For that,” Cliff responded, “you must thank Alec. There is no doubt that he is—or was—quite a brilliant scientist in many ways, and the theory I am putting forward is one more likely to be born of his imagination than my own. The fact remains that that is what I believe is the answer to our most remarkable change in outlook, and indeed, to a certain extent it would appear to have affected you, though I don’t see any signs of a distinct interchange with Nan.”

“Is there any reason why part of my electrical make-up could not have exchanged with you, or Alec?”

“No reason at all, only it is more likely that your particular make-up would have an affinity with another female. The two sexes are really quite as distinct electrically as are positive and negative in the electrical sphere.”

“And just what does it all add up to?” Isabelle asked, sighing. “To have proved a theory at least to one’s own satisfaction, only to find that one is doomed to extinction is not particularly

encouraging. In any case you may be wrong. It may be just that you on the one hand have undergone a reformation of thought, whilst Alec has turned in exactly the opposite direction, all because of the desire for gold.”

Cliff did not respond. His arm was still about Isobelle’s waist as they came to the top of the long rise of gold dust, and here they paused looking about them. They stood in silence, two small and amazingly isolated figures against the stars, whilst ahead of them yawned endless more deserts of gold dust stretching as far as the eye could penetrate, to the very near horizon.

“Somewhere in all this,” Cliff said at length, “there is an answer. I don’t mean all this waste of gold dust about us—I mean in the things that have happened, such as the change of personalities, the mysterious reversion of gold dust into common sand, the effect of a weak atomic blast upon gold dust. Everything links up somewhere, if only I could put my finger on it——”

He searched the stars above him with what seemed to Isobelle a certain touch of desperation, his fists clenched at his sides as though he was striving to bring some clear thought out of a chaos of speculations.

But nothing seemed to emerge. He remained silent, Isobelle at his side.

Nan awoke from the depths of unconsciousness to the awareness that Alec was bending over her, a glass of powerful restorative in his hand. Indeed her throat was still burning from the after-effect of the fluid which he had forced between her lips.

“Better?” he enquired, with a brusqueness far more noticeable than usual.

Nan nodded, but she did not speak. For the moment she was doing her utmost to try and knit together the events which had immediately preceded her unconsciousness, and it was as she did so, that she realised that she and Alec were alone in the control room.

Then the whole business had been true! Cliff and Isobelle had been left behind on the planetoid—it had not been part of some horrible dream she had been experiencing during her unconsciousness.

“Yes, you look better,” Alec added, looking at her critically. “Just for a while you had me rather worried, you were such a long time unconscious. We’re well away from ZK/70 by now, and heading as rapidly as possible back towards home.”

“And what of Cliff and Isobelle?” Nan’s eyes searched his taut, grim face intently. “Are they aboard, or did we really leave them behind?”

“We left them behind, of course! What else did you expect after the way they behaved.”

“I still can’t remember how they *did* behave. I certainly never saw them attempt anything. The only thing I did see was you standing there with your gun level and giving me orders as to what to do. I don’t understand you, Alec, I just don’t!”

He grinned cynically. “It simply boils down to this, my dear. You and I are the only ones who possess the gold, and therefore shall be the only ones to control it. As for Cliff and Isobelle, they don’t mean a thing. They could have caused plenty of trouble—and would have done if necessary—only I happened to be just a little too smart for them.”

Nancy just gazed for a moment or two, then she struggled up from the long wall couch on which Alec had placed her and put her feet carefully on the ground. For a moment or two she felt somewhat light-headed, then she moved over to the switchboard whither Alec had already gone. On her way to join him she gazed through the observation window, and to her surprise beheld ZK/70 no larger than a tennis ball far away in the firmament.

“Alec——” She drifted towards him and laid a gentle hand on his arm.

“Well?”

“Do you still care enough for me to take time out to analyse yourself?”

It was such an extraordinary question that even Alec was surprised for a moment. He looked at her quickly, and then a half-puzzled expression came into his eyes.

“Analyse myself? Why should I?”

“Because you are not yourself—and you know it!”

Alec hesitated, then he said curtly: “I feel all right. In fact I never felt better in my life! I’ve disposed of all the elements likely to cause us any trouble, I have you by my side, and in the store room at the end of the ship we have a crate full of gold dust which can buy us everything in the world which we need. And if it should fall short of our expectations we know where there is oceans more of it to be obtained. If that isn’t enough to make a man feel good, I don’t know what is!”

“All that is entirely superfluous,” Nan replied deliberately. “What I am trying to drive home to you, Alec, is that you are not the same Alec Carter who started out on this expedition. Before we set off into space the very idea of ditching Cliff and my step-sister on that planetoid would have been utterly repugnant to you, yet now I find you actually revelling in the notion. That is why I say analyse yourself—try and find out what it is that makes you so willing to follow such an evil course.”

Nan fully expected that he would flare up at this, so she held herself in readiness. But to her surprise a thoughtful expression crossed Alec’s face and he gazed moodily out of the big observation window. He even seemed to forget that Nan was present, for with the same faraway look in his eyes he started to wander about the control room, finally finishing up again at the switchboard.

“Come to think of it,” he said, musing, “Cliff said some strange things on that planetoid before we departed. You didn’t hear them, of course, but they were to the effect that he and I had exchanged personalities in some mysterious way. He said too that he had become attracted to you, and he half-expected that I would be attracted to Isobelle. At least, that is the impression he gave. Obviously such a circumstance as that could only come about by his personality and mine changing places—partly, if not wholly.”

“I’m not a scientist,” Nan said simply, “so I just don’t know what you mean.”

“Damned if I know myself, if it comes to that, but if there is anything in it it would mean, don’t you see, that Cliff would be putting forward his theory, which I, in my normal self, would probably have put forward instead. What it amounts to is borrowed scientific knowledge which he has somehow obtained from me. On the other hand, from him I have obtained all those common, calculating, sadistic qualities for which he was singularly remarkable. Oh, I know he didn’t reveal such tendencies any more than he could help, but I’m quite convinced that they were there. You may remember that before this space journey began, and also after we had got under way, I said I didn’t trust him. That, too, may have had something to do with my determination to be rid of him—as indeed we are.”

“Exchange of personalities?” Nan repeated slowly. “I must say that I quite fail to see how anything like that could come about.”

“Off hand, so do I, but since I’m as puzzled by my whole mental outlook as you seem to be, it might be worth while, after all, if I did give it a little thought, and try to figure it out.”

Nan did exactly as she was bidden and kept completely silent so as not to disturb Alec’s concentrations. She realised that she had won a point up to now, therefore it all depended on

whether he was willing enough to subdue the change in personality to try and find out the reason for it.

Time passed, and he still sat motionless, obviously still thinking hard—then at last he got to his feet with an irritated movement and pushed a hand through his hair impatiently.

“It’s no use, Nan, I just can’t get the hang of this business at all! If, as has been suggested, some kind of radiation might be responsible for it, then surely it wouldn’t just apply to Cliff and myself, *you* would be affected also and so would Isobelle have been.”

“Isobelle *was* to a great extent,” Nan replied. “We mentioned that much earlier on in the journey! She was never the same once the space journey began.”

“All right then, what about *you*? No change in you that I can see!”

“Not that you can see, perhaps. But there *are* changes just the same. It so happens that they are not changes of a violent enough nature to make them obvious. Besides, when it comes to controlling my emotions, I am pretty strong willed. Since this space journey began I have had several remarkable urges and leanings, which normally would be quite foreign to my type of temperament. There’s no getting away from it, Alec, there’s something somewhere which is responsible even though neither of us seem able to alight upon it.”

Alec moved around again restlessly, and took a long survey through the observation window back towards the planetoid they had left so far behind them. And then at length he strolled moodily out of the control room and down through the main passageway. Nan watched him go, his shoulders slumped, his hands pushed deep into the pockets of his space slacks, as he quite obviously still struggled to sort the problem out.

It was in this mood of complete abstraction that he finally came into the storage room at the rear of the vessel where lay the huge tubes of the rocket exhaust. There was nothing premeditated about his arrival here: it was simply the outcome of his wanderings. Lost in thought he surveyed the enormous cylindrical surface of the rocket tubes and absently noted that the thermometer readings upon them were correct, then his eyes travelled to the crate of gold dust which he had placed here before leaving the planetoid. He looked at it casually in the first place, then he gave a start and moved more closely. The faraway look went from his eyes suddenly. He moved forwards quickly, dropping on his knees beside the crate and peering into it.

“It can’t be!” he whispered to himself, half incredulously. “It just can’t *be*!” He dug his fingers into the gold dust and allowed the grains to run between them, but it was no longer gold dust which he held there, no longer incalculable wealth, but pure, unadulterated sand! For several seconds he was almost stunned by the realisation. Then he became frantically active and dug his hands into the crate, sweeping up handfuls of the stuff and staring at it in the bright light. Finally he gathered up one handful and quickly returned along the corridor into the control room. He did not stop until he reached Nan’s side, and then he poured the sand grains out of his hand on to the metal floor. Nan turned quickly from the controls and sat staring at this demonstration, at his distraught face.

“What—what’s this stuff?” she demanded at length, staring at him in amazement.

“Sand!” Alec’s laugh was almost hysterical. “*Sand!* Nothing else but sand! This was the gold dust! Now we have nothing but a crateful of sand and nothing to explain it!”

For several long moments Nan was silent, staring at the grains on the floor. She reached out the toe of her heavy shoe and stirred it in the dust. Gone was all that faint iridescence which had announced the gold; instead there was just the faint glitter of thoroughly pulverised rock.

“A mutation,” Alec whispered, half to himself. “That’s what it is! The blasted stuff has mutated! It was gold to begin with and now it’s changed into sand. A complete transposition of elements—caused by——”

He stopped, staring into space. Then he repeated slowly: “Transposition of elements? Exchange of personalities! Great goodness, Nan, do you begin to see some sort of parallel between this gold changing into sand and Cliff and I exchanging our personalities?”

“A parallel?”

“Certainly! The only difference is that in one case it has happened to inorganic material and in the other to organic material. That means that—let me think now——”

Alec beat his forehead steadily with his fists. “There must be some kind of connection somewhere to cause this—er—it’s something in this space ship! First it was personalities which in some strange way mutated—if you can call it that—and in the second place it was an unstable element like gold dust which was forced back into the basic material of sand. A radiation! There’s only one answer to this, Nan, there is some kind of radiation passing right through this vessel which for all the insulation we have, it is not proof against it. And there’s only one way to get the answer to that one, and that is to get to work with the detectors right away. Come to think of it,” Alec added quickly, “it’s a good job I happened to notice that the gold had gone back into sand, otherwise I would never have grasped this exchange of personalities business. Plainly the problem is atomic, or else electrical—a change of electric charges which, in the case of human beings, alters the basic balance and causes a certain surge along the line of least resistance and in the case of inorganic materials it means a breakdown of the atomic make-up into a less complicated form. All right, where’s the detector?”

From the nearby rack he took down the instrument he required and then set it up carefully in the rubber-footed stand specially made for the purposes of experiments. Nan immediately put in the automatic controls, so that she could stand by Alec’s side and watch the indicator’s reaction. It was one specially devised for the detection of ultra short wavelengths, and up to this point it had not been used for the simple reason that there had been no realisation that there was anything abnormal in the way of radiations present. The moment Alec switched the current through it, however, the needle began to swing back and forth under the impact of an unknown and extremely powerful radiation. Indeed, when at length the needle came to rest, it was well beyond the point marked down as cosmic radiation. Apparently there was yet another radiation even shorter than cosmic rays themselves.

Alec stared at the meter almost disbelievingly, then he cast a quick glance at Nan’s intent features.

“This,” Alec said, “bears out what Jeans once said about there being a radiation in the Universe far stronger than cosmic waves. He merely theorised at it mathematically because it cannot be traced very clearly by instruments only to the atmospheric belt, but out here in space it is plainly distinguishable. It explains much! It explains why the insulation of the ship does not block it, because presumably Professor Brailsford relied on cosmic rays being the most powerful radiation likely to be encountered. That automatically explains why it is affecting us. Plainly it is not the kind of wavelength which burns and blasts, as do cosmic waves, but is one of such an extremely short wavelength that it produces a vibration which causes violent atomic changes in both organic and inorganic objects.”

“And it also explains something else,” Nan said very slowly, “something of real significance which has worried us right from the very commencement, namely, why didn’t my father bring gold dust back to Earth with him? Now we know the answer! Either he did, and

found it turned into sand so did not mention the fact for fear of earning ridicule, or else he knew such a thing would happen so did not attempt to bring back the gold anyway!”

“Yes.” Alec clenched his fists slowly. “That is undoubtedly the answer, Nan. This infernal radiation is nothing more or less than what might be called an infernal barrier! Do you realise what it means? Out there on that planetoid we have left behind there is limitless wealth, yet it must forever stay there, because in crossing from that planetoid back to Earth again this confounded radiation gets in the way and reduces everything into sand! It’s about the biggest cosmic irony that I ever heard of. As far as your father is concerned, Nancy, I venture to think that he must have known all about it; he was too clever a scientist not to. Why he didn’t mention the fact in his will is best left to conjecture, but I will make one guess—he evidently wanted us to show courage enough to make the trip, and he also wanted to show us by actual proof that wealth is not always possible to take away. If he had stated these facts in his will we should never have believed them, because it is one of those matters where only the actual experience can provide proof which is needed.”

“Yes,” Nan agreed slowly, “that must be it. But mind you, it also brings into being various other relevant points which we haven’t given any consideration. Namely, if organic and inorganic subjects are affected by this radiation, isn’t it logical to assume that everything aboard this ship, including the ship itself, must also be affected?”

Alec looked about him quickly. “Probably there have been changes, in fact, undoubtedly so, but they have not been of a sufficiently prominent nature for us to have noticed them. One thing we can be reasonably certain of, and that is that this space ship is safe enough, otherwise your father could not have made the journey to the planetoid and back as he did. He evidently was quite sure that the machine would hold out, otherwise he wouldn’t have suggested that we made the trip. As to other things like metals and so forth, they will very probably have undergone several subtle differences in make-up, but the likelihood is that the mutation would have been only from one form of metal into another, and therefore that presents no actual danger in itself. The real phenomenon lies in this interchange of personalities and the breaking down of the more unstable elements like the atoms of gold. Having solved what is causing the trouble, the thing to do now is to stop it! It is an intolerable thought that out there is a world full of gold dust which can’t be touched because of this blasted radiation upsetting everything. Then again there is the exasperating change which comes to personalities. If we can only find a way to block this shortwave radiation, it is inevitable that I shall resume my normal personality, something which I find it too difficult to do by an effort of will. Only one thing for it,” Alec finished, “I shall have to do a bit more thinking and see what I can devise.”

“Wouldn’t it be more to the point,” Nan asked, “seeing that we’ve solved the cause of the trouble if we went back for Cliff and Isobelle. You are fully aware now that the actions which you performed on ZK/70 were entirely dictated by this change of personality, so why don’t we return and——”

“Not if I know it!” Alec broke in. “Cliff and your step-sister had a plan against us which ——”

“But what in the world does that plan matter now?” Nan demanded, beating the bench at her side. “All they tried to do was to stop us getting gold dust; well, if they do that they’ll only get ordinary sand, so the whole scheme falls to bits for that reason.”

“It would, if they knew that the gold would turn into sand on the way back to Earth. But they don’t, and if we went back for them and took them aboard this machine, you can bet your

sweet life that they'd do everything they could to be rid of us. No, we're not going to risk that, Nan, not if I know it!"

Nan became silent. She could see quite clearly that Alec was still being dictated to by the fragments of Cliff's personality which he had in him. There was nothing that could sort out this business except an actual reversion to normal, and then indeed he would be able to reason things out from the aspect of Alec Carter and nobody else.

But to work out a method of insulation against this mysterious and so far completely undetected radiation, was no small business. Alec struggled with the problem for many hours, during which time Nan remained faithfully at the switchboard, yawning through many intervals when she felt the overpowering urge to sleep, but still Alec sat doggedly on, figuring, plotting, experimenting with the detector, and making practically every postulation which his scientific imagination could devise. Nan indeed, had decided in her own mind that he had found the problem quite beyond him, when suddenly, after what seemed an eternity of motionless sitting, he jumped to his feet in sudden eagerness.

"I believe I've got it!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nan gave him a tired look. "Well, what's the answer? Lead sheathing or something of that sort?"

"No, nothing like that. Lead wouldn't be insulative enough for a radiation with such a short wavelength. No, the only method is to try electrical repulsion, and by so doing we are probably forming the basis of the first repulsive shell found in any space machine. It involves the conversion of the atomic generator, but I think I can manage that in a couple of hours. The first thing I've got to do though, is to get some sleep, then I can get to work. Do you think you can hold on for two more hours whilst I take time out? For while I'm watching the controls I can also get to work on the atomic plant, and so kill two birds with one stone."

Nan gave a nod. "Carry on."

Alec did not hesitate any longer. He left the control room and made his way down the corridor to his own quarters. Nan, worn out though she was, had deliberately refrained from raising any protests for the simple reason that she knew that the sooner this radiation was blocked the sooner Alec would return to his normal personality, and this pseudo Cliff with whom she was making the return journey would automatically disappear. Nevertheless the couple of hours seemed to her to be endlessly wearying, and throughout the time the tiny globe of ZK/70 grew smaller and smaller as the space machine hurtled onwards towards the orbit of Mars.

Ever and again Nan caught herself nodding over the controls, each time to jerk herself back into listless life. At last there came the moment when there was the sound of Alec's heavy boots on the floor of the corridor, and yawning widely he came into the control room.

"Right," he said, "I'll take over from here. I haven't managed to get much sleep, but enough I think for a refresher for what I have before me. You go and sleep all you like, Nan, I'll do everything from this point onwards."

Nan needed no second bidding, and immediately she had gone Alec spent only a few moments checking the course and making sure that all was well in this direction, then he went to work to remove the heavy cowlings from the top of the power plant.

Nan for her part fell asleep almost immediately, with the vision of the retreating ZK/70 through the porthole immediately above her bed. When she awoke again she was able to judge from the smallness of ZK/70 that considerable time had elapsed, and as she lay gathering her sense out of sleep, she found herself wondering why, through such a long interval, Alec had not come and aroused her. For as near as she could judge she had been asleep some six hours or more. She lay passive for quite a while, listening to the whine of the power plant and hoping to catch some sounds of activity as Alec went about the task of creating his repulsive shield. She wondered what exactly he had in mind for she had not stayed long enough for him to explain in detail. Not that she would have understood, probably, but none the less she would have been glad of the opportunity to try.

Finally she got out of bed and quickly re-dressed herself in slacks and blouse, then she wandered into the control room and looked about her. The first thing she saw gave her a jolt of horror. Lying before the atomic power plant, the cowlings to one side, was Alec himself. He was lying flat on his back, his arms outflung, and there was something about his attitude which suggested he was more than just unconscious.

A momentary horror passing, Nan went down on her knees quickly at his side and shook him violently—without avail. She tried again, and then again, until at last she was forced to take the step she had tried to avoid. She listened at Alec's chest and also took his pulse—or tried to—but in each case she got no reaction. The answer was so horrible, so stupifying, she could not take it in. For Alec was dead. As she half-crouched, absorbing this fact, Nan became aware of something she had not noticed before, or else it was only just beginning to manifest itself, and that was that upon every portion of his exposed skin there was a rosy pinkness, slowly deepening into a redness, and then forming into obvious blisters. It was almost at this moment that Nan herself began to realise that the backs of her hands and her face were smarting intolerably. They were also little pinpricks stabbing into her eyes and making vision difficult.

Though she did not *know* she felt reasonably certain that the cause of the trouble was the unshielded power plant. For obvious reasons the heavily insulated coverings which had been placed around it had been put there to prevent dangerous atomic radiations from escaping, which fact indeed Alec himself had mentioned at the very outset of the journey. Either, in his eagerness to get his repulsive screen into operation he had forgotten the necessity to heavily insulate himself when being near an exposed atomic power plant, or else he had considered the radiations would not be dangerous enough in the short time he intended to work, but which ever had been the case, the fact remained that his heart had not been able to withstand the strain and he had dropped dead.

Just for a moment Nancy nearly gave way to the overpowering hysteria which sought to govern her, then with a tremendous effort, that will power on which she prided herself, came to her rescue, and she mastered her emotions. Shaken, she struggled to her feet and went across to the control board. One fact was in her mind now, namely, that she could return to ZK/70 without interference and undo the wrong which Alec, though partially governed by a personality other than his own, had wrought. But here again she faced the problem of controlling the machine. She had nothing to go upon except the memory of how Alec and Cliff had handled things, and this knowledge was at the best pretty weak.

Nevertheless she made an effort and operated what she hoped were the right switches. The result was that, by degrees, the machine presently began to turn in an arc, ZK/70 appearing at the front of the vessel where formerly it had been at the rear.

Satisfied that she had contrived this much, Nan glanced back towards the fallen body on the floor. Something had to be done. It was no longer Alec lying there but a corpse, and in time—quickly perhaps in the stifling air of the control room—decomposition would inevitably set in. So ahead there lay for Nan a ghoulish task, but it had to be done.

Seizing Alec's body by the shirt collar she heaved and pulled, and at last succeeded in dragging him down the main corridor to the rear of the vessel where lay the rocket exhausts. Here, in the absolute tail of the ship, there was an ejector valve used for the expulsion of waste materials from the vessel. True, the transfer of materials to the exterior did not dispose of them entirely, since they followed the ship's mass at a slight distance, but at least they were not within to foul and pollute the precious atmosphere.

Half an hour's work was needed before Nan had at last lifted Alec's body into the small valve. Then she closed the door and closed her eyes for a moment as she muttered a prayer. She felt that it served a double purpose. On the one hand it calmed her emotions somewhat, and on the other it was the only way she could contrive to hand Alec over to the Power that rules all.

Her hand closed the switch and there was an instant rush of compressed air which sprung open the outer valve and sent the corpse hurtling into space. Her eyes misted with tears Nan stumbled back along the corridor into the control room, fighting the urge to look into the rear prismatic mirrors and see if the body were following on. Inevitably it would be, but the last thing she wanted was to ever see it again.

And now what? The power plant had apparently caused the trouble, so the logical thing seemed to be to refix the cowlings. In her ignorance, Nan did not realise the deadly danger of the task she proposed to perform. She was under the delusion that only several hours of soaking in radiation could cause trouble. The brief exposure *she* had had so far did not seem to her to be any cause for alarm—so she went to work as rapidly as possible to get the heavy covers back into place. However, since she had never had the remotest engineering sense she did not make a particularly good job of her effort. Further, she had to constantly interrupt her activities in order to attend to the course. In the main the automatic control kept the vessel generally in the right direction, but there were always cosmic drifts to be guarded against.

Between interruptions and lack of knowledge Nan was sadly handicapped. She got the cowlings partly into place and that was all. The bolts she could not find anywhere, and at length it occurred to her that probably Alec had put them in his pocket. So she propped the heavy covers in place with whatever loose objects she could find and at length returned to the full-time job of guiding the vessel. Making a further reading of ZK/70 she found that its distance had considerably decreased, but there was still a vast distance to go

And on ZK/70 itself. For Isobelle and Cliff there was nothing but the twilight and the subtropical atmosphere. Hours, maybe many Earth-days, had passed since the departure of the space machine, and up to now there was not the least sign of it returning.

“Izzy, we have a decision to make,” Cliff said finally, and motioned for her to sit down beside him on the gold dust dune. “We’re most unlikely to find anything edible here, and we’ll probably die in our efforts to do so. Do we use the beam-automatic and finish things off in the grand style, or do we slowly fade away like a couple of old soldiers?”

“We’ve still some time to go before we fade away. Until the situation becomes intolerable let’s carry on.”

“To where?” Cliff asked dryly. “Seems to me we can better conserve our energy by just sitting here. At least we have the consolation that we shan’t catch cold!”

Isobelle said nothing. She gazed up into the starlit wastes, and towards that vastly distant green star which marked Earth. Upon that world were people—living, dying, being born, fighting. Some wealthy, some poor, but at least they were all on a planet where they had their own kin around them. Here there was nothing. Unimaginable wealth marched hand in hand with a vapid, sickly wind.

“I wonder,” Cliff mused, “if Alec has yet discovered that personalities can interchange? If so, there is a strong possibility that he may return.”

“Why should he?” Isobelle asked moodily.

“Because there’ll be enough of me in him for him to want you more than any other woman. Nan won’t satisfy him, any more than you now satisfy me. Candidly, Izzy—and I mean this without personal disrespect—there is no woman born in whom I could now be less interested than you.”

Isobelle shrugged. “I won’t say that I feel the same about you. You’re still Cliff to me, even if there is a flavouring of Alec——”

Silence. Conversation for the sake of it: that was all they were making. Anything to kill time, to stave off the relentless monotony, to bury the realisation that they were sitting languidly on enough money to buy up the whole world—even the System. The consciousness of mounting irony was appalling.

And back on the space machine Nan clung unswervingly to her resolve to return to ZK/70 as fast as possible. Now it was not only to rescue her step-sister and Cliff, but so that she could have living company, her most desperate need. She had never realised the appalling loneliness that can descend on a solitary human being in the deeps of space.

Here, though, in her urgency she had overlooked that the faster she drove the space machine the more the atomic power raced itself, and therefore the more dangerous gamma, beta and alpha radiations it gave forth. She was awakened to this fact by the consciousness of tingling mysteriously from head to foot. At first she put it down to her immovability in the control chair which had brought on an attack of cramp, but when she stamped around the control room and flexed her arms fiercely only to find the condition becoming worse, she knew that something much worse had her in its grip.

But *why*? This was what she could not understand. She was quite sure that the power-plant cowlings were back in place satisfactorily enough to prevent any trouble. It did not occur to her that even the slightest crack—and there were plenty of them between the plates—was sufficient to permit of the radiations escaping.

So, gradually, the sense of cramp within her changed to an intolerable burning, an irritation which spread over her like a corrosive tide. She stumbled across to the wall mirror and surveyed herself. Her skin had become lobster-pink—just as Alec's skin had appeared as he lay before the power-plant. Then it was that she knew the truth.

It was a million to one against that she would ever reach ZK/70 alive. Indeed, her sight was already failing under the incessant impact of the radiations. As she gazed wildly around her it seemed that the control room was much darker, and she could no longer see the goal towards which she was heading. Even the switches, as she crossed to them, appeared to be bathed in a luminescent, foundering haze shot through with bars of darkness.

Gropingly, she sat down again in the control chair and fought frantically to compose herself. She knew—for Alec had once told her—that atomic radiations strike first at the organs of vision, and afterwards at the heart. It could not be long before the elemental forces which had struck down the too-casual Alec would strike her down too.

The only hope, then, was that this hurtling space ship would perhaps somehow land on ZK/70, drawn by the gravity of the planetoid, and that Cliff and Isobelle, if they still lived, would find a way to patch up the wreck and make a safe return home. Perhaps Cliff, with his scientific knowledge, would know what had caused the deaths of the two occupants and would take care that the power-plant was properly insulated before attempting a take-off.

All speculations—wild, improbable speculations—but they were the only things Nan could hang on to. Even as she speculated she pulled the switch which she remembered set the forward rockets going, thereby braking the vessel's speed, and with this accomplished she was incapable of further effort. Her whole being seemed to be consumed by living fire. She could not remember when her hands left the switches, nor was there any conscious realisation of the moment when she died And the projectile flashed onwards, but within it was slowing down in its prodigious velocity as the forward jets began to make an impression.

It was not coincidence which guided the decelerating machine to ZK/70, but the natural mass of the planetoid itself, just as Nan had hoped. Even so, the machine was hurtling at

several thousands of miles an hour when it struck the planetoid's shallow atmosphere. Instantly a deafening, high-pitched scream resounded from one end of the planetoid to the other. It awoke Cliff with a start as he lay half-dozing in the gold dust, and Isobelle stirred uneasily.

"Quick, Izzy!" she heard Cliff shouting, as he shook her. "They've come back! Look—up there!"

Isobelle stared upwards, adjusting her mind after sleep. Her gaze became fixed on what appeared to be a meteorite flashing lower and lower, the scream of its descent so shattering she was compelled to cover her ears.

"It's the ship all right!" came Cliff's voice, muffled, "but it must be out of control. They'd never dive at that speed otherwise——"

In fascination he and Isobelle watched. It only seemed like seconds as the machine descended, then it struck the golden planetoid some five miles distant. Even at that distance there was a distinct shock, a blinding flash, and then quietness.

"Neither Alec nor Nan could possibly have survived a smash like that," Isobelle whispered, struggling to her feet.

"I can't understand why they came down at such a lick——"

"Better see what happened. Come on!"

Cliff grabbed her arm and together they began hurrying through the loose sand. Here at last was the need of activity, the interest of something having developed, though doubtless tragically. By the time they had reached the half-buried machine they were breathless and perspiring freely in the tropic air. They dragged to a standstill, staring at that pointed tail angling sharply against the stars. Clearly the vessel had arrived with tremendous force, burying half its length in the sand.

"Better be prepared for some kind of unpleasant sight in there," Cliff murmured. "Both of them must have been nearly scrambled to a jelly."

He went forward again quickly, finally reaching the machine's slanting side and angling his face so he could peer through the porthole. Within, all was dark . . . Isobelle came to his side and looked about her.

"How about trying the emergency hatch on the top? Opens from outside as well as in."

"Good idea."

Cliff caught hold of the outer projections of the vessel's plates and began to haul himself up, holding down a hand for Isobelle to follow. By degrees, moving with difficulty on the slanting plates—which were still hot from friction with the atmosphere—but cooling rapidly thanks to the insulation preparation with which they were covered—they gained the round lid of the emergency hatch and Cliff kicked back the clamp. To raise the cover was but the work of a moment, then he began the descent of the sharply angled metal ladder within, helping Isobelle down after him.

Their expectation of finding the interior of the ship smashed into twisted wreckage was not entirely realised, probably because the machine had plunged into yielding sand instead of solid rock. They found the control room more or less intact, but two of the main switch-panels had been wrenched from their wall fixtures and were swinging drunkenly over the slanting floor. Upon this floor Nan lay, face downward in a corner, her arms flung wide.

Silent, Cliff and Isobelle studied the scene, their eyes wandering presently to the power-plant from which the cowlings had been ripped away with the shock. This would have occasioned no surprise had they known how loosely they had been fixed in position.

“Where do you suppose Alec is?” Isobelle asked finally.

“Heaven knows! Perhaps in one of the bedrooms. Go and take a look whilst I see how Nan is. Afraid there’s little we can do as far as she’s concerned.”

Isobelle turned and scrambled back along the slanting passage-way, looking into each sleeping compartment in turn. In practically every instance the beds had been torn from the walls and were lying amidst a tangle of blankets and sheets. In one of them the washing apparatus had been smashed to bits and water was trickling from the broken tank above . . . but nowhere was there a sign of Alec. Her wonderment deepening, Isobelle turned finally to the only other possible place where Alec could be—the storage-hold where lay the rocket exhausts. But, of course, she drew blank here also.

The mystery to her was complete because there was no back door to spaceships. Baffled, she was about to turn away when her eye was caught by the crate of sand near the exhaust tubes. She returned to it quickly, ran the sand through her fingers, and then stood thinking.

“Then I must have been right,” she muttered. “About my theory of metamorphosis——”

She examined the crate itself carefully, and then made the difficult, up-ended journey back into the control room. She found Cliff in the act of rolling Nan’s body in a sheet of tarpaulin.

“Dead,” he announced quietly, as Isobelle stumbled in. “I get the impression, though, that she was spared the horror of the actual crash. Her body is quite cold, for one thing, which it wouldn’t be yet if she’d died when the machine hit bottom. Besides, there’s a curious pink look about her exposed skin, even in death, which seems to suggest that she became exposed to atomic radiations, which killed her. Perhaps from the power plant there when the cowling came away——”

Cliff paused and shook his head dubiously. “Couldn’t have been that. The cowling wouldn’t be torn off until the crash. Damned if I know! What about Alec? Did you find him?”

“Not a trace anywhere.”

Cliff stared. “But that’s impossible! He wouldn’t leap out of the ship!”

“I know it, but there’s no sign. What I *did* find, though, was a crate full of *sand*, and it’s the same crate which was used to put the gold dust in.”

Cliff hesitated over a remark, then whilst he thought it out he finished wrapping the tarpaulin around Nan’s body and then got to his feet.

“I must take a look at that,” he said briefly. “*And* verify to my own satisfaction that Alec is nowhere aboard.”

Isobelle shrugged and turned to the food cupboard. Within it was a fair supply of canned concentrates, both food and drink. By the time Cliff had returned, obvious wonderment on his face, she had set out a rough meal on the slanting table.

“Well? No Alec?” she asked grimly.

“No—but I have the explanation. The ejector-valve has been used, and the chamber inside it has been enlarged to the widest capacity. I’m making one guess—the only one, that Alec was fired from it by Nan.”

“But *why*?” Isobelle stared incredulously.

“I don’t know. Come to that, we never *shall* know now.”

Isobelle mused, her brows knitted. “If that were the case Alec’s body would tail the ship due to its gravity. It would also have come down with the ship.”

“Probably it did. If we looked far enough we’d probably find the corpse. Since it couldn’t tell us anything, what’s the use?” Cliff sat down slowly in the cock-eyed chair at the table. “As to the sand, you’re dead right. The same crate exactly. The gold dust has turned into sand, just

as you said it might do. All part and parcel of that damned mutational business which keeps going on without us discovering *why*.”

Silence. Isabelle looked at the food on the table and then gave a rather uneasy smile.

“I don’t think either Nan or Alec would think any the worse of us for having a meal at this moment. No disrespect to the dead is intended. Simply a matter of not being able to live with the dead.”

Cliff nodded absently, took a drink, and then began to eat some of the concentrated food. After a while he gave a bitter smile.

“Pretty clear now why your step-father didn’t bring any gold dust back home with him, Izzy. Either he knew to commence with—or found out in the course of the journey—that the dust would become sand.”

“That being so he shouldn’t have sent us on a fool’s errand.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t that. He may not have known what *caused* the gold mutation and relied upon it that we four would find a way round the difficulty. After all he didn’t *order* us to make the trip. We were free agents. Seems pretty clear now that the change in gold has been caused by the same unknown something which forced an interchange in personalities. That means it can only be something existing in space itself. Radiation of some sort, perhaps——”

“Which automatically means that gold dust cannot even be transferred from here to Earth?”

“At the moment, that’s the way it looks.” Cliff gave up eating and took a cigarette from the storage cupboard instead. It seemed a long time to him since he had indulged in the soothing inhalation of nicotine. He dragged deeply on the weed and looked about him.

“It might be possible to get *some* gold dust back to Earth,” he said finally, “if we content ourselves with no more than say half a pound of it. In the storage hold there is a big lead container which originally contained the radio-active bar for the power-plant. Put the gold dust in that and it would probably stay sufficiently insulated against metamorphosing radiations. On the other hand there would be ourselves to consider, and how *we* would react. We know now what space can do to us. Presumably it will do it again if we can ever make the trip back to Earth.”

“You mean our personalities would again undergo change?”

“Only to be expected, I’m afraid.” Cliff drew at his cigarette and then began to mooch around again. “Perhaps I’m taking too much for granted, anyhow. Better make sure first that this vessel can ever be made spaceworthy. First, though, I think Nan had better be given a decent burial.”

Isabelle nodded soberly and together she and Cliff carried the covered body outside and laid it on the gold dust. To dig a shallow grave, bury the corpse, and then put up a roughly-inscribed cross took perhaps an hour. A short ceremony which Cliff conducted as best he knew how, and the job was done Silent, troubled because they did not really know why Nan had died—and it had plainly not been the crash itself—they returned into the lop-sided control room and looked about them.

“Check every wire and circuit,” Cliff instructed, arousing himself. “That’s the first job.”

So they began their task. They felt they could do it with reasonable peace of mind because they were no longer fighting an impossible situation. They had the chance in their hands now to make a return home, even if in the end it meant that they would arrive without the wealth they had planned. Nor was time any longer a factor, for in the provision cupboard there was enough to last for a very long time if used with restraint.

By and large they worked and slept normally for what must have been several Earth-days, during which time ZK/70 performed several revolutions on its axis. Not that night on the planetoid seemed very much different from the day. There was simply an increase in the depth of the twilight and the absurd sun and remote Earth disappeared below the horizon—and that was all. There was, though, that certain conviction of grimness of which Professor Brailsford had spoken in his will—that odd feeling of being on the very rim of Eternity.

Not that Cliff and Isobelle had much time for these side issues. They worked to a systematic plan in their assessment of the space machine, and by degrees they repaired the loose switchboards and checked up on every connection and cable, which automatically brought them eventually to the power-plant.

“There’s enough stuff in here to get us back to Earth,” Cliff decided, after a careful examination. “We’ll use up quite a lot of juice pulling free from the hole in which this ship has buried itself, but once we’ve done that we’ll be okay. I wish,” he finished, puzzled, “I could understand why it was necessary for these cowlings to be removed. Damned dangerous idea, and I’m pretty sure that the escaping radiations caused Nan’s flesh to get so burned. Give me a hand to get them back into place.”

This was not so difficult. The delay came in Cliff having to manufacture nuts and bolts with the machine-tool equipment. Altogether, the reassembly of the cowlings so they were entirely secure took a further couple of hours. Then Cliff made the necessary test with the power-plant running and a geiger-counter in action. Since the geiger made not the slightest sound it was reasonable to assume that the plant was effectively insulated.

“So far, so good!” Cliff rubbed his hands. “What I would really like to do would be to make a test flight and be sure everything is all right, but that might take too much juice. We’ll have to throw everything into a last chance. If we pull free and find there are no leaks when we reach the void, all well and good. If otherwise——”

“If otherwise it’s the finish, anyway,” Isobelle said philosophically. “There’s nothing left to worry over now except the gold dust.”

“Ah, yes!” Cliff hurried from the control room and presently returned carrying the heavy lead container he had mentioned. It was very similar to the containers used for radium needles, only larger. One mass of solid lead in built-up layers with an oblong recess in the centre made to carry the radio-active bar which was now in the power-plant matrix.

“Come to think of it——” Cliff dumped the heavy container on the floor and breathed hard. “Come to think of it, even this much pure gold dust—enough to fill the centre cavity here—will amount to a tidy fortune. Then again there is always the possibility that we can return here and get more in bigger containers. On the next journey we’ll find a way to properly insulate the ship.”

Isobelle nodded. “And we split the weight of gold dust between us, I suppose?”

“That’s the idea.” Cliff hesitated and gave her a searching look. “Just the same, for safety’s sake, I’d better hang on to the key for this container till we get back to Earth.”

“Meaning you don’t trust me?” Isobelle asked coldly.

“No, not that. I’m thinking of the possibility of the return trip proving too much for you. Being a woman you have not the same resistance that I have and——”

“Be hanged to that for a tale, Cliff! When the container has been locked, put the key on the wall hook there. The gold dust is no more your exclusive property than it is mine. For that matter it doesn’t really belong to either of us: it was bequeathed to Nan.”

“Who is now out of the picture,” Cliff commented, coming forward slowly to where Isobelle was standing beside the main switchboard. “It amounts to this, Izzy: either you or I are going to have control of everything on Earth before we’re finished. Our very wealth will see to that. Power cannot be divided over two people, therefore only *one* of us is going to have supreme power, and I intend that one to be me!”

“Which is another way of saying you’ve gone back to your original plan?”

“Perhaps——” Cliff gave a grim smile. “I can tell you what has *really* happened, if you’re interested?”

“I am—very. You sound exactly like the old Cliff talking.”

“I *am*. The explanation is simple. In the time that we have been stranded on this planetoid, the radiations which caused my change of personality have been blocked, or at any rate considerably deflected, by the atmospheric density—just as on Earth the atmosphere dilutes the cosmic rays. That fact has more or less caused me to revert to type, and with that has come the rebirth of my former ambition, to have all power unto myself. You are welcome to string along with me, providing you do exactly as I say.”

Isobelle was silent. She had noticed for some little while back that many of the normal characteristics of Cliff had returned to him. Now her worst fears were confirmed: not a trace of that mysterious interchange of personality with Alec remained.

“I suppose, then,” she said at length, “that your affections have automatically returned to me? I am no longer the woman in whom you could not be less interested? Your own words!”

Cliff grinned cynically. “Matter of fact, Izzy, I again feel about you exactly as I used to. I don’t love you, and I never could, but you’re exactly right as a partner, always providing you do as you’re told. Never forget that.”

“I still insist since this is a partnership, and you are entirely Cliff Ashton again, that we should have equal control over the gold—commencing with the key hanging over on the wall there.”

Cliff shook his head. “No, Izzy. I am resolved to have complete control or nothing!”

Isobelle’s hand moved swiftly, so swiftly indeed that Cliff had no chance to grasp her intentions. In a matter of seconds she had whipped a small automatic from the pocket of her slacks and held it steadily.

“This is just to show you that I am not entirely defenceless,” she explained bitterly. “I don’t like having to do it, but you compel me. Since you are determined to have the gold dust entirely under your control I am equally determined that *neither* of us shall have it! I know I couldn’t hope to overcome your control, but I can and will stop you before you can even begin. Now get this machine on its way and forget the dust! Hurry up.”

Cliff remained where he was, weighing Isobelle up critically.

“Melodramatic, but hardly convincing,” he commented. “If I don’t start the machine going and you kill me in consequence how do *you* propose to get away from here? You can’t pilot it yourself, you know. You have to rely on me for that.”

“I can discover how if I have to. Evidently Nan managed it, and she knew less than I do.”

“And she crashed,” Cliff added, then, with a sudden gesture, “Oh, stop acting like a fool, Izzy! It’s only common-sense that a man of the world should have control of a vast fortune. It isn’t a woman’s job, anyway! Put that gun away and let’s——”

Isobelle shook her head. “You heard what I said, Cliff! Get busy!”

Cliff knew Isobelle well enough to realise that she was not joking; and he also knew that she was no fool with an automatic. His face grimly set he turned to the switchboard, the

automatic now digging in his back. Snapping on the power he listened to the humming of the power-plant and surveyed the meters. Everything was just as it should be.

Isabelle's left hand moved forward and closed the switch which operated the airlock. Silently it swung into place and then sealed itself.

"This is insanity!" Cliff breathed direfully, glaring at her. "We're throwing away a fortune beyond the dreams of——"

"You mean *you* are! I'm not concerned any more. Give me Earth, a little peace, and no struggle to break your hold over me, and I'll be satisfied. I'm ready for the take-off when you are."

Desperation spilled over as far as Cliff was concerned. He wheeled at lightning speed, at the same time flinging out his right fist so it knocked the automatic spinning from Isabelle's grasp. She dived for it, but his hand came up and shoved her violently, sending her reeling back into the switch panel. She felt a make-and-break control snap into place against her shoulder blade; then she straightened up and found Cliff had retrieved the gun.

"You shouldn't play games, m'dear," he advised sourly. "It's only going to make me trust you all the less in the future. Now, we'll get the gold dust and then take off."

He pulled the switch which re-opened the airlock and, her battle lost, Isabelle straightened up and sighed.

"Can't blame a girl for trying," she commented. "My only hope now is to give you a tough run for your money when you try and tell me what to do."

"That's more like it," Cliff grinned. "Good old stubborn, high-hat Izzy! That's what I like about you—— Now get outside."

"Why? You don't need me to help load the dust into the container, surely?"

"No, but I do need to make sure you don't try and take off without me. I wouldn't put it past you to try and strand me. Come on; we're wasting time."

Isabelle began moving and then glanced towards the humming power-plant. She looked at Cliff inquiringly.

"Better switch that off, hadn't you?"

"It doesn't signify. We'll only be a moment or two—— Outside, Izzy, then I can grab that container."

Knowing she was cornered she did not demur any further. She jumped through the airlock and dropped in the gold dust outside. Though Cliff did not immediately appear there was nothing she could do to help herself. Then, after a moment or two, he slung the heavy lead container outside and leapt down after it. Thereafter he kept the automatic levelled with one hand and filled the container with the other.

"A nice enough quantity," he commented, flashing his beam upon it. "Enough for a start, anyway. All you'll have to do, Izzy, will be to be nice to me and——"

He got no further for it seemed that an earthquake suddenly hit the spot where he and Isabelle were standing. There was a buried, shattering roar and a quaking of the ground which flung both of them from their feet.

Utterly bewildered they tried to grasp what was happening; then as the shattering roar changed to a deafening scream they grasped the frightful truth. The spaceship was taking off!

"What the hell——!" Cliff screamed, struggling to his feet, but almost immediately he had to drop flat again as blazing sparks blasted from the rear jets of the machine, together with superheated, expanding gases. Choking, their faces and arms blistered, Cliff and Isabelle lay flat in the gold dust, only daring to look up as the appalling scream of the rocket-jets began to

die away. Then it was that they beheld a faint arc of light amidst the stars where the vessel was cleaving to the atmospheric limit.

“I don’t get it!” Cliff panted, his voice shaking with fury and disappointment. “I just don’t get it! How in hell did it take off like that? Nobody was aboard!”

“Alec, perhaps?” Isabelle whispered, white-faced under the stars.

“Alec be damned! He wasn’t anywhere on board: we checked on that. Only one thing could have started the ship off and that was the delayed action control. The power-plant was running, and one movement on the delayed action control could have sent the whole issue skywards——”

“That’s it!” Isabelle’s voice broke in tautly. “I remember now! When you pushed me against the control panel a switch moved under my back. I felt it, then forgot about it—— It must have been the delayed action——”

Cliff turned slowly. Isabelle could see his face like a mask in the phantomic twilight.

“You dirty, low-down little liar,” he whispered.

Isabelle took a step backwards. “How—how do you mean? A liar? That’s the truth, Cliff, sure as I’m here! If you had not shoved me——”

“Don’t hand me that for a tale! You did it all deliberately! You closed the delayed-action switch without me noticing it, somehow. Since you couldn’t make me take off without the gold dust you took the other course and ditched the pair of us here! *That’s* the answer! Just about the sort of a trick I might expect from a woman!”

Cliff’s hands shot out and gripped Isabelle’s shoulders, shaking her savagely.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” he demanded.

“No, it isn’t! Honest, Cliff, it was an accident——”

“That I’ll *never* believe!” He released her abruptly. “And I can only think you’ve gone utterly crazy! Rather than have wealth and Earth once more you prefer to maroon us——! That ship will never return, you know! *No* ship will ever come this way, or if one does it will be too late.” Isabelle swung away angrily. It was tragic enough to be stranded on this desolate planetoid—without provisions or hope of rescue—without the added burden of Cliff’s mistaken suspicions. Cliff watched her leave him, a silent figure beneath the eternal stars. He looked down at the container full of gold-dust, back to the empty heavens, then again at Isabelle’s shadowy figure as she wandered away.

She did not wander far. Suddenly she heard the crack of the automatic and a split second later tearing pain slashed through her body. It came again, an intolerable anguish, and she fell to her knees, gasping hopelessly for breath. Hot wind surged up and blew in her face; grains of incalculable wealth blinded her—then she rolled over and collapsed helplessly down a dune, finishing up half-buried in the precious dust.

It was some time before Cliff came upon her, his automatic still in his hand. He had more or less acted on impulse, the impulse of a man overcome with fury at having lost everything for which he had planned . . . but it was too late now. In a few moments he knew that he was alone on Planetoid ZK/70. With his own hand he had destroyed what company he could have had, however aloof it might have been.

Cliff was not the kind of man to allow the overpowering loneliness and desolation to overcome him. He stood up at last, studying Isabelle’s half-buried form amidst the grains; then he toiled to the top of the dune once more, threw away the automatic, and contemplated the heavens. He was trying to remember whether or not the spaceship had been set on course before it had taken off. If so, it would never come back. On the other hand, if no course had

been set it would fly in a tremendous arc and eventually—granting no large body pulled it aside—would strike ZK/70 once again. How long a time would elapse before than happened was unpredictable: it all depended upon the expanse of the arc taken.

“No,” Cliff whispered to himself at last. “No course *was* set. I was going to do that when we returned into the machine. In that case— In that case *anything* can happen. The ship might return within a few hours—or it may be weeks, or months, or years—!”

He trudged steadily, the loneliest figure imaginable, in the leprously-white waste which lay under the inscrutable stars. Once or twice he glanced up towards them, singling out the great planets of the outer deeps. At other times he kept his gaze fixed on the one green star which was Earth, close beside that ridiculous sun.

He stumbled suddenly and laughed almost hysterically as it became obvious that he had caught his foot against a golden spur, valuable enough to buy up the whole of Britain. Fate was certainly playing her most ironical part at the moment

He tripped again after a while, but this time it was not a golden spur. Something dark and unexpected in this land of eternal twilight and sameness. A body—bloated and frozen solid even yet despite the hot wind which blew over the wilderness. Cliff went down on his knees and by degrees he made out the distorted features Alec! It was Alec’s body, grotesquely distorted from the unthinkable zero of space, still not yet thawed out. Alec’s body, exactly where it had fallen when the pull of the spaceship’s infinitesimal gravity had been superseded by the major pull of the planetoid itself.

Alec’s body Cliff turned away from it in horror. It seemed to him like a ghastly omen. Nan he had buried; Isobelle he had shot; Alec he had stumbled upon Now there was only himself left. And, out there in the deeps . . . ?

“For God’s sake, come back!” he screamed, shaking his fists at the stars. “Give me one chance to get out!”

The void did not hear him. It remained as impartial, as impersonal, as remote as it had ever been. Infinity does not deign to hear the cry of one tiny mortal, even less so if he be not worthy of hearing.

The space machine which had so unexpectedly flashed into space was still pursuing its unmanned course—if course it could be called, and its velocity once it pulled free of the slight gravity of ZK/70 was stupendous. Acceleration was piled upon acceleration for the simple reason that the power-plant was at maximum and there was no hand to cut it out. But definitely the vessel was pursuing the arc which Cliff had forseen.

Once the vessel had reached the orbit of Mars, far enough away from the red world to be unaffected by his mass, it also reached the limit of its outward flight and began to slowly turn like a monstrous cosmic boomerang. In a matter of thirty minutes or less it was parallel to Mars’ orbit; then gradually it pursued its elongated ellipse until it was pointing back the way it had come. And the speed now remained constant as the last trace of atomic energy in the power-plant expended itself. The matrix was empty, the control-room door was open to the awful gulf and cold of the void. The one link with Earth was returning to ZK/70 at a speed beyond imagination, very closely approximating that of light itself.

Here and there a meteorite from the asteroidal belt drifted into the ship’s path, but so fast was it travelling it whipped the meteorite into cosmic dust before it could make the slightest impression.

Faster and faster yet, drawn at last by the pull of ZK/70, it flashed down through the atmosphere in one long line of incinerating fire to strike the gold dust desert with an impact

which sent a shock through the planetoid. So colossal was the collision of the vessel with ZK/70 that there was nothing left when the confusion had died down except pulverised gold dust, molten metal, and twisted bars of steel bent into every conceivable shape. Of the outline of a ship there was no sign—only the crater of molten chaos where the vessel had crashed.

But Cliff knew nothing of the vessel's return. He had used the last bullet in the automatic and he lay not far from the half-buried Isobelle. He had not seen a possibility of escape and so had taken the quickest way out. Even had he waited, that ship would have been beyond all power of rebuilding.

Across the deserts of wealth there blew that stifling wind, disregarded by the three dead Earthlings who lay forgotten and marooned on this lost world. On the far horizon gleamed the solitary green star of Earth.

Perhaps, somewhere in the cosmos, the spirit of Professor Brailsford looked down cynically as he saw for himself the visible proof of the fact that the wealth of the void is not always there for the taking

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Numerous mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been fixed.

[The end of *Wealth of the Void* by John Russell Fearn (as Vargo Statten)]