Special Effect

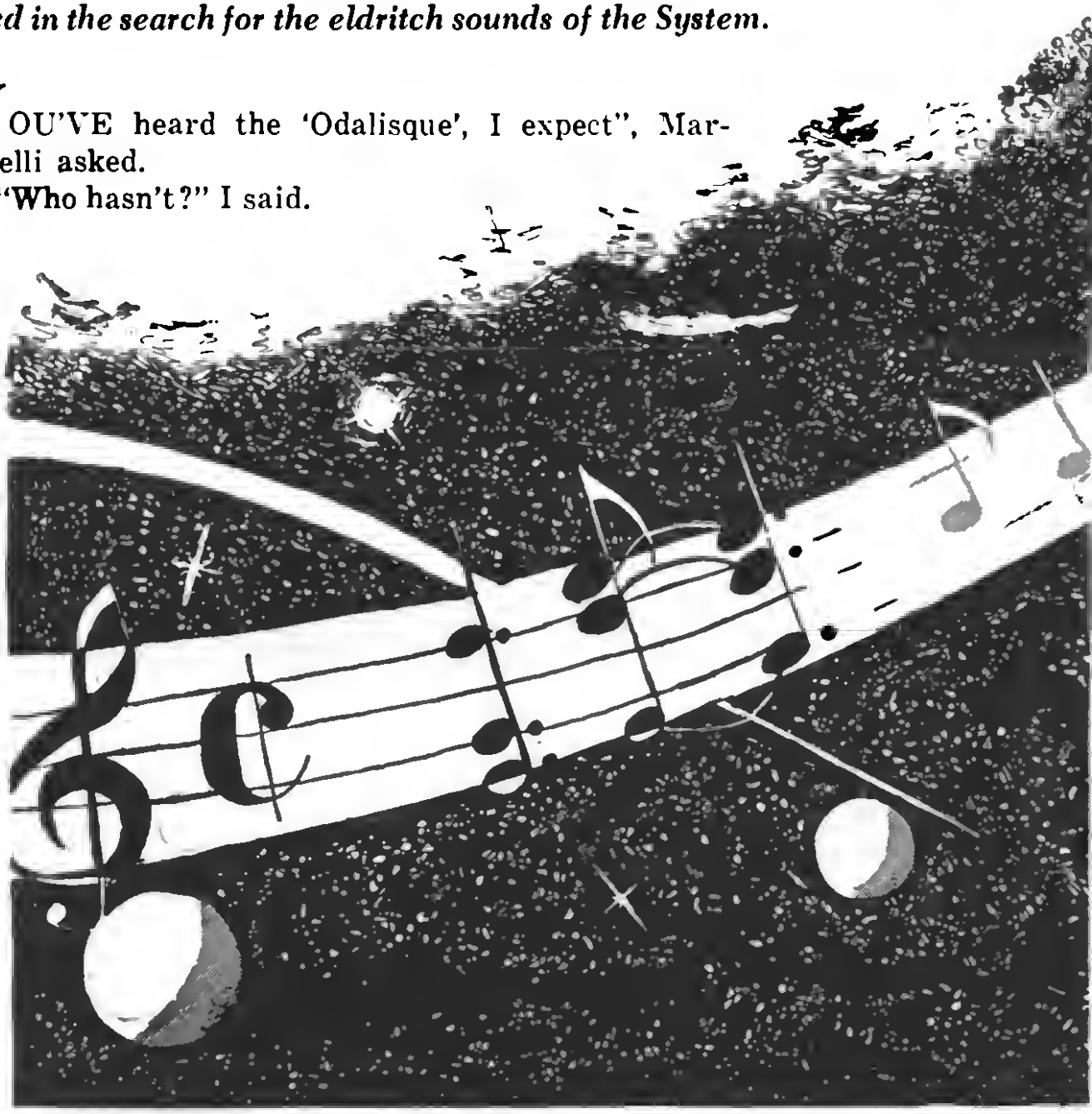
By J. F. BONE

Illustrator DOUGLAS

Martinelli's passion was music. And before it was slaked men—and other beings—suffered, thrilled and died in the search for the eldritch sounds of the System.

YOU'VE heard the 'Odalisque', I expect", Martinelli asked.

"Who hasn't?" I said.



"Raposnikov at his best," he said, "and his best is very good indeed."

"There's no one like him, past or present," I enthused. "Nicolai Ilarionovich Raposnikov was the finest composer who ever lived. his handling of special effects alone would make him great but his intimate understanding of music, his feeling for balance and harmony, his exquisite employment of modern technology and ancient art to produce music that can be felt and sensed, as well as heard, why—there's never been a composer who could compare—" I sputtered, losing my eulogy in my enthusiasm.

You might gather from this outburst that I like music—and you'd be right—although to look at me you'd hardly figure it. Spacemen look like what they are —Muscle Beach boys with a prison pallor. We're an anachronism on an Earth welded to the twenty-hour week and balanced caloric diets. Compared to the slim bronzed groundlings, we sailors stand out like Charolais bulls in a herd of Angus heifers. Some of us try Mantan to blend in with the general background but we never manage to make it. Our eyes give us away. You can't spend months on end looking for trouble without developing a certain restlessness of the eyeballs that refuses to let one's vision linger too long upon any one object; "Dancing Eyes" the groundlings call us. They give us our character and part of our reputation. We're the last of the pioneers, our direct ancestors are the sailors, the conquistadores and the mountain men who opened up the western hemisphere back in the Dark Ages. In short, we're romantic hellers.

The only trouble, as far as I'm concerned, is that I don't want to be a romantic heller. Sure—I like women—but I'd rather spend an evening at Berlino's eating a good steak than taking a two-minute break at a Calorie Counter. I'd rather sit in Carnegie Hall listening to good music than sweating at Roseland dancing to squirm. And while it's fun to kiss a girl goodnight, I have no desire to have her cluttering up my apartment until the following morning. As far as I'm concerned, I'd rather live back in those quiet days of the middle Twentieth Century than in these hectic ones of the middle Twenty-second.

I sighed and let my gaze flicker over the dark man who sat across the table from me. His name was Olaf Martinelli and he was a conductor. He'd been on the podium at Carnegie several times when I was in the audience. He wasn't bad—at times he was even great, but he had a poor reputation in music circles. He was a glory-grabber, a ty-

rant, a disciplinarian of the old Toscanini school, and about as trustworthy as a Venerian swamp sucker on a hot day. I didn't like him by reputation, and his personality wasn't much better. He was too dark, too tall, too smooth and too well informed about my habits. He had looked me up, run me down, and cornered me in Eddie's Bar where I occasionally stop for a drink. He'd been thoroughly briefed, except that he didn't know I distrusted tall, smooth characters, and that I have no faith in artists as businessmen. Any day I'd rather take a chance with a hard-headed contractor than an artist. Painters, actors, musicians—they're all alike, people who usually have their feet firmly planted on a cloud. Once I was soft enough to freight an entire musical comedy group to Mars which was a mistake since the company went broke and I couldn't sell their contracts for beans. Bad artists are a glut on the Martian market, and I wasn't about to get in another jam like that. By sticking to regular business I manage to run a fairly profitable operation. I own the "Virgin Queen" and I intend to keep on owning her. I'm not eager to take on speculation charters or cargo. Let the guys who are riding high do that! Small operators like me have to stick to hard cash and let the big chances go by. We never make millions but we stay alive and do what we like to do—which is travelling the spacelanes.

MARTINELLI, however, had a proposition. He leaned forward across the table and tried to hold my shifting blue eyes with his protuberant brown ones. "You're just the man I've been looking for," he said. "A spaceman who appreciates good music. You're a rarity, my friend, a rarity."

"What's so odd about liking music?"

His eyebrows rose. "Have you ever considered the statistical improbability of finding an independent spacer who understands and appreciates Beethoven, Tchaikowsky, Dvorak, Moussorgsky, Sibelius, Taylor, Shostakovich, Callendar, and Rostanzo?"

"Not to mention a few others," I added helpfully.

He nodded. "Actually, Captain Lundfors, you're unique. And you're precisely the man I have been looking for."

"How's that?"

"Would you like to charter your ship for a year's cruise?"

I gulped. A year's charter would get my pint-sized operation solidly on its feet. I could buy some needed tube liners and insulation. I could have the "Virgin Queen" drydocked and thor-

oughly overhauled. I could clean up the back-pay accounts of my crew. I could buy myself a new uniform to replace the threadbare grays I was now wearing. A year's charter would be a dream.

"It would cost you plenty," I said.

"How much?"

"Two million credits."

Martinelli winced. "What does that rocket of yours run on—gold?" he asked.

"Plutonium. It's more expensive."

"I didn't realize these things cost so much," Martinelli's voice was flat. "I don't think I can afford it."

"I might be able to shave the costs a little," I said dubiously, "but a year's cruise can be damned expensive. It depends on where you want to go. Incidentally, where *do* you want to go?"

"Hmm—let's see—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Titan, Io, Callisto, Ganymede, and—oh yes—Pluto."

"All the inhabited worlds in the system!" I said. "Why?"

"I'll tell you that if we can come to terms," Martinelli said. "Until then, that's my secret."

"We can dicker," I said, "but it won't be much less than two million—not with an itinerary like that. Or do you realize that it will take you nine months of that year just to travel to those places? Pluto's a long way out, and Mercury's pretty close to the sun. Frankly, it's a cheap price."

He shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I'm not a poor man but that's pretty steep."

"Tell you what we can do," I offered helpfully. "After we check your credit rating, we can go down to Univac Center and put the problem up to the computers." Actually I'd do that anyway before I ever made a smoothie like Martinelli a firm offer. "We'll figure it as cost of operation plus ten percent. That ought to be fair enough. You lay out the itinerary and I'll insert the Queen's latest operating data. We add ten percent to that, and if you're willing to go on from there, I'm your man."

"That sounds fair enough," Martinelli said.

"Of course," I added, "there'll be the usual demurrage, port charges, change of destination clauses, *and* an Act of God clause included in the contract."

Martinelli looked at me with a faint light of respect in his bulging brown eyes. "You don't miss a bet, do you?" he asked.

"I've been dealing with contractors for twenty years," I said drily.

He laughed, and I chuckled with him.

"I'll file our contract in Public Archives," he said, "providing we agree on one. Some day it'll be a historical document."

It was my turn to laugh. "Do you think they'll accept it?" I asked. "What sort of business would make a freighter's contract a public record?"

"Wait," Martinelli said.

I shrugged.

THE basic figure Univac gave us was two million, one hundred and thirty thousand, five hundred and twenty-seven credits. Martinelli whistled with dismay. "I should have taken your original offer."

"It wasn't firm," I reminded him, thinking as I did that computers were almost as easy to fool as conductors. With new tube liners in the "Queen" I could shave half a million off that figure. But Univac didn't know that. It had to work upon the data I had given it, and new high performance tube liners weren't included in that data. For two hundred thousand I could have the "Queen" docked, relined and refitted. I would be getting the equivalent of a new ship and nearly three hundred kilocredits to boot.

"The other figures I've checked were all about the same as yours," Martinelli said glumly, "except for IPC. That bunch wanted three million."

"Interplanetary has newer and faster ships," I said. "And, besides, they're a big outfit."

"I don't need a big outfit," Martinelli replied. "Yours will do nicely. Now let's go up to my office. We'll have a law firm make up the contract. And then I'll tell you what I want you to do."

"You won't mind if I select the lawyers?" I asked.

He shook his head. "You can hire the Attorney General if you wish." He sounded indifferent.

"Akers, Callahan, Weintraub, and Kabele'll do well enough," I said. "They've handled my freight contracts for the past decade."

"They're a good firm," he agreed. "I've done business with them once or twice on tour contracts."

I looked at my copy of the contract and nodded. As far as I could see it was fair enough. It had the usual penalty clauses for nonperformance, but essentially it was a standard freight contract. I agreed to deliver Brother Martinelli and such equipment as he would bring with him to the eight inhabited worlds of the Solar Union. The order in which the worlds were to be visited was at my discretion. The only bad feature was the time element. One year was all I had to complete the trip. And that wasn't too much time. One minor accident, one bad touchdown, could ruin me. But I had fulfilled worse contracts than this one and I had no cause for com-

plaint. I knew the "Queen" inside out and was perfectly aware of what she could and could not do. This job she could handle.

"All right," I said. "Now what are we making this trip for?"

"To collect sounds," Martinelli said.

"Sounds?"

"Remember we were talking about Raposnikov?"

I nodded.

"You'd really have to know the man to appreciate this, but Nicolai Ilarionovitch was a Unionist all his adult life—and when the Solar Union was established, he decided to write a symphony honoring it. He finished it just before he died last year. It is his master work, his greatest production, the piece toward which his entire life was directed. It's called the "Nine Worlds Symphony" and is dedicated to the Solar Union." Martinelli looked at me, his brown eyes glittering. "It's probably the most valuable single piece of property in existence today," he said. "And I own it on condition that I present the entire score *exactly as it was written* in its debut on the tenth anniversary of the Union. And that date is a year and a half away."

"Then why are you hiring a space ship?" I asked. "It seems to me that you'd be hiring a symphony orchestra."

"It's not that easy," Martinelli said. "You see, Raposnikov took a leaf out of Tchaikovski's book, only he went one step farther."

"Tchaikovski?"

"Remember the 1812 Festival Overture?"

I nodded. "The one with the special effects?" I asked. "The cannon, the Moscow bells, and the brass band?"

"That's the one. Well—Raposnikov out-Tchaikovskied Tchaikovski. His piece calls for a steam hammer working a steel ingot, a Dixieland Jazz Band, a spaceship taking off, the sound of the lava flows on Mercury's twilight zone, the bellow of a Venerean swamp sucker, the temple bells at K'vasteh, the Corens' warcry, the nesting call of a flock of Ionion Kalliks, Callistan whistlers, a hegemon, and a Plutonian ice fall. Oh, yes, and the sound of a hulled spaceship."

"That's quite a mess of sound," I said. "I've been on the spacelanes for twenty years, and I've yet to hear a Callistan whistler or a Kallik's nesting call. Never was on any of the outer worlds except Ganymede, but you should have no trouble there. A hegemon's easy to dicker with. For that matter, I've only heard a swampsucker just once—and, frankly, I don't want to hear one again. Those subsonics play hell with the nervous system."

"I tried to get the sounds from the Solar Union Academy," Mar-

tinelli went on, "but they're not recorded. You'd think they would be", he added aggrievedly. "It just goes to show that when you want something out of a museum you can't get it. They've got plenty of stuffed Kalliks, and whistlers, and even a stuffed swamp sucker, but not a single sound." He shrugged. "And since the contract states that original sounds must be furnished, I'm stuck with an exploring job."

"How much is the Academy offering for a copy of your soundtrack?" I asked.

Martinelli smiled wryly. "Not much, just the technicians, professional guides, and the recording apparatus."

"That should be quite a saving."

"It would be except for one thing. I have to pay them for every soundtrack over five, and I'm not sure they'll record the proper key and pitch I'll need to fit into the symphony."

I shook my head. Martinelli had a job ahead. I wondered why he took it, and said so.

"You haven't heard the "Nine Worlds", Martinelli said, "otherwise you wouldn't ask. You want to hear it?"

I nodded. Raposnikov is one of my favorite composers.

MARTINELLI opened his desk safe and took out a roll of recording tape. "I had this made in sections," he said, "so no one would be able to copy the theme. Some of the sounds are in already—the first movement is complete; so you can get an idea what the finished piece will be like." He pressed a button and a panel on top of his desk slid aside to reveal a modern stereo—one of those fancy jobs with acoustical depth. He threaded the tape and placed his finger on the starter button.

"The first movement", Martinelli said quietly, "deals with man's conquest of space. Unlike Dvorak's "New World" the shape of the main subject is introduced directly. There is no hinting, no intimation of things to come. It is more like Beethoven's Fifth—a direct, demanding introduction that draws the listener bodily into the vigorous *Allegro molto* with its hypnotic repetitive rhythm. The theme is advanced by a transition that is actually a subsidiary theme in F-minor played first by the flutes and oboes and picked up by the other woodwinds and strings. The second main theme is carried by the brasses in G-major, starting with a muted trumpet playing an unmistakeable derivation of Rosinski's "Space and the Atom". The harsh, almost militaristic note is augmented by the brasses, modified by the woodwinds and swept to a glittering

crescendo by the strings and kettle drums, culminating in the hissing roar of a space-ship's jet with their supersonic overtones that are almost painful—listen!" He pressed the button.

I was relaxed, soothed by Martinelli's summation, and utterly unprepared for the violent opening as the full orchestration of over two hundred pieces hammered at my eardrums. It was a blockbuster opening, something that would have made Beethoven turn green with envy. It was Raposnikov all right, but a Raposnikov I had never heard nor dreamed of hearing. The music picked me up, hurled me into a world of sound and fury, of men and metal and dreams turned into steel and atomics. It was pure sensation—music that made me want to laugh and weep, to swell with pride, to suffer the heartbreak of failure and to feel the grim determination that next time—next time we would succeed. For a few minutes, I was a part of all mankind who ever dreamed of the stars. My chest hurt, my brain throbbed, and cold involuntary chills ran down my spine. My legs trembled, and tears actually came to my eyes at the termination when man finally achieved his ancient dream and left earth for those glittering witch lights in the heavens. The sounds, as Martinelli called them, were an integral part of the theme. Their presence was essential. From steam hammer to jetblast, the sounds were a part of the music, complementing it, augmenting it, making the whole movement the vital, living, striving thing it had to be.

Martinelli stopped the tape, and I relaxed, shivering with reaction.

"My God!" I said weakly. "I thought I had heard them all, but this is incredible!"

"See what I mean," Martinelli said. "This is the greatest thing that man has done in music. Ownership of this score is literally worth millions. And I own it if I can reproduce it precisely as Raposnikov wrote it. Do you wonder why I am willing to spend over two million chartering your ship?"

"No," I said. "And if the rest of that symphony is like the beginning, I'd almost be willing to donate the 'Queen' to help you pull it off." I was drunk with sensation. Never in my life had I heard such music.

"Almost," Martinelli chuckled, "but not quite—eh?"

I sighed, shrugged, and stood up. "A man must live," I said, "and space is my life and the 'Queen' my home. There are things like fuel, repairs, wages and dockage charges. Those cost money and, unfortunately, I'm not a rich man."

"But you love music," Marti-

nelli said, "so you will be eager to help me."

"That's about it," I said.

"And that is all I will need to make this debut a success," Martinelli said. "I thank you, Captain Lundfors." He held out his hand.

I gripped it. It was I who should be thanking him, I thought. He had given me a taste of glory.

A WEEK later the "Virgin Queen" was ready for blast-off. Port Maintenance had completed a man-killing crash program in record time, and the "Queen" was as tight and true as the day she left the ways. For the first time in years everything aboard the old girl worked as it should. I collected my crew from the fleshpots of New York and Westchester, herding the grumbling spacemen aboard like a father loading his children into the family car at the end of vacation. Three weeks liberty on full pay and the men still complained. They hadn't had it so good in years but they wanted more. Of course they didn't get it, since a contract is a contract, and a spaceship captain is God Almighty as far as his crew is concerned.

About the only man who looked happy about coming back was Egon Bernstein, my executive officer. Bernie was old enough to appreciate space. The rest—mostly four-year men—were hardly dry behind the ears. I wasn't too happy with them, but with the major spacelines giving two year contracts and bonuses to experienced men with six or more years of service, an independent freighter has to take what's left and be thankful it is no worse.

The Solar Union boys—five of them—arrived with a truckload of sound equipment which they supervised like mother hens guarding chicks. They stored their equipment with meticulous care, took their shockcouch assignments, and fitted into the ship's routine with the ease of professional space travellers.

Martinelli and two heavy-shouldered men showed up with another pile of gear which we stowed. We took on last minute supplies, extra fuel slugs for our reactor, and topped off the chemical tanks with nitric and hydrazine. I checked the stations from the control chair, got the all clear signal from the tower, and blasted off.

Outside the atmosphere shell of Earth I cut the chemicals and switched on the atomics. A pale blue glow spurted from the drive tubes as we began to pile on velocity for the long trip to Pluto. I had checked our possible courses at Port Astrogation and had finally decided that the rela-

tive positions of the planets were such that the outer worlds offered the best positional relationships—and when we had finished with them, the inner worlds would be in good juxtaposition if we could keep to the schedule I had planned.

The outward trip was fortunate. We picked up a thumb-sized meteorite as we crossed the asteroid belt and the crash and hiss of escaping air were satisfactorily recorded by the Solar Union men. I gave them plenty of warning to get set up and although I could have used the screens to deflect the tiny chunk of metal, I figured that if we could get a meteor strike recording this early in the game we were all to the good.

Damage control quickly repaired the leak as the sound men checked their tapes with Martinelli.

"Did you know your hull rings in F-sharp?" Martinelli asked me as he came into the control room during the first watch after the collision. He had gotten over his space sickness quickly and was continuously active—nosing through the ship, asking questions of the crew, Bernie, and myself, and behaving like a rubber-necking tourist. In a way it was laughable, but somehow I couldn't laugh at Martinelli. The man was too intense, too serious to be a comic figure.

"Is that good?" I asked.

"It's perfect. That passage was written in F-sharp. We won't need to try again or make tonal adjustments. We have a recording that'll turn the public's hair when we use it. It's great! And that young crewman yelling "Meteor strike!"—that was the convincing touch."

"You mean Nalton?" I asked.

"Yes, that's his name."

"He's young," I said, "young and pretty green. Making a planet out of an asteroid. He should have kept his mouth shut. But maybe its a good omen. When a goofur turns out all right that's a good sign."

"I never thought you were superstitious," Martinelli said.

"All spacemen are superstitious," I replied. "I guess it's because space is so big and we're so small."

"When are we due to hit Pluto?" he asked.

"If we've laid the course right —in about two months."

"Long time."

"Long distance—Pluto isn't just next door."

"I realized that, but I didn't realize what it'd be like cooped up in here with only a thin metal skin between us and space. Frankly, that meteorite scared me."

I grinned. "I didn't feel so good either—and we almost took it in the screen control which

would really have made things sticky. Without screens we'd be in bad shape."

"Would it be that serious?" he asked worriedly.

I smiled without humor. "We finished one run from Mars to Earth without screens," I said, "and we ran out of patches. There were one hundred and thirty-seven holes in the 'Queen's" skin. We looked like a sieve, finished the trip in space suits, and had two casualties."

He shuddered. "I hope the screens hold this time."

"They will," I assured him. "The generators have been completely rebuilt."

I WISH Nicolai Ilarionovitch had a better understanding of the technical details of sound transmission," Martinelli said bitterly as we stood on Pluto's icy surface and surveyed the frozen desolation about us. "Just how are we going to record an ice fall on a world without atmosphere?"

"There's plenty of atmosphere," I replied as I scuffed the blue-white dust underfoot with an insulated space boot. "The only trouble is that it's all frozen,—liquid helium, solid oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide. What would you expect on a world three and a half billion miles from the sun?" I was angry with myself. I should have realized that Pluto's solid and semi-solid atmosphere was incapable of transmitting audible sound. We had our two and a half month trip for nothing.

All about us were the giant glaciers that covered Pluto's surface, knife sharp jagged blocks of ice rising hundreds of feet into the air, cold and black under the faint light of the stars and the tiny disc of the sun low on the horizon. The radome of Pluto Station bulged darkly behind us and a little to one side were the clustered spikes of the station spaceships and the bulkier mass of the "Queen" standing on her landing pads.

Far below our feet in tunnels and corridors carved from the endless ice, the men and women of Pluto Station went about their daily tasks—adaptable as only humans can be—carving a life and living out of the frozen crust of the iceworld.

"Obviously Raposnikov was thinking of the icefall of '98," I said. "The one in the main lateral of the old station. There was air down there—and there was undoubtedly sound."

"That could be it," Martinelli agreed. "Let's go below. It's getting cold up here."

I had to agree with him. Despite the insulation and heating elements of our spacesuits the frightful cold of Pluto was seeping through my boots and the

joints of my armor. I turned toward the station's airlock, the chilled joints of my armor somewhat stiffer than normal, and as I turned I cast one flickering glance around the horizon. It was purely habit—the trained eye reflex of a spaceman, but in that brief glance my vision caught an abnormality. One of the tall ice spires above us was distinctly wrong. No longer vertical the tall black tower was leaning outward, toppling with silent ponderous deliberation.

"Icefall!" I yelled. "Run!"

Martinelli's reflexes were as fast as my own. He cast one lightning glance upward and then broke into a clumsy run for the steel and cryoplastic revetment that guarded the station entrance. I pounded along behind him. In Pluto's light gravity we made surprisingly good time despite the armor that encased us. As we dove for the shelter of the revetment, the airless sky of Pluto was filled with hurtling shards of ice as the pinnacle struck and shattered. One small piece struck me in the ribs while another ricocheted off Martinelli's helmet. Two years ago he'd have been a dead man breathing space through a shattered helmet, but the ice shard merely glanced off the tough cryoplastic without doing any harm.

Well—almost no harm. Martinelli was scared to death, but that was all. Apparently he had read some of the old stories about what happened when something hit a helmet.

"You're O.K." I assured him as I lifted him to his feet.

"My helmet?"

"New model," I grunted. "They don't shatter nowadays."

"Thank God! For a minute I thought I'd had it," Martinelli said. His voice was unsteady. "I don't want to die—at least not until I've produced the 'Nine Worlds'."

"My personal opinion is that all conductors are born to be hung, so you're safe until you get back to Earth."

"Not funny," Martinelli said, but he chuckled just the same. Occasionally it takes a bit of graveyard humor to draw the iron out of hiding. He was all right now. "You know, it's too bad that Pluto has no free air. That could have been a wonderful sound."

"The only sound I want to hear right now is the bubbling of a coffee pot," I replied.

"You have a point there," he said, as he helped me open the small airlock.

WE CHECKED with Herb Hallowell, the station superintendent, about the possibility of air remaining in the old station.

"The Old Station?—Hmm. I don't know. We abandoned that place nearly fifty years ago. Why do you want to go there?"

"I don't," I said, "but Mr. Martinelli does."

"I want to record an icefall," Martinelli said. "And since there's no atmosphere outside—".

"There's no sound," Hallowell interrupted. "But why do you want to record an icefall?"

"I think I'd better explain," Martinelli said. "In a year and a quarter, Earth time, the Solar Union centennial is going to occur and we're going all out to make it one of the greatest shows Earth has ever seen. Part of the program is a sound recording of typical noises of the nine inhabited worlds, and an icefall is typical of Pluto."

Hallowell grimaced. "It's typical all right. Well—you can visit the Old Station if you wish but I won't be responsible for your safety."

"Is there an atmosphere?" Martinelli asked.

"There was the last time anyone visited the place."

"When was that?"

"Five years ago."

"Hmm—that means there's probably some left."

"There should be. Ice is pretty good insulation."

We left for the Old Station the next day. Five of us,—Martinelli, myself, Nalton, and the two heavy-shouldered apelike men Martinelli had brought along from Earth. Their names were Anderson and Bellini—which had become shortened naturally to Mr. A. and Mr. B., and finally to Able and Baker, during the long trip out to Pluto. Although most of the crew understood the inference, I'm sure that neither Able nor Baker did. It was one of those sly spacemen insults that often resulted in broken skulls when the victim realized what it meant, but in this case I doubted if it would. The simian resemblance of Able and Baker extended to their mental capacity if not to their sex. They were a pair of good-natured brutes, capable of shaking your hand or cutting your throat with the same friendly smile on their face. Martinelli called them guides, but goons would probably have been more accurate. Able had prospected on Titan and Baker was a Venerean swamprat, but neither of them had any experience on Pluto. Still, their muscles were handy for lugging heavy equipment, and we could use them.

We took along some of the high-priced recording equipment to get the sound of an icefall if an audible one could be made available, and a few explosive charges to make one available if nature wouldn't cooperate.

The Solar Union men refused to come unless Martinelli paid them, and Martinelli refused to pay for such a simple thing as this sort of recording. They were within their rights. Pluto wasn't included on their agenda but I couldn't blame Martinelli. After all, a technician's pay on a hazardous mission isn't peanuts and Martinelli had already laid out quite a bit of change for this trip. So we left them behind to enjoy the warm comfort of Pluto Station while we did the work.

The station rolligon carried us to the old airlock of Station One. The antique double lock was still functioning, and the dials on our spacesuits indicated a two-thirds Earth normal atmosphere inside. They didn't indicate that the air was breathable, and we weren't about to take any chances since we had twenty hours' supply in our tanks. I had brought Nalton along to help us. The youngster was the only one of us who had more than a speaking acquaintance with explosives. He had taken a course in field demolitions and derelict removal at the Space Academy and planned to start his own business as a spacelane contractor in the asteroid belt as soon as he finished his course in practical spacemanship on the "Queen". Nalton was a nice kid—the cleancut Academy type that look as though they had been stamped out of a mold labelled "Made in Alamogordo". But some of that Academy veneer was wearing off. He had a sense of humor, a quick wit, and a quick tongue. He learned fast and was well liked. Some day he'd be a first class spaceman. But it was his knowledge of explosives that made him a member of the party.

Inside, the supports holding the ice roof were warped and twisted from the slow flowing of the ice, and the broad tunnel into the depths that had once been straight was now crooked and bent. Our lights cast beams of brightness ahead of us as we cautiously made our way downward to what had once been the entrance hall from which passages had radiated outward to the various working and living levels. The hall was barely two-thirds its former size, its walls oddly twisted and warped. It looked fragile and unstable. Many of the supporting girders were buckled and useless. A great pile of broken ice lay on the floor, evidence of an icefall that could have happened years —or minutes—ago.

Martinelli looked up at the jagged ceiling some ten meters overhead. "This will do," he said. "There's plenty of free drop here to get the crash and rattle that will be necessary. We can plant the microphone in the entrance and bury a couple of small

charges under that bent pillar in the center of the room and see what happens when we touch them off."

"Nalton," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"You're the demolitions man. What'll happen if we crack that pillar?"

Nalton looked upward. "It'll probably bring the whole roof down," he said. "That hunk of duralloy is supporting about half the load on the center of the ceiling."

"How much plastic do you figure's necessary for the job?"

"About four hundred grams, sir. I wouldn't care to use any less."

"Well—get about it," I said, "and be careful. In air as cold as this, plastic's tricky stuff so I've been told."

"I know, sir," the youngster said. "That's why I've been keeping it in a thermo bag. It should be hot enough to mold easily."

"Okay, it's your baby. Get the charge placed. I'll run the detonator wires back to the entrance. When you're through, come up and join us. Then we'll set it off. Martinelli and his two monkeys'll handle the sound recording."

Nalton grinned, and I hoped that Able and Baker didn't get the drift—but it was hardly probable that they would. I dropped the end of the wire beside Nalton and slowly climbed the long corridor to the surface, paying out carefully and doing my best to avoid the leads Martinelli had run from his microphones. When I arrived at the airlock, the three of them had already set up the recorder and had the tape running.

MARTINELLI looked up at me. "Thought I'd better get this going just in case," he announced cheerfully.

"Just in case of what?"

"You never know. That hall looked pretty fragile to me. That ceiling could come down any minute."

"Nice cheerful guy, aren't you?" I asked. "Or do you know Nalton's down there?"

"I know and it worries me, but this is the only place we'll get an audible icefall on this crazy world. There's no sense in missing anything."

As though in answer the needles on the recorder jumped clear across the dial faces and a shudder rippled upward through the ice.

"Icefall!" Martinelli yelped.

"Nalton!" I shouted—and started down the passageway. A blast of frigid air swept up out of the depths and a whole section of passage in front of me buckled, twisted, and with horrid deliberation broke into huge blocks and shards that filled the pas-

sage with flying daggers! I stumbled back. There was sound this time, rumbling, grinding sound as millions of tons of ice shuddered, shifted, and crushed together. The shockwave from the icequake knocked me to my knees. Blind with panic I turned and crawled back to the airlock as shock after shock rippled through the cracked and shattered ice. Martinelli and the others were already standing outside, numbed by the violence of the quake, uncertain whether to run or stand still. The rolligon had been tossed nearly two meters from where we had parked it, and stood rocking back and forth on its flotons as the tremors passed with steadily decreasing intensity as the shifting ice obliterated the last trace of Old Station—and spaceman second class Tamashiro Nalton.

I felt numb. Five minutes ago Nalton was alive—a nice kid with a sense of humor and a future. Now—my mind recoiled from the thought of what those millions of tons of shifting ice had done to him.

Martinelli, Able and Baker looked at me. Martinelli's face was frozen in horror—the two goons merely looked stupid. But one thing I was thankful for, they weren't grinning. If they had so much as showed a tooth I think I'd have killed them. I liked Nalton. The boy was a morale lifter. We were all going to suffer from his loss.

"I hope you got your damned sound," I gritted as I faced Martinelli.

He shivered and a measure of sanity came back to his eyes. "Oh God!" he said. Sweat stood out on his high forehead. "Oh God!—I've never heard anything so horrible—and Nalton's screams!" He retched—something that no one should ever do in a spacesuit—and I could no longer see his face.

SOMEHOW I managed to get Able and Baker moving. We packed the recording apparatus, led Martinelli back to the rolligon and headed back to Pluto Station across the ice hills that separated the old from the new base. I let Martinelli stew in his own digestive juices. At the moment I could do nothing else—and perhaps even if I could I wouldn't. I couldn't help blaming him for Nalton's death, and every time I thought of that grinning cheerful kid I felt sick and angry—angry as much at myself as at Martinelli. I should never have let a man of mine go down into that death trap. Getting the sounds was Martinelli's business, not mine or my crew's. Next time—and all the rest of the times, he could damn well kill his own sloats.

WE BLASTED off Pluto in a somber mood. Martinelli with his burned face, me with my guilt and resentment, the crew with their anger at the Solar Union technicians, and the technicians with their righteous air that was all the more sickening because it *was* right. They didn't have to go on that trip that killed Nalton. The "Queen" wasn't a happy ship as we hurtled sunward to intercept Saturn. Not even the fact that the recording of the icefall was better than Raposnikov could have wished helped very much. I couldn't listen to it. The scream torn from Nalton's throat just at the beginning was all I could take.

We orbited Saturn on schedule, and the sight of the great-ringed world spinning below us was as heartening to the crew as a shot of euphoral. You could feel their spirits rise as we drove in toward the rings, killing our speed to make a landing on Titan.

Like Pluto, Titan was an ice-world. Its surface temperature of minus 245 degrees centigrade was far too low to support unprotected human life, but it wasn't too low to support the Corens, those peculiar amorphous entities with their silicon-based organic structure and their incredible capacity to withstand cold. Like most of the sun's natural children that man had visited, the largest moon of Saturn supported life. Pluto, the captive planet with the eccentric orbit did not. Nor did Iapetus or the smaller airless satellites of Jupiter and Neptune. But Titan, with its atmosphere, was inhabited long before man came to share the world and plunder it of its natural resources of heavy metals. The Corens, semi-intelligent, partly civilized, and thoroughly unpleasant, had done their best to discourage immigration, and had succeeded remarkably well until the First Punitive Expedition reduced them to relative harmlessness.

They still attacked isolated prospectors now and then, but they stayed away from the domes where Earthmen worked and were present in numbers. They had learned their lesson and were no longer a menace. A nuisance, perhaps, but mankind was big enough to stand nuisances, and we had no intention of committing genocide upon the original inhabitants. We had no use for the frigid surface of their world. Our interests lay in what was under the surface—the uranium, the thorium, and the other heavy elements that powered Earth's atomic civilization. So there were probably as many Corens today as there were when the first prospectors arrived and they were still the

wild, warlike, death-defying savages who would willingly sacrifice a hundred of their number to kill one human. The only difference between the modern Coren and his ancestors is that he doesn't care to commit fruitless suicide attacking domes and spaceships.

"Just how," I asked Martinelli, "do you expect to get a recording of a Coren warcry? They avoid us."

"Simple," Martinelli said. "We use a decoy."

"Who? Not one of my crew!"

"Certainly not. We use Anderson. He prospected out here and knows the ropes. We put him down in a prospect hole, furnish him with an electronic fence, a communicator and an automatic rifle and await developments."

"Does he know what you're planning for him?" I asked.

"Naturally. I hired him on contract for this job."

"But that's sending a man out to be murdered!"

"He did it before, with less hope of reward."

"But"—I shrugged and shut up. Anderson knew what he was doing—what chances he took.

"The greatest concentration of Corens, so I understand, is in the South Polar region," Martinelli said. "We'll land near there and break out one of the lifeboats. Anderson'll set out and find some Corens. He'll land about a day's march away and set up camp, using the lifeboat as a base, and when the Corens come he'll invite attack, record their warcry, and then come back here in the lifeboat. It's simple."

Yeah—simple. But Martinelli didn't know the Corens. He had no experience with their uncanny ability to camouflage themselves to look like natural rocks or siliceous vegetation. He didn't know their incredible ferocity or tenacity of life, or their equally incredible patience. Probably Anderson did, but the man was hardly more intelligent than a Coren. It would be all too easy for him to become a second casualty, and I wanted no more. One death on this voyage was enough. As captain, I was responsible for both crew and passengers and I had no desire to explain to an Admiralty Court why I allowed a passenger to expose himself to possible death. Actually, I couldn't stop him. Once on a planet my authority over passengers was nil, but I'd be the target of some pretty hard questioning if anything happened.

"We're going to tape this insane idea of yours into the ship's log," I said. "I want it on record that I'm opposed to this sort of thing and that it is your responsibility."

Martinelli shrugged. "As you wish," he said indifferently. "I'll

have Anderson make a statement, too."

I sighed.

ANDERSON took off in the lifeboat shortly after we landed and completed the usual security precautions. After searing a hundred-yard wide area around the base of the ship with the rockets on idling, we strung an electronic fence and hooked it to one of the auxiliary generators. The gun turrets were opened and our heavy weapons were checked to see that they were in operating condition. After that, two groups of crewmen covered every square foot of the seared area blasting any suspicious bump or bulge on the ground. Then, and only then, did we break out a lifeboat, provision and equip it, and send Anderson on his way. As he disappeared southward, I had the feeling we would never see him again.

Half an hour later he reported in over the communicator. "Spotted about two hundred of the jellies—am circling them. Get a position fix."

Wagner, our astrogator, obligingly pinpointed him and gave him the data on his position.

"Will now fly about thirty miles away and find a landing site," Anderson said.

"Some navigator," Wagner said. "He doesn't even know his position." He flipped the transmitter switch. "Queen to Anderson. Will track you. Fly over your landing area until I pinpoint you."

"Okay, Queen." The transmitter stayed on as Anderson circled.

"You can set down now," Wagner said. "I have a fix."

"Thanks." Anderson's heavy voice was flat. "I'll contact you again as soon as I get my security up."

Regularly on the hour, Anderson reported. For the first 48-hour-period nothing happened. Then Anderson came on ahead of schedule.

"They're here!" Anderson's voice crackled over the phone. "I have about 20 new rocks in my front yard that weren't here yesterday. Looks like I'm going to have visitors." His voice was almost happy.

"Increase the charge on your fence," I ordered. "There's no sense in asking for trouble."

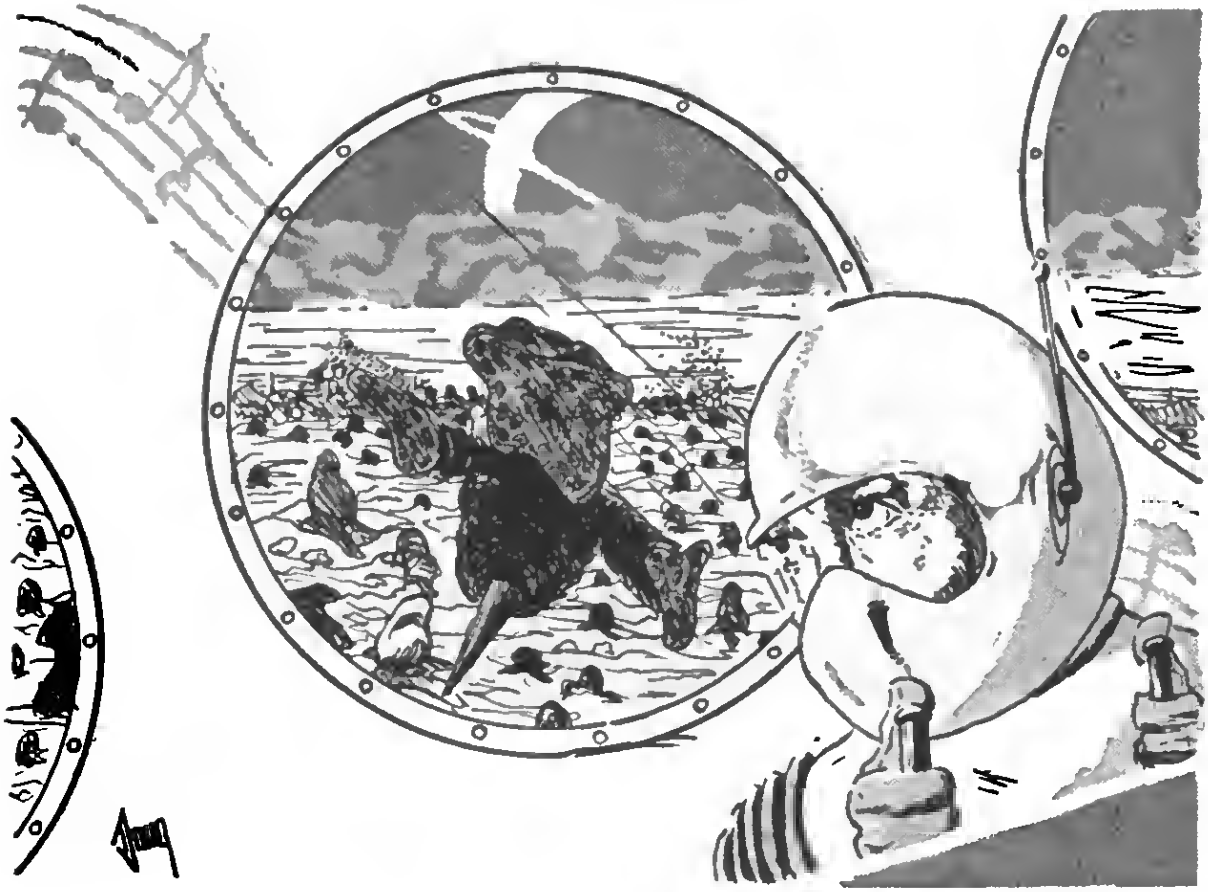
"I already have," Anderson said. "I know these jellies as well as you do."

"And keep your communicator open," I added. "You may not have an opportunity to open communication again. We'll stand by here."

"I'll do that—but there's no need to worry."

"Don't bet on that. The Corens are smart."

"Okay—but—" A wild eldritch



cry came faintly over the communicator.

"Well—that's it," Anderson said calmly. "They've decided to pay me a call. I'll blast a couple of them to get things stirred up. Tell Martinelli he'll probably get his warcry any minute now."

"Was that a Coren warcry?" Martinelli asked. He was leaning over my shoulder listening to our conversation.

"No," I said. "But keep your ear glued to this speaker and you'll hear one. That was just their way of talking to one another. They have a tonal language, not an inflected one. They make sounds by forcing air from their air bladders through their breathing tubes. The principle is something like that of a horn. When you hear their warcry, you'll recognize it." I grinned thinly. "You can't help it. It sounds like a traffic jam of homicidal maniacs on the Midcontinent Skyway."

Martinelli chuckled nervously.

I turned to the ship's annunciator. "Now hear this," I ordered. "Prepare for blastoff."

"Why?" Martinelli asked.

"We may have to help Anderson," I said. "He just might not have firepower enough to get out of there."

Sound erupted from the com-

municator. It wasn't exactly discord, but it had a nerve grating quality that made the short hairs on the back of one's neck stand erect and icy prickles chase one another down one's spine. There were harsh undertones of menace, overtones of shrill hate, and a full-bodied middle range of detestation. I'd heard it before, but never so loud. It had the volume and some of the tonal quality of the brasses in an orchestra—a metallic diapason of rage and hatred. The sound swelled and throbbed inside the "Queen's" control room—and was suddenly punctuated by Anderson's horrified voice. "My God! There's thousands of them!"

"Get out of there!" I ordered. "That fence won't hold."

"I know," Anderson said, "they're all over the boat. They broke through the fence just like it wasn't there." His voice had become oddly calm. "I can't take off—they're weighting me down."

"Open the jets to full," I said. "Spin the ship. Shake them off!"

"I'll try—but you'd better get here quick. I don't think it'll work and this boat won't take much of that treatment."

"To hell with the boat," I said as I hit the emergency blastoff alarm. "It's your life I'm worried about."

"*You're* worried," Anderson said. "What do you think I am?"

Fifteen seconds later we were airborne—heading for the fix Wagner had taken on Anderson's position.

"If you can get here in another 20 minutes, I think I can hold out," Anderson's tight voice came over the communicator. The background noises of his jets and the grinding of metal against rock indicated that he was taking my advice. "I don't dare try to roll the boat over, but the jets are scorching enough of them to keep the pressure off. The hull's bulging a bit but I think it'll hold."

"We're on the way," I said. "Hang on."

"I haven't any—" the communicator went dead. One of the Corens had probably ripped off the antenna.

WE flashed across Titan's surface, travelling low and fast. I don't know how the crew felt, but I wanted to get to Anderson while he was still alive. The Corens were incredibly strong, and a lifeboat isn't too ruggedly built. All they had to do was spring one plate and Anderson was dead.

"He's just over that next range of hills, skipper," Wagner's voice came into my earphones.

I threw the "Queen" into a vertical attitude, balancing her on the jets as momentum carried

us forward. It was a dangerous maneuver, but I needed the jetblast. It was the best weapon we had. Sweat poured off me as I balanced the ship on her drives, using the jet to kill our speed as we swept over the hills and into the valley beyond.

The entire floor of the bowl-shaped valley was crawling with Corens. The lifeboat was covered with them. As they sensed the "Queen" the gray blue blobs began splitting up and moving away with startling speed as they extruded limbs from their amorphous bodies and ran for safety. They had no desire to face a full-sized ship.

But those covering the lifeboat didn't run. They clung like limpets as we plowed stern first toward the seething mass of siliceous flesh, our tubes blasting fiery paths across the ground. Some of them died in the jetblast as I set the "Queen" down heavily in what was an arrival rather than a landing. Shock raced through the ship, slamming passengers and crew against safety webs and shock couches. For a moment we teetered dangerously as I stabbed at the steering jets, trying to keep us upright. Below me the automatics in the three turrets that could be brought to bear began pouring low order solid and vibratory destruction into the Corens still covering the lifeboat while the fourth turret speeded the departure of those who were still within range in the valley.

The "Queen" shuddered and steadied in a vertical attitude as Bernstein, acting without orders, opened the engine room hatch and dropped to the ground followed by five men carrying flamethrowers. At the sight of this easier prey, the Corens swarming over Anderson's boat, dropped to the icy ground and came scuttling forward on their pseudolegs, trumpeting their warcry as they ran.

Bernie and his men met them with a wall of flame that crisped the foremost dozen into cinders. But the others came on. There weren't so many now, only twenty or so, but a Coren is twice the physical match of any human, and if one of those beasts got to close quarters it would be curtains. I swore insanely as I watched Bernie through the scanners, cold sweat running down my face. He had no business risking his life out there. Nor did those other five fools. He let them come to pointblank range and fired again. I yelled hoarsely as the yellow flames enveloped the front rank of the nearest jellies, and yelled again as the others turned and fled. They had enough. Fully two hundred of them were dead, and that price was too high even to their blood-soaked minds.

The lifeboat was apparently intact as Bernie and his party walked cautiously toward it. I noticed for the first time that the men he was leading were the Solar Union people—and whatever feelings I had for their actions on Pluto vanished in admiration of their courage here on Titan. It took guts of the highest order to face a charging Coren.

Bernie opened the emergency airlock on the lifeboat and slammed it shut again as a thick grayish blue pseudolimb extruded sluggishly from the opening. The closing steel sliced through the jelly-like mass which dropped to the ground, extruded a half dozen pseudolimbs of its own and scuttled off across the gray landscape. I felt sick. We were too late. The Corens had managed to crack the lifeboat's hull.

We had a little trouble getting the Corens out of the boat without destroying the recording apparatus, but the exhaust fumes of a small gasoline engine finally did the trick. Oxygen breathers like ourselves, the Corens were equally susceptible to carbon monoxide.

We hooked them out of the interior, two three-foot pieplates of gray-blue meat, with a humped central area that held dozens of flat razor-edged siliceous spicules.

"They look like jellyfish," Martinelli observed as we flopped the limp amorphous masses onto the icy rocks.

"Maybe they do to you," I said, "but to me they represent something else."

"What?"

"Vampires."

Martinelli's eyebrows rose, but they didn't stay that way. Two of the Solar Union men came out of the lifeboat carrying something horribly slashed and deflated that had once been Anderson. The knifelike silicon spicules had reduced his space armor to ribbons at every flexible joint, and inside the armor, a shrunken mass of bones and slashed skin was all that was left. Virtually all the soft tissues of his body had been absorbed. And the greatest horror of all was that there was no blood.

"They're fond of men," I said bitterly, nudging one of the dead masses with an armored foot. "We're a delicacy."

Martinelli's face turned a pale green, but he didn't get sick. Experience on Pluto had taught him to keep better control over his stomach.

"Load the boat," I ordered. "We can repair her on the way. There's no use staying here—and there's no use bringing Anderson," I added.

We buried him under a cairn of ice and melted it into a solid

mass with our needle beams, while Martinelli went back to the ship with the sound tapes and his weak stomach, and the crew connected the hoist cables to rings welded in the lifeboat's hull.

It didn't make me any happier to know that this recording was also perfect. Two lives for two noises seemed a pretty high price. Nor was Martinelli joyful.

"At this rate," he said bitterly, "we'll be landing on Earth with half our personnel missing."

"I know," I said, "and there's worse to come."

I was thinking of the swampsucker. That thing is almost legendary in stories of the exploration of the Solar Union. Of all creatures dreamed up by an insane Nature in a moment of homicidal madness, the Venerian swampsucker is the worst. That animal fitted into no known category of solar life. It was even a stranger to its equally weird fellows on the Cloudy Planet. They, at least, had some similarity to Terran and Martian phylogeny. But not the swampsucker. It was a survivor of an older and fiercer age. I didn't relish the thought of meeting it.

"But let's look on the brighter side," Martinelli said, interrupting my unpleasant thoughts. "There's Ganymede, Io, Callisto, and Mars."

"I'll try to be happy about it," I replied.

He smiled without humor. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," he said.

IO WAS our next stop. The run was made smoothly and without trouble. Oddly enough, the loss of Anderson didn't seem to disturb the ship as much as I expected. There's a difference between dying fighting and being crushed by an impersonal Nature. Anderson had known what his chances were. The fact that he had accepted them made his death easier to take. Why, I don't know.

The Kalliks—big, birdlike animals with downy jet plumage—thoroughly adapted to frigid, nearly airless Io, were an easy assignment. The human colony raised them by the thousands and harvested their feathers for insulation. Our best synthetics couldn't compare with them either in weight or efficiency. Light as thistledown, the black plumage was fireproof, heat transmitting, and cold proof. Each feather possessed the peculiar property of directional transfer of heat. Turn it one way and every local erg of ambient temperature could be channelled inward. Turn it the other and heat would be channeled outward. The Kallik feathers had long ago done away with

complex and cumbersome refrigeration and heating units. They lined the double hulls of ships, furnished insulation and temperature control for spacesuits, heated and cooled every dome city in the System, and most of the better houses on Earth. As a trade item they were almost priceless and the demand far outstripped the supply. And, since the birds couldn't live away from Io, the moon had a corner on the System's temperature control business. Kalliks were easy to find, and in the hundreds of Kallik brooders dotting the area around the spaceport, it was easy to find nesting Kalliks. The Solar Union crew collected the necessary recordings inside of four hours—and Martinelli found several chitterings of the right tonal quality.

I was almost happy as we took on more chemical fuel and blasted off for Callisto and the whistlers. The whistler is a solitary beast with sufficient antisocial traits to make it a problem to figure out how the species reproduces itself. Their call, a peculiar double-toned ululating whistle, is one of the oddest sounds in the System. It makes the listener want to laugh hysterically—and early explorers often did—with occasional fatal results. The effect on Earthmen is bad enough that the uninitiated are required to wear earplugs.

We set down at the lone spaceport on Callisto, checked in with the Wildlife Conservation Division, who were all too happy to cooperate with us when they learned of our mission. One of the field agents turned out to be a sound bug and had made several recordings of the whistlers, which he was happy to give to the Solar Union men for use in the Natural History Archives.

"See," Martinelli said happily, "things are working out all right now."

I nodded, unconvinced. This was what I'd figured to be the easiest part of the journey. The life forms on Jupiter's moons were singularly friendly and inoffensive. I hadn't expected trouble here and I wasn't disappointed. We stayed only long enough to record our log, visit the officials at the station, and compute a course for Ganymede now on the opposite side of Jupiter.

I WAS glad to get off Callisto—the great, red bulk of Jupiter hanging overhead made me uneasy. I always have the feeling that the Big Boy's satellites are falling into that hell of methane storms raging on the surface. It's not a particularly secure feeling since it leaves me with the same sort of vertigo that grips some people who peer over the edge of earth's skyscrapers. Aboard ship it's differ-

ent, but on a planetary surface I don't like feeling like a cliff hanger.

WE MET Ganymede about ten hours out, overtook her and made the third landing in as many days. This business of satellite jumping was almost pleasant after the long runs from Pluto and Saturn.

"So you want to record the song of a Hegemon?" the Port Captain asked. He eyed us with amusement—one of those trim, darkly efficient young men who are taking over the Space Service. His voice soothed my jangled Norse nerves like a buzz saw cutting through a steel plate. I've never cared for Civil Servants who eye spacemen with amusement. We may be anachronisms, but we've done more to make the Solar Union work than a regiment of these neatly polished products of the Academy. "I'm afraid you're in for a disappointment, gentlemen," the Port Captain continued. "There probably isn't a hegemon on this world that would sing for you. We humans aren't liked too well."

Small wonder, I thought. If this character is representative of the earthmen on Ganymede, the hegemons would probably be only too happy to see our retreating backsides rather than our faces. I glowered at the captain who returned the glare.

"Have you ever tried cooperating with them?" I asked.

"Why? We have no need for them—and they have none for us. We leave each other alone."

"Oh—great!" I exploded.

"Easy, skipper," Martinelli said. "There's no need to antagonize him."

"Why not? The poor fool obviously knows nothing about Ganymede."

The Port Captain stiffened. Dislike flashed from his brown eyes to my blue ones, and was returned with interest. "Since you are obviously an authority on Ganymedan life, Captain Lundfors," he said, "I would appreciate your views on the matter. They might help us."

"They might at that," I said.

"And what would you suggest?" he asked icily.

"Skipper!" Martinelli said, pleadingly.

I ignored him. "What is your job here?" I asked the Captain.

"To speed the work of the spaceport and improve efficiency, of course."

"Why?"

"So trade can move freely."

"What sort of trade?"

"Machinery, textiles, food, and living equipment from Earth —industrial bort, gem stones, and isotopes from here."

"No wonder the hegemons dislike you!" I said.

"Eh?"

"Do you know what you're doing?"

"Certainly—we're helping to keep the Solar Union's economy in balance."

"And you're taking without giving. Sure, I'll admit most of the stuff you're using is valueless to the hegemons, and they're perfectly content to let you have it, but after all, it's their property—a part of their world and you take without asking—and conduct a closed trade system—leaving them out. They're intelligent and sensitive in the mass, and they obviously resent being treated like country cousins."

"We have nothing they want," the captain said. "They're the most completely self-sufficient form of life in the Union. We've thought of a thousand things to trade, but they neither want them nor need them. We've been on this world officially for the past ten years, and the traders and prospectors were here nearly a hundred more. No one, except for one man, has in all that time even roused the slightest interest in a hegemon. They tolerate us, but they've never shown any interest in our activities except when we built this spaceport and trading station."

"For trade between Earth and her colonists," I added.

"For Solar Union trade," he corrected.

I GRINNED at him. "I was here in '08," I said. "One of the Old Timers had hegemons doing his work for him. He shipped out with us with over ten million credits in his account."

"You knew Isaac Miller?" the Captain asked. There was a faint note of respect in his voice.

"Sure," I said. "That's the man I was talking about. What about him?"

"He was the only one who ever could work with the hegemons."

"Well—why don't you do what he did?"

"What *did* he do?"

"What? Don't you know? Why—he told me he was going to turn his secret over to your people."

The Port Captain nodded. "He was," he said, "but he was killed in a groundcar accident less than a week after he returned to Earth. And he left no records."

"Oh—I didn't know."

"And you know Isaac's secret."

"I think so."

"And you'll give it to us?"

"Why?" I asked.

"What's this?" Martinelli broke in.

"Remember me telling you that we'd have no trouble with the hegemons?" I asked.

He nodded. "But you were wrong."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. It's just that these Solar

Union lads don't use their heads. They've been ignoring the natives."

"And what's wrong with that?" the Port Captain asked. "Just how do you trade with an entity that has no need for goods —which draws its sustenance out of the rocks—and who has such a completely different standard of behavior that it cannot even recognize that you're intelligent except when you're working in a group? The hegemons neither need nor want goods or money, and since they have neither sex nor sight, nor the ability to taste or smell, there's virtually no way to contact them. The things which appeal to us do not appeal to them. We have no common basics, no meeting grounds. So we go our way and they go theirs. There's one just outside the port—probably a million unit cluster. It's been there ever since we phased in, and it ignores us. Once in awhile it shows a color change, but not often. It just sits there! For ten years it's been sitting there ignoring us. We've tried everything." The captain's young voice sounded human and a little desperate. "And nothing works. Why it stays around is a mystery. Maybe it likes to observe us —with whatever it uses in place of vision."

"No," I said, "it's hoping. That's why it stays."

"Hoping for what?" he asked.

"Hoping that you'll some day get some sense and give it what it wants."

"And what do we have that it could possibly want?"

"Music," I said.

"Music?" his voice was incredulous. "What would a thing like that want with music?"

"Possibly the same thing we do—emotional satisfaction."

"This I'll believe when I see it," the Port Captain said.

"Well, come along and learn something. We old-timers aren't quite as stupid as you youngsters think."

He didn't laugh, but his smile was condescending, like that an indulgent father gives a child. It made me writhe. "I'll come," he said. "I wouldn't miss this for worlds. We've tried sound on it. We know it's senstive to vibrations, but it never displayed the slightest interest."

"Why should it?" I asked. "Let's suppose you were a music lover and someone kept jarring your ears with an oscillator. Would you pay him any attention?"

The Port Captain grinned. "I guess not—except maybe to hit him over the head if he annoyed me too much."

"Now consider the patience and forbearance of the hegemon."

"Hmm—I see—but we did try

music. Arlo Jelke brought out a whole album of dance music—progressive squirm. He didn't get a nibble.

"Why should he? The hegemon is logical and rational. It wouldn't go for that stuff."

"Maybe you're right," the Port Captain said grudgingly, "but until you prove it I'm not buying."

We wore armor, of course. Not to protect us against the lack of air because there was plenty of that, but to keep the bitter cold from freezing us solid.

THE hegemon, an enormous one, was nestled against the base of one of the low hills just outside the Spaceport Dome. It was an impressive sight, gleaming a rosy pink in the red light of Jupiter hanging above us. A tremendous structure of hexahedral crystals, it spread over nearly half an acre of Ganymede's barren terrain, and as we watched, it moved sluggishly, rearranging the individual crystals of its mass into odd shapes and angularities and geometric patterns of startling beauty. I plucked a crystal from the branch of a surrealist tree that towered beside us. The tiny living entity scarcely two centimeters long, a perfect hexahedron with fine tendrils protruding from either end, was one of the millions of units that composed this monstrous structure of crystalline life. It glowed, first pink and then an angry red, as its life substance realized that it was separated from its fellows. Individually it was nothing—merely a unit in the mass—but collectively a hegemon was a thing of incalculable strength and power. The energies contained in this giant could devastate half of Ganymede if they were released all at once.

I looked at the crystal curiously and replaced it in the mass. Instantly its tendrils entwined with the others' and its crystal shape blended into the growth around us.

The Port Captain looked at me with horror in his eyes. "You were lucky," he said. "I've seen men incinerated for meddling with a hegemon."

"Not for one crystal," I said. "It's too small compared to the total mass. But a dozen of them could burn your hand off." I turned to the Solar Union men who were setting up the recording apparatus from the ship. "You about ready, boys?" I asked.

Their chief, a grizzled veteran named Vance M'bonga, nodded—his white teeth gleaming in the darkness of his face. "Ready, skipper," he said.

"Did you bring that 'Nine Worlds' tape?" I asked Martinelli.

"I did—but can't we use something else?"

"We could, but it would have to be something this fellow hasn't experienced, and I don't know whether this is one of old Isaac's boys. It's big enough to be, and the fact that it's been hanging around here for ten years makes me think it might have had some close contacts with humanity. So why take chances. We won't miss with this one—and I'd like to show that young fellow something." I jerked my thumb at the Port Captain. "Besides, I figure that patience like this hegemon has shown should be rewarded."

"All right, but I hope you're not barking at the moon," Martinelli threaded the tape on the stereo player and Vance turned the volume on full.

"There's always that chance," I said as I looked past him at Vance. "Okay—let her go," I said "loud and clear."

The opening bars of Raposnikov's "Nine Worlds Symphony" crashed from the speakers.

Instantly the vast mass of the hegemon rippled. Its crystals tinkled like fairy bells, turned a deep red, and shifted with a dazzling rapidity. Before we could move we were encased in a throbbing mass of pulsating ruby crystals that soared over us and around us to form a gigantic million faceted, acoustically perfect dome that changed shades of color to match each change in tempo of the music. Two hundred of Earth's best musicians had poured their talents onto that tape and two million units of an utterly alien life form absorbed that sound with an intensity no human audience could match. Bursts of scintillating colors flashed and rippled over the crystalline mass around us, and the mass itself moved and rippled, approaching the stereo to catch the fainter parts, retreating from the full-throated crescendos, quivering to the glissades, and swaying with the rhythms of the melody. We were standing in the middle of a fantastic concert hall, a hall that lived with the music that filled it—that drank in greedily every note, every nuance of the contrapuntal passages, every chord and harmony.

The Port Captain, the sound specialists from the Solar Union, Martinelli and myself were stunned. I hadn't expected such a response even though I had known in a rough sort of way what would happen. The others, utterly unprepared, were struck dumb by the glittering fairyland that encased them.

Finally it was over. The last notes died, and slowly, reluctantly; the hegemon withdrew to form a gigantic mass, a tower of piled crystals that pulsed with ruby color. And from the glowing crystals came a pure clean

note of music, so sweet and piercing that our bodies shook to its vibration.

"Record!" I snapped.

Vance moved, snapping the switch of the recorder as the note augmented, strengthened, and grew as the whole hegemon combined its millions of vibrating crystals into a wave of gratitude. We stood there, quivering, as the sound went through us and slowly faded into silence. The crystals nearest our feet drew back and before us, on the dark ground, lay a mass of black glittering crystals.

THE Port Captain took one stunned unbelieving look at the crystals and slowly sank to his knees. "Bort!" he gasped. "Industrial diamonds! Why, there must be fifty kilograms of them!"

"The audience," I said, "always pays for the concert. It appears that our music was appreciated."

"How much is that pile worth?" Martinelli asked.

"About two and a half million credits," I said, "figuring bort at ten credits a carat. That's earthside prices of course. Your music has just shown its first profit."

"My God!" Martinelli's voice was as shaken as the Port Captain's.

"Of course," I continued, "there's the ship's share, the crew's share, the Union's share for taxes, and my share for showing you the secret. Figuring it out fairly, you'll come out about a half million ahead, which isn't too bad for fifteen minutes work."

"Look!" the Port Captain said. "The hegemon's breaking up."

Masses of red-tinged crystals, humming with power, were darting up and away from the central mass which shrank visibly as we watched. Finally, the hegemon vanished.

"What does it mean?" the Captain asked.

"Simple," I said. "The word's going out. There's a new day coming to Ganymede. You won't find the hegemons ignoring you any more."

"I wonder if that's an unmixed blessing."

"You never can tell. Maybe—maybe not. And incidentally, Isaac said that they like Bach best, although most symphonic music will do well until they tire of it. Bach, however, seems to have the best lasting qualities."

"Thanks," the Port Captain said, "but it won't do me any good. By the time the word gets out everybody will be milking this golden cow."

"Of course, they'll never pay like that again," I added, nodding at the heap of bort, "but a few classical tapes can be a profitable investment."

"But there isn't a classical tape in the whole port! We haven't a longhair in the station complement."

"Too bad," I said, "but maybe you and I can do business. I have a pretty fair library aboard the "Queen." For twenty-five percent I'll let you have enough to make us both rich."

"You're a profiteer and a pirate," Martinelli said. "The only thing that gripes me is that I didn't bring any music besides the 'Nine Worlds', and I can't part with that. There's too much tied up in it."

"More than a few megacredits?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You can keep sole Ganymedan rights," I suggested, "as soon as you've produced the whole symphony. You can license it—or even work Ganymede yourself."

His face cleared. "Of course!" he said. "I'll license it for this planet."

We went back to the ship and negotiated a contract with the Port Captain who was happily contemplating retiring and becoming a prospector. I didn't tell him that he'd find it a lot harder than today's stint. After all, a hegemon that's waited for ten years would probably be more grateful than an ordinary native. And besides, it was probably paralyzed by the "Nine Worlds". Its sense of values might have been distorted. But the young man would do all right —and I'd make a decent profit before Ganymede was glutted with music, and the hegemons raised their prices for helping humans make a profit.

WE braked down into a respectful orbit around Mars. The Red Planet was still the same suspicious place. Martians were never noted for their trusting nature, and with modern technology their distrust extended as far out as the orbit of Deimos. They had never forgotten how the exploration parties had nearly wrecked their culture with the exotic diseases the first humans had brought with them, and they were determined that such things would never happen again.

The Customs and Sanitation boat that came out to intercept us was filled with the typically fussbudget officials that have made Mars a trader's nightmare for the past two centuries. We were examined, poked, prodded, fluoroscoped, X-rayed, tracered and decontaminated until we and the "Queen" were as sterile as an autoclaved forcep. And only then were we permitted to land. I couldn't blame the Martians. In their place I'd act the same way. We were too much alike in structure and metabolism for

anything less. Human and Martian diseases flourished equally well in either race.

But this took time, and Martinelli was getting impatient. "We have less than six months left," he protested. "This stay in quarantine hasn't helped things any."

"It's the rule," I said. "It does no good to buck it. The whole thing is designed for mutual safety."

"But why do they have to move so slowly?"

"That's the Martian way."

"Ah, yes—the Martian Movement is called the *largo*. I wondered why."

"Your friend Raposnikov must have been a frustrated spaceman," I said.

"He could talk about the planets of the solar system for hours," Martinelli said, "and though he'd never been off Earth except for one tour of the System, he probably knew more about it than most men. He was a shrewd and careful observer."

"So it seems. Well, I hope he was right about his Martian sound effects. The thin air of Mars might make a difference."

"I'm sure he took that into consideration. He hasn't missed so far, has he?"

I shook my head.

We landed at Marsport—the domed Earth town on the outskirts of K'vasteh. Nobody paid us more than casual attention since spaceships were constantly leaving and taking off, and the "Queen" was neither large nor otherwise extraordinary. The Martians had been hearing the sound of jets for so many years that they were used to them, and the absence of the sound would have been more disturbing than its presence. We checked in at Customs, stated our business to a politely incredulous customs officer, drew our billet assignments and settled down to planetside life.

The crew went off to stretch their muscles in the nearest bar. I sat in the port administrative offices cleaning up the inevitable paper work that goes with a Mars touchdown, and Martinelli went off to K'vasteh looking happier than I'd seen him in months. The closer he got to the sun, the lighter his spirits became. He was, I reflected, a true son of Mother Earth. The spacelanes and other worlds didn't interest him. His principal desire was to get through and get home to the familiar sensations of Earth. Mars, to him, was merely the third from the last stop in a trip that was already much too long. The temple bells at K'vasteh were just another sound that had to be obtained, and he intended to obtain them with the least possible trouble.

I COULD have told him something about those bells, but I didn't have a chance. He was gone before it occurred to me that he might not know. I learned about the Algunite monks a good many years ago and the information was so much an integral part of my background that it was second nature. Algun was the nearest thing the Martians had to a Supreme Deity. Properly translated, the name means "infinite intelligence" and the bells are only rung for a candidate who succeeds in passing the examinations for the priesthood and on the annual Festival of Algun which occurs in the summer on a date fixed by a complicated astronomical calculation performed by the Grand Ecclesiastical Council. Since the Martian year is over twice as long as ours, if we had missed the annual festival our only chance of hearing the bells would be to find a priestly candidate willing to take the examination and capable of passing it.

Finding a candidate would be no trouble, but finding one who would risk the examination was another matter. Since a suitable penalty was provided for failure, few acolytes were willing to take the examination, which was how the priests of Algun managed to keep a large number of acolytes to serve them. In my book priests were the only truly privileged class on Mars. Anything they wanted they had merely to ask and it was given them. The people, I suppose, figured that if the priests were on their side they could receive the benefits of infinite intelligence. And after all, there was some justice in the belief, because a priest *did* wield some awesome powers.

Oh yes—the penalty. It wouldn't be too much to an Earthman but a Martian's ears are much larger. A losing candidate lost his ears, and was driven from the temple. Most failures became hermits and hid their shame in the desert. The rest committed suicide. You see, a Martian's ears are not like ours. They're bigger, more brilliantly colored, and serve as a focussing device for psi-potential. Loss of his ears deprives a Martian of one of his six senses and impairs another. It was a high price for failure.

Martinelli came back looking downcast. "The spring Festival is three months away," he said, "and they won't ring the bells prior to that time."

"Unless a candidate passes the examination for the priesthood," I added.

"Candidate? Priesthood? What's this?"

I explained.

Martinelli's face lightened. "Then it's easy," he said with relief. "All we have to do is find a candidate who wants to be a

priest—and make sure that he passes."

"Easy," I said without conviction. "Ha! Remember the ears?"

"What could be so hard about it?" Martinelli asked. "There shouldn't be anything we can't answer for him. We can surgically implant a two-way communicator and rig it into the Solar Union branch library here on a direct beam. With all that information to draw upon, a Martian couldn't help but pass *any* test."

I shook my head doubtfully. "The priests know every trick of cheating in the book. In fact, since most of them pass their examinations by some form of dishonesty, you might say that they are experienced experts in academic cheating."

"Do they know about microminiaturization?"

"I suppose so."

"But can you prove it?"

"No."

"Well, then—"

"If you can persuade an acolyte to go along with your scheme, I won't object," I said.

"Where would we find one?"

"Probably in one of the downtown bars in K'vasteh. They live it up during off-duty hours."

"Isn't that an odd sort of activity for a holy man?"

I shrugged. "Different worlds, different customs."

"Want to go with me and help find a volunteer?" he asked.

"Why not? The sooner we get this done, the sooner we get home, and the sooner I get paid."

Martinelli looked at me oddly—an enigmatic expression on his dark face. He nodded.

WE found our acolyte in the Garden of the Seven Delights, one of K'vasteh's plushier night spots. From observation and experience I had long ago deduced that six of the seven delights involved alcohol, narcotics, audio, visual, olfactory, and sexual stimulation, but I never did discover what the seventh was. It involved something peculiarly Martian—about which the natives never talked. When asked they would respond with the irritating Martian cackle that can roughly be translated "find out for yourself if you're so curious." I'll admit I was curious but in a quarter of a century of riding the spacelanes, I had never found out. I figured it had something to do with their peculiar ears, but that was as far as I could go. And not having Martian ears, I would probably never learn anything more than I already knew.

Lor T'shonke was our lad's name, a Senior Acolyte of about fifteen years standing, a typical Martian, small, lean, pigeon-chested, and oddly human in conformation. Only his crest of feathers and scaly legs betrayed his avian ancestry. He reminded

me of Commander Kelthorn's wry comment to the reporters after the first successful landing and return. "There's a bunch of queer birds on that world," Kelthorn had said—and the description was as good today as it was two centuries ago. Martians *are* queer birds.

T'shonke was in the middle of the First Delight—alcohol. A large amphora of Ko-fruit wine stood on the floor beside his booth and the peculiar narrow-mouthed sipping glass in his hand was half empty. He looked at us fuzzily, his eyes half filmed by the translucent membranes of his third eyelids. He blinked at us, and I was somehow reminded of an earthly chicken. The lower lids of Martians are movable, while the uppers, encrusted in a mass of brilliant red pigmented tissue are more ornamental than useful. A Martian's eyes constantly give an earthman the impression that all Martians are recovering from a three-day binge—but T'shonke was sober enough.

"Greetings, Earthmen, what brings you to this poor table?" he said.

Martinelli looked at me.

"Tell him," I said, "straight out. There's no ceremony. Just get the idea across fast and clean."

"How would you like to be a priest?" Martinelli asked.

T'shonke ran his long, bony fingers over the gorgeous earlobes that drooped in multicolored splendor from the sides of his head. "I would like to very much—but the penalty for failure is too great."

"And if we could fix it so failure was an impossibility?" Martinelli asked.

T'shonke's third eyelids snapped back and his yellow eyes were suddenly alert. "How?" he asked.

"Just a minute," Martinelli said. "What is your answer?"

"If you could guarantee that I would not fail," T'shonke said slowly, "I would pledge anything within reason."

Martinelli glanced at me.

"That's a top offer," I said. "You can go ahead."

"Would the contents of the Solar Union library be sufficient information for your purpose?"

"More than enough," T'shonke said, "except for the mysteries—and I'm well grounded there." His glass floated off the table, the amphora tipped, poured and the glass floated back full. "I can handle up to fifty kilograms—which is twice as good as most priests can do."

"Amazing!" Martinelli said. "Are all of you Martians telekinetics?"

"No—just a certain percentage—like your telepaths—only better trained and better devel-

oped. We recognized ESP long before you did and made it part of our culture." He sighed. "If only our brains were designed for telepathy."

"That's where we can help," Martinelli said. "We can give you access to the Solar Union library even while you are taking the examination. In effect, you will be a telepath."

"How?"

"We surgically implant a fourth order communicator in your ear—back of the cochlea—and another behind your syrinx. This will allow you to talk to our agents in the library and they'll research any data you want. With the electronic coders in the library this can be done in seconds."

"They give five minutes for thinking," T'shonke mused.

"That would be plenty."

The Martian shook his head. "But it wouldn't work," he said. "It's been tried before." His eyes filmed over. "Two years ago an acolyte tried this technique. He was discovered. His ears are nailed to Algun's altar."

"Why was he discovered?"

"We go before Algun naked as we came into the world and are examined for evidence of cheating. Under X-ray the mechanisms showed."

"That's no problem—the communicator could be made of radio-transparent material."

"The size?—displacement of tissues?"

Martinelli held his fingers a centimeter apart. "That too large?" he asked.

T'shonke shook his head. "If you can do as you say," he said, "I will try to take—but wait—what do you gain from this?"

"The temple bells which will be rung in your honor," Martinelli said. "I wish to record their music."

"But can't you wait until the Festival?" T'shonke's voice was suddenly suspicious.

"You don't understand," Martinelli said, and then he told T'shonke about the "Nine Worlds" symphony.

"Hmm—I see. Now it makes sense. But before I agree, I must be sure that you are telling the truth. Can I hear this music?"

"Part of the first movement," I said. "Enough to give you an idea. No more."

T'shonke cackled. "You know Mars, eh, Earthman?"

I cackled back at him. "I do—a little", I said, "enough to know that Martians can't be trusted with uncopyrighted works of art, literature, or music. You're the biggest cultural thieves in the system."

"Not too much of an honor, considering the other inhabitants," T'shonke said easily.

"If you come to the ship," I said, "we can arrange an audi-

tion—a limited one—enough to give you an idea."

"That is acceptable," T'shonke agreed. "If I am convinced that the work of art is as great as you say, I will agree."

Martinelli shrugged. "But how will he know?" he asked me.

"I'd trust him," I said. "Mars has been a tremendous customer for classical music. I learned to appreciate it here. I had a month's layover between trips, and used to visit town pretty often. One of the Algun priests took a liking to me and educated my ears to appreciate great music. You can trust the musical judgment of a priest or most acolytes as much as you can trust anyone's. T'shonke'll give you an honest answer."

IT TOOK only half of the first movement to do it. I kept watching T'shonke and gave Martinelli the high sign as soon as the Martian was softened up.

"May I hear the rest?" T'shonke's voice was pleading. "It is the most magnificent music I have ever heard."

"You can hear it all—with the temple bells—the Corens—the hegemon—everything—once it's played in full and the copyright established," I said.

T'shonke's head drooped. "You are a cruel man, Captain Lundfors. You give one a sip of ecstasy and then hide the amphora. I could hate you if I did not know that you are right. There is no sense in jeopardizing such a valuable property. And so you are answered. I will help you. I could do no less—and though my ears may hang on Algun's holy altar, I will still help you. It will be recompense enough to know that I have done something for the greatest music I have ever heard."

"The priesthood should be some reward," Martinelli said.

"It is—but it alone is not enough to justify the risk," T'shonke said. "I'm doing this for the music—the sixth delight—not for the honor and power of the priesthood."

I had never seen a Martian so moved. It amazed me. I had always thought of them as coldly intellectual and thoroughly sensual, but not emotional. Perhaps it took something as superlative as Raposnikov's music to move them and any lesser thing was not enough. Whatever it was, T'shonke was our Martian as much as though he had thumbprinted an oath of service.

It was no effort to install the tiny transmitter-receiver units and within half an hour T'shonke was connected to us by electronic bonds that worked perfectly well inside the temple and out. We tested the hookup thoroughly for nearly a week, under every conceivable situation. It worked per-

fectly, and finally, satisfied, Martinelli passed the word to T'shonke that everything was ready. We hadn't seen the Martian since that one night when we had recruited him but that wasn't necessary. Since we were in electronic contact personal visits were needless—and they would have done nothing to help matters. Acolytes who apply for examination for the priesthood are watched closely and suspiciously. T'shonke, we hoped, because of his long service, was not suspect enough to warrant being tailed prior to our meeting. Now, however, he was watched night and day.

We had already moved our recording equipment into an empty apartment opposite Temple Square and the Solar Union technicians were on watch day and night for the first sound of the bells.

And while we waited T'shonke entered the inner sanctum of the temple to take his examination. I passed the word and our whole complex linkage between T'shonke and the Solar Union Library in K'vasteh was alerted. We waited eagerly as the minutes dragged into hours. But there wasn't a sound over the hookup. Not once did T'shonke press the activator button. Night fell, and day brightened without a single call for help.

And then the bells rang out! A thunderous chorus pealing through the thin Martian air. From the two hundred ton monster in the lower course to the tiny silver klingers in the uppermost tower, the great bell concourse rang out with a tone and brilliance unknown to the thick air of earth. And then, with a final shimmer of sound that slowly sank to silence, it stopped.

The cessation was so abrupt, so unexpected, that a thrill of fear shot through me. I had never heard the bells cease so abruptly before. There was something final about it, as though a period had been placed behind an interlude. Worried, I called the sound crew.

"We've got it. They're all on tape," Vance said. "But all hell's popping down below us in the temple square!"

"What's the matter?"

"Seems like a lynching party. Migod! They're tearing some poor native limb from limb!" Vance gasped.

I didn't need the letter that came half an hour later by messenger to tell me what had happened. "Honored Sir", it began. "I failed. The first time I tried the communicator and saw the High Priest smile I knew I was discovered. And when I could not contact you, I knew, as neither you nor I did before, that Algun is truly Infinite Wisdom and His priests know about fourth order

radiation. They took me from the place of examination, cut my ears from my head, nailed them to the holy altar—and drove me from the temple. I am disgraced and maimed as no living Martian should be. The sixth and seventh delights are barred to me who enjoyed them more than all the rest. I have no will to live, yet ere I die, I will perform one act for memory of the ultimate in music. I still have a set of keys to the temple. I know the stations of the guard. And for once the bells of Algun will ring for something greater than either priest or festival.—Farewell." The letter was unsigned, but I didn't need the signature.

"What happened?" Martinelli asked.

Wordlessly I handed him the letter. He looked at it, puzzled. "I can't read Martian," he said.

I told him what T'shonke had done.

His reaction didn't surprise me. He looked sick. He loathed violence. "So we have the bells," he said in a dull voice. "Fine, now let's get going. We have only five months left."

"Four and a half," I corrected.

WE WERE standing on the shadow rim of Mercury. Behind us was darkness and bitter cold, and the lifeboard which had brought us here. Ahead was the blazing corona of the sun and temperatures hot enough to melt lead. The sunward side of Mercury was an inferno, with soft crusts of semi-solid magma, spouting volcanoes and a ghastly brimstone atmosphere that corroded metal and ate through rubber and plastic as though the refractory substances were so much paper. It was no world for human beings, yet humans lived and worked here, extracting the heavy metals from the sizzling surface of the Sunward side and processing them for the use of the Solar Union's expanding economy. There were native lifeforms, the dominant one a grisly armored creature roughly resembling a lobster in size and shape. They were primarily vegetarian, and offered no trouble except for their numbers and the fact that they tended to congregate around Earth settlements or lumber painfully after exploring parties. Since they were neither good to look upon nor to eat, men tolerated them as another unpleasant fact of existence on Mercury and tried their best to ignore them. There were about twenty of them following us, appearing abruptly from holes in the rugged surface, waving their long-jointed antennae solemnly as they scuttled over the rocky soil. Before us the flaming glory of the corona leaped and flickered above the knife black edge of the escarpment which separated us

from the shimmering hell of the sunward zone. In many areas the transition from darkness to light was not nearly so abrupt, but we had selected this one because of the relative protection the escarpment offered. Ahead of us Vance and his crew were pushing on toward the rimrock with the little remote controlled track layers that carried the sound equipment. In some respects this was an unnecessary journey since the sounds could be perfectly simulated by boiling a pot of thick gelatin over a low flame. But the contract specified actual sounds and so we had come to Mercury at the risk of life and limb to complete the next to last part of our mission.

Martinelli's voice came to me over my headset mixed with the roar and crackle of the solar wind as streams of electrons hurtled outward from the sun toward the farthest reaches of space. The static was inconceivable to anyone who hasn't experienced it, and here on the edge of the sunny side communication was virtually non-existent. Through the snap, crackle, pop and hiss, I managed to decipher Martinelli's words.

"Think", he said, "have gone —enough—up here and get out as ——— as possible. This place ——— on my nerves ———."

"Me too," I said, and then repeated it a couple of times to make sure he got it. "Vance'll take the records—and then we'll blow."

"Good!".

Conversation was exhausting so we gave it up by mutual consent and watched the sound crew up ahead. They approached the edge gingerly and sent the equipment carriers ahead on their control lines. Electronic communication was hopeless up there. The track layers disappeared over the crest, guided by Vance and the four men of the crew crouched behind the rimrock with their recording instruments.

Time passed until Vance finally gave us the high sign and began to reel the tractors in. Two of the men, Tayler and O'Banion, packed up their equipment and moved back down the hill toward us while Vance and the fourth, a man named Stanley, his first *and* last name incidentally, brought the carriers back. The two recording techs were halfway down to us when the Merc-quake struck.

The ground beneath our feet shifted and rolled as we fought to keep our balance. The two techs were knocked off their feet and came rolling down the slope together with dust, rocks and boulders. The Mercurians following us scuttled back towards level ground, their antennae waving wildly. I had the odd impres-

sion that they were communicating with each other, that their intelligence was greater than we thought—and then the whole scene dissolved into a kaleidoscope of chaos. I had the confused impression of a hundred things happening at once, that a giant rift had appeared in the wall of the escarpment into which tumbled the doll-like figures of Vance M'bonga and Stanley followed by the child's-toy shapes of the track layers. I was frightened beyond any fear I had ever experienced in my life.

I wanted to run—I *was* running, stumbling, staggering, staying erect by some miracle, leaping across cracks crisscrossing the tortured crust, dodging giant boulders and fumaroles that leaped hell hot and hissing from the torn earth. I was helpless and alone—more so than I had ever been in my life. The awesome power of the quake stunned and confused me—and it was nearly a minute before my reason took control and shook my fight or flight mechanism into some sort of sanity. Shivering with reaction and adrenalin I turned to face the direction from which I had come.

Behind me was shambles!

The quake had distorted the whole area, and through the dust and steam, landing across the rise to the cleft in the escarpment the intolerable glow of Sol's corona cut with brilliant light. Our lifeboat was miraculously intact.

Vance and Stanley were gone, but sprawled grotesquely on the torn and steaming rock were the two green-suited bodies of the sound crew, and bending over them was the yellow-suited figure of Martinelli.

"Hang on!" I yapped into my communicator. "I'm coming."

"Hurry!" Martinelli's voice came back over a roar of static. "Tayler's in bad shape!"

I CAME back almost as swiftly as I left. Tayler was still breathing, but he didn't look too good. A two-inch gash was ripped through the belly of his suit and there was red blood visible on the green armor. Martinelli was futiley trying to hold the gap closed with his armored hands and making a poor job of it. I tore open my emergency kit, pushed him aside, slapped a wet patch on the tear, turned Tayler's oxygen to full, flushed the suit, and turned to O'Banion. He was apparently all right—paralyzed with fear but otherwise unharmed. Martinelli was supporting him with one arm while the other cradled two flat canisters of sound tape that he had picked up from beside the men.

"You get it all on tape?" he asked as he shook O'Banion's shoulder. He wasn't gentle about

it but he produced results. The man's eyes focussed.

"Not the earthquake," he said.

"Merc-quake," I corrected absently as I arranged his companion to a more comfortable position. Tayler was breathing easier now but his face was contorted with pain. Mercury's corrosive atmosphere had cooked a large patch of his chest and shoulder, and he was suffering the indescribable agony of first degree burns.

"I don't give a damn about the earthquake," Martinelli snapped. "Did you get those sounds of Mercury's boiling surface?"

O'Banion nodded. "They're in those cans," he said indicating the two canisters Martinelli held. "Vance sent us back with them. Said he thought they'd be safer —say—where is Vance?—and Stanley?"

"Gone," Martinelli said. "They fell into that crack in the escarpment." He gestured upward at the lance of light flashing through the torn rimrock.

"Oh God!—poor Vance."

"We'll have to get out of here," I said to Martinelli. "I'll carry Tayler and you take care of O'Banion."

"Why?" Martinelli asked.

"Because he needs help," I said. "And because I said so."

Olaf Martinelli looked at me with something like contempt in his brown eyes. "I don't need you to give me orders. After that fancy bit of running—"

"Sure—I was scared." I said. "I panicked—and I'm ashamed of it—but I'm still captain."

"Very well—captain." He made the title sound like obscenity.

I winced. It did me no good to reflect that I had come back. I shouldn't have run in the first place. A captain should never run —but the quake had done something to me that I hadn't realized was possible. It had made me afraid. All I wanted now was to get back into the familiar surroundings of the "Queen" and nurse my injured psyche.

But there was something else to do first. "You two get going," I said to Martinelli and O'Banion. "I'll be along later."

"Where are you going?"

"Up there." I gestured at the rimrock. "Mercury's gravity is lighter than Earth's. The fall may not have killed Vance and Stanley."

"What about Tayler? I can't carry him," Martinelli said.

"You won't have to. On second thought he may be safer here. Get back to the boat and try to contact the "Queen". Have them send out a rescue party."

"But you're the only one who can pilot the lifeboat."

"Who said anything about piloting the boat," I snapped. "You can work the communicator as well as I can."

"But we don't dare stay here."

"We can dare anything until I find out whether Vance and Stanley are alive or not." I turned my back on the protesting Martinelli and moved up the slope toward the crack in the rimrock.

There is no point in recounting the difficulty of the climb, or the difficulty of the descent into the crack. I did it somehow and found the mangled body of Stanley quickly enough—but Vance was nowhere in sight. With frantic speed I checked the shattered rock, looking for something—anything — that would give me an indication of Vance's fate. I was about ready to give up when I saw a tiny spot of fluorescent orange gleaming from beneath a pile of rocks and debris. I clawed the covering away—and found Vance alive but unconscious. A rock had smashed his air intake, and in a few more moments he would be dead. I ripped my hoses loose and forced them into the helmet nozzle and gave him a stiff jolt of oxygen. Working as rapidly as I dared, I bent the crumpled intake back into an approximation of normal, connected his airlines and dug him out of the debris.

He was horribly battered, but he would continue to live if he were gotten to medical attention quickly. Gently I lifted him, my big space-trained muscles easily supporting him under Mercury's low gravity, and picked my way back to where I had left Tayler. He was still there, but so was the "Queen's" second lifeboat. I was never so happy to see anyone as I was to see Egon Bernstein, and judging from the grin on his ugly face the feeling was mutual.

"Bernie," I said, "thank God you came!"

"Do you think I'd trust anyone else?" he replied.

I didn't say anything for a moment. Just stood and enjoyed the feeling of mutual trust and friendship that flowed between us. We'd been bucketing around the Solar System together for quite a few years and words weren't necessary.

"Get those two to the Mercury Station hospital," I said. "I'll take Martinelli back to the ship."

"How about Stanley?"

I shook my head. "He isn't very pretty. We can take care of him later."

Bernie nodded. "Well—there's worse places to die than on Mercury." He didn't say where and frankly I doubted if he knew a worse place, but he was a perennial optimist.

WE BLASTED off without Vance and Tayler. They would recover—modern medicine being what it was—but it would be weeks before either of them was fit to travel. We went back

for Stanley, but the Mercurians had been there first—and I learned why they followed us around. Sooner or later, they hoped, I suppose, that something would happen to us. You see, they saw something in us that was important. Our skeletons were virtual treasure troves of calcium and phosphorous. And so they had *salvaged* Stanley. There was nothing left of him but meat. Every bone had been dissected from his body by the sharp chelae of the natives. The stories were right. Mercurians weren't carnivorous, but like all organic life, they needed minerals—particularly light minerals, and these weren't too common on the sunworld. We buried what was left of Stanley and erected a stone cairn over the spot.

Venus City was the same as ever—a dome town anchored near the north polar cap of the cloudy planet. Looking around me at the steaming swampland environment, I wondered how the old-time planetographers had ever come to the conclusion that Venus was lifeless. The formaldehyde and carbon dioxide in the upper atmosphere probably fooled them as did the thermal layer a hundred kilometers up. But the ground level was just about like the old-time writers had predicted, hot, humid, and swampy. Venus was going through another Carboniferous period. Plants and animals of huge size covered the surface everywhere except the equator where it was too hot even for their adaptability. On Venus a high degree of specialization and relatively quick geologic changes probably explained why there was no intelligent life. The eras, periods, and epochs followed swiftly upon each other's heels and the geologic climatic and environmental changes were incredibly brief when compared to the other habitable worlds of the solar system. An epoch lasting scarcely a million years is insufficient time in which to develop intelligence, particularly when a million years on Venus were only two-thirds as long in duration as a similar period on Earth.

But there was life—plenty of it—and the biggest, deadliest and most indestructible form was the swampsucker. Imagine, if you can, a hundred meter length of suction hose, two meters in diameter, armored with ten centimeter thick chitin plates, and possessing a rudimentary intelligence and highly developed sense organs that can detect disturbances in water pressure up to a half kilometer away. Now endow that hose with a voracious appetite and a digestive system that can handle anything from leaves to animal protein and you have the swamp-

sucker. Its toothless maw, fully a meter and a half in diameter, is ringed with hairlike stinging cells whose long processes, tipped with barbs containing a potent cytotoxin can reach out a full ten meters in any direction. Behind the mouth are two large collapsible muscular sacs set along the gullet. These can be dilated with extreme rapidity causing a vollent suction that engulfs any prey paralyzed by the stinging cells. Food and water are forced down the gullet and the excess water removed through a sievelike valve in the stomach. The food remains to be digested, absorbed and excreted through the long gut filling most of the posterior two-thirds of the animal. The nervous system consists of a series of ganglia connected by a doral nerve trunk. Each ganglion supports a number of sense organs roughly comparable to eyes and ears—and pressure receptors like those along the sides of earthly fishes. It is a formidable beast, that like the fabled Choggemugger, doesn't die all at once, and until men came to Venus was the undisputed lord and master of the entire planet. It isn't now. It had met a smarter, more voracious, more greedy life form and was rapidly being exterminated. If it only had brains it might have held its world, but ganglia are no match for a functioning cerebrum—and Venus was rapidly becoming man's world.

TO FIND a swampsucker and record its voice would take a full-fledged expedition, since the giant wormlike creatures had been driven from the polar and temperate regions to a thin strip of the subtropics girdling the planet where the temperature was too high for humans. Venerean life existed there in relative comfort, but even air conditioning and insulation couldn't make it comfortable for man.

It would require an expedition which Martinelli reluctantly agreed to finance. It took a considerable amount of his share of the industrial diamonds to procure the necessary swampcats, men, and materiel. And since Venerean colonists are by nature dilatory and haggling, it took considerably more time. I didn't like this latter aspect since we had little better than two months to complete the contract and return to Earth, and time was running short. So I spent some of my own share of the bort to speed things along. At that, it took better than a week to accumulate the necessary gear—a task that could have been done on Earth or Mars in less than a day.

For some reason, Martinelli had become morose and unapproachable. He kept to himself

and discouraged conversation and company. At best he hadn't been too gregarious. After nearly nine months in the close confinement of a spaceship, men normally get to know each other pretty well, but none of us really knew Martinelli. He was an island to himself, a closed system that none of us could enter. Not even I, who was closer to him than any other man on the "Queen" could figure out precisely what made him operate. Lately he had taken to chumming with Bellini, the survivor of the two "experts" he had brought aboard, and pointedly ignored me.

I suppose I had it coming after that exhibition on Mercury—but why he should choose Bellini as a companion was beyond me. The fellow knew his way around Venus all right, but from an intellectual point of view he simply wasn't. He was a cultural cipher, his conversation limited to women and occasional monosyllabic grunts. The crew had milked him dry in less than four months, and while they tolerated him, they didn't exactly encourage his company. Possibly, I speculated wryly, it was a case of two misogynists getting together.

We set out in two swampcats —combination boats and track layers twenty meters long, armored and gunned heavily enough to discourage even the most ferocious life on this ferocious planet. A Venerean colonist named Riley, a big red bearded brute of a man, commanded one boat, and Bellini had charge of the other. And for the first time Martinelli didn't come with me. He went with Riley and I with Bellini. We kept to the waterways, watching the dank yellowish green vegetation slip by, and listening to the pounding rain that clattered intermittently on our metal roof and the peaceful hum of the nuclear engine in its safety well amidships.

Five days found us well in the subtropic zone and the temperature was rapidly becoming uncomfortable. We pushed on more slowly—separated about two miles apart, twisting our way through the tortuous waterways, looking for swampsuckers. We saw one on the second day of our search, a young male, scarcely twenty meters long. The little fellow had guts if not good sense for he came at us with every intent of swallowing us, paused as he sensed that our size was somewhat larger than his own, and vanished in a pall of greasy black smoke as Bellini incinerated him with the semi-portable in the turret on the roof.

"They grow up," Bellini said coldly as he safetied the guns.

WE KEPT in close radio contact since we couldn't see

each other, and continued to head southward. The ambient temperature rose steadily. Our Kallik feather insulation was set nearly at full negative. It kept the temperature bearable, but even so, it was miserable since the feathers did nothing about the humidity. Only Bellini seemed to be able to keep control of his temper. The remaining three of us, myself, Ward O'Banion—the Solar Union man—and Karl Albertini our native engineer, snapped and snarled at each other as the misty silence chewed at our nerves.

"We're getting into the area where the big ones hang out," Bellini said as our swamp cat churned slowly through a weed-choked waterway. "They don't come into these shallows—can't push their weight through them—which is why we have the weeds. They need enough water to support them. But when we reach a clear channel—look out. There'll be one in the area."

We went forward slowly, partially on our tracks and partly on propellors, leaving a broad trail of dirty gray mud and torn vegetation behind us. The sunlight, filtered and diffused by the hazy atmosphere and the impenetrable cloud blanket overhead, turned the whole area into a misty nightmare where one direction was the same as another. A man outside would have no chance of finding his way back to Venus City. Even if he managed to avoid the deadly life in the swamps, the heat and humidity would quickly boil the life from him. It takes a trip to Equatorial Venus for one to realize how dependent man is on temperature and humidity. Our protective mechanisms of sweat glands and evaporation would be no help at all in this enormous steam bath.

I looked at the outside temperature indicator. A hundred and fifty—nearly at the boiling point of water on Venus. Farther south the water did boil—contributing clouds of steam to the hothouse effect that made Venus habitable only at the Polar regions. Men were at work terraforming Venus. They had been at work for nearly two hundred years, but their labors had shown precious small result. The scientists figured that perhaps another century would see the breakpoint, when the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere was reduced to the point where the hothouse cycle could be broken. Earth plants, bred for Venerean conditions were doing their bit to absorb the excess gas in the air, and were doing it well—but the effects weren't apparent yet—nor would they be until the critical point was reached. The rains would come then. Enormous rains like those

once seen on Earth in the days of her youth. And there would likely be floods—enormous floods that would put the stories of Noah's Ark to shame. And when it was all over, Venus would have a climate approximating that of Earth, and on the island continents rising above the shallow seas, Earthmen could live in relative comfort and build a new future. But that was centuries away and now men clung here rather than stood, and existed rather than lived.

I didn't like Venus. I hated its heat, its heavy oxygen-starved air, its swamps and insensately ferocious life. I would be happy when this trip was over and we were again in the clean blackness of space with the stars gleaming in unwinking splendor about us and the sun dazzling with its prominences and corona. And I would be more happy back on Earth with this Odyssey completed and Martinelli's fee in my pocket. A year was a long time to be on the flit, and like all sailors from time immemorial I would be glad to see the home port again.

Our vehicle tipped forward into a broad scoured channel of black water.

"Here's a lair," Bellini said. "Check the ports and see if we're buttoned up. A sucker can get his stingers through an open port as easily as you can walk through a door. Check the ventilator screens, and see that every hole and opening is sealed."

I spread the word and the two crewmen and I checked the craft and satisfied ourselves that she was as tight as a spacer.

"All secure," I reported.

"Good!" Bellini said. "I'll start the oscillator now."

"Eh?"

"It's just an ordinary oscillator," Bellini explained. "The vibrating diaphragm is under water. We found out that it's the best gadget to attract them when we cleaned out the temperate zones." He flipped a switch and slowly turned the knob of the rheostat back and forth, listening intently as he did so.

I HEARD it almost as soon as he did. Or rather, I felt it. You don't hear most of the sounds an adult sucker makes. You feel them. They start in the subsonic range and rise to a ululating shriek that practically lifts the top off your head. O'Banion snapped on his recording apparatus and bent over his dials, fiddling with them for a moment until he got the mix right. He pushed back his headset and looked at me.

"Weird, isn't it?" he asked.

"It gets you," I admitted. And frankly I was understating. Subsonics depress me. Some people are terrified by them. Others be-

come morbid, and still others can be shocked into unconsciousness. There are a whole range of responses that can be triggered by low frequency sound. Personally, I don't like them.

"Cut the engines," Bellini ordered. "Quiet. Don't move. Don't make a sound. There's two of them out there."

The whole vehicle was vibrating as two fat smooth waves came toward us from each end of the weedless channel. We crouched near the portholes watching the waves approach. From each of them came crimson glints as the dull light struck the upper edges of the giant mouth orifices.

"If those two are males," Bellini whispered, "you'll see something that you can tell your grandchildren. If one of them is a female, you'll see something you can't tell anyone." He chuckled, the sound a harsh whisper in the damp stillness that surrounded us.

Sweat broke out on my face as the two waves rushed together—and the water exploded!

A giant geyser erupted beside the boat and from the center of the boiling foam we could catch glimpses of the gargantuan snakelike armored bodies writhing and twisting beside us.

"Males!" Bellini said in a tone of satisfaction as the water boiled and heaved. An armored body crashed against the side of our vehicle, hurling us sideways through the water. The shock knocked me from my feet and as I scrambled to get up I saw Bellini slide into the gunner's seat and grasp the controls of the semi-portable in the turret on the roof.

"Don't!" I yelled, but Bellini was past hearing. His heavy features were convulsed with hate as he twisted the twin blasters to bear on the boiling water beside us. And the guns added their din to the roaring and bellowing outside.

Gouts of black smoke leaped from the nearest body mixed with puffs of steam as the bolts struck and incinerated whole sections of the monster. It was dead at the first blast, but its decentralized rudimentary nervous system didn't realize the fact. But it did realize we were present from the vibrations of our guns. A score of filaments leaped from the water and snapped around the turret as the severed mouth parts of the monster attempted to seize and paralyze the half inch armor plate of the turret.

Bellini twisted the gun controls, his face a mixture of rage and fear. Overloaded servos whined and a thin curl of smoke came from beneath the seat, and then the safety relays clicked as the overload became too great.

In that instant we were disarmed.

I LOOKED outside at the thick bundle of filaments and the ghastly nacreous pink of the two meter wide, roughly circular mouth orifice hanging from our topside, and as I watched the filaments tightened convulsively as the front end of the monster died.

"Where's the other one?" I snapped at Bellini.

He looked past me. He hadn't heard a word I'd said. His eyes were fixed on the mass of protoplasm hanging from our topside. We were listing dangerously, our upper deck perilously near the muddy water as the weight of the front parts of the sucker dragged us down.

"Bellini!" I shouted, putting every ounce of authority I possessed into my voice.

He looked at me, his glazed eyes focussing slowly. "Yeah—what's the matter?" he said thickly. "What's going on?"

"You damned fool!" I raved. "What in hell were you trying to do—kill us? Where's the other sucker?"

"What other sucker?" His voice was thick with shock.

"The one you weren't shooting at—" I stopped. He wasn't getting it. Something had snapped inside his mind. For the moment, at least, he was merely an automaton. I clambered painfully to my feet. O'Banion was lying on the deck, bleeding from a gash over his temple. He was out cold. I looked down the engine room well. Albertini was sitting on the deck next to the reactor, his leg twisted oddly beneath him.

"You all right?" I asked.

"I think it's broken," Albertini said, gesturing at his leg. "I fell down the hatch when the sucker hit us. What happened up there?"

"Bellini blasted one of the suckers," I said. "Its front parts are wrapped around the turret. Bellini's in shock. O'Banion's knocked cold, and we're damn near capsized."

"That's no news," the engineer said, gesturing at the slanted deck beneath him. Point is—what are you going to do about it. We can't travel like this."

"First, maybe I'd better set your leg."

"That can wait. We'd better get straightened up and get out of here. Without guns we haven't a chance. You'll have to free that turret."

"Me and who else?" I asked "I'm not going out there alone."

"Me," a voice said above me. I looked up. Bellini was standing in the hatchway. "I got us into this, and I'll get us out." His leathery face wore its usual normal stupid expression and his eyes were clear.

"What happened to the other sucker?" I asked.

"It's busy. It won't bother us. It's eating the one I killed. Oughta keep it busy for days." He grimaced. "Guess I sorta made a fool of myself up there; but I hate those critters. One of them ate my brother."

"Oh," I said. Actually there wasn't anything more to say. "Well—what do we do about the piece that's hanging on us?"

"We cut it off. Careful. Those stingers are still loaded. They'll stiffen anyone who touches them."

"What'll they do to a man?"

"I don't know. Nobody that's had anything to do with them ever came back to tell about it."

"Oh fine," I said. "You do the cutting. I'll hold."

He grinned at me. "We'll both cut," he said. "You may be skipper on the 'Queen', but you're crew here. This is my show."

I had to admit that he was right. We went back topside and I checked O'Banion. He was all right, but still dazed. In an hour or so he'd probably be as good as ever except for a headache.

WE TOOK brush axes, big broad-bladed things with razor edges, made for hacking through the tough rubbery growth on Venus' surface, and cautiously made our way out the after hatch to the slanting deck.

Filaments were everywhere, tipped with rows of fat, spindle-shaped excrescences armed with needle-like prongs.

"Stay away from those," Bellini said. "Chop 'em loose and rake 'em overboard. Once we get rid of those stingers we can start on the rest of the mess. He looked over the side at the gaping, corrugated, six-foot funnel of rubbery flesh. Dead, it was gray. Its nacreous red color had vanished but it was, if possible, even more horrible than it had been alive. I looked down at the fringe of wrist-thick cilia surrounding its outer rim and shivered.

We worked slowly and carefully, cutting our way through the mass of interlacing filaments covering the deck, working slowly forward to the dense meshwork of pallid strands that virtually hid the turret.

"God! What a beast!" I muttered as my axe sliced through the rubbery flesh.

"You don't know the half of it," Bellini panted beside me as his axe sliced through two thick filaments. The gaping mouth below us sagged a little and the swampcat rolled sluggishly in the water. "Another four or five and I think we'll be able to clear the turret." He drove his axe into the nearest fiber.

"Yeah—looks like we're going to make it all right," I said.

"You never can tell—we just might be attracting another with all the noise we're making," Bellini said.

Involuntarily I turned to look up the waterway behind me, and the head of Bellini's axe whizzed through the spot where I'd been.

"What's the big idea?" I yelped.

"The idea is that Mr. Martinelli told me to get you out of the way," Bellini grunted. "And since you're no use to me now—" he swung the axe again.

I stumbled backward as the curved razor-edge split the air in front of me. I was numbed. I had expected almost anything except this. But the next time Bellini drew his axe back for a swing I was ready for him. I jabbed with the axe head, catching him in the chest. His feet slipped on the slimy deck and he slid backward into the nest of filaments still covering the turret. He screamed once as the stinging cells bit into his flesh and struck the deck as stiffly rigid as though someone had short-circuited his nervous system.

I felt for his pulse. His heart was still beating, so I dragged him back to the after deck. I felt like pushing him over the side, but there would be no profit in that. After all, he was the one who knew the way out of this swamp. I was no surface navigator.

Quickly I cut the remaining strands and dragged Bellini inside. Hardly had I fastened the hatch when the water boiled alongside us, and a great net of filaments shot out to enfold the severed end of the dead swamp-sucker as it floated low in the water. Bellini had been right after all. We had attracted another sucker.

Freed of the weight of the dead monster we drifted slowly toward shore, and once near an estuary that ran into the waterway, I started the engine and headed full speed into the shallow water. Behind us the main waterway boiled as a dozen filaments snapped out of the sullen surface to fall short by a good ten feet as we churned up the shallow waterway. The big suckers couldn't follow us up here, and I wasn't afraid of the little ones.

I spent the next hour getting the engineer's leg bandaged, and a plastiform compress on O'Banion's aching head. Bellini was still alive and still rigid in a tetanic convulsion that left his limbs locked in extension. There was nothing I could do for him, so I went outside and cautiously removed the remnants of the sucker that were still clinging to the deck and checked the turret. It moved easily. Once again we were ready for trouble.

Then I checked the ship. The engines were all right, but the jolt the sucker had given us had damaged our radio. It was dead, and so was our main power supply. That collision had done more than cripple our crew. It had shorted out the main power leads from the generator and our entire electronic complex was a mess. Our inertial navigator was out, our computer was dead, our radio direction finder was a hopeless mass of fused circuits.

"Think you can fix the electronics?" I asked O'Banion.

"I can try," he said grimly. "But I don't think so."

"Just what in hell happened to the relays?" I complained as I surveyed the wreckage.

"Someone wired across them," O'Banion said, as he pried into the breaker box. "Not a one of them had a chance to work."

"Why?" I demanded.

"This is Venus," Albertini said. "These gadgets are Earth-built and Earthers don't understand what we have up here. We work on hundred percent overload most of the time. We have to jump the relays. They turn our gear off when we need it most."

I didn't say anything but I thought plenty. Here we were, three thousand kilometers from base in a crippled ship, hopelessly lost, and without communication. We could travel, but we were in a bad way.

"Well—go ahead," I said. "Meanwhile we'll sit here. It seems safe enough and it's going to be nightfall before long. There's no use getting worse lost than we are already.

TOWARDS morning Bellini began to stir, and by early afternoon was capable of some movement. O'Banion, however, couldn't fix the radio or anything else.

"About half the transistors are burned out," O'Banion said. "That jolt broke the primary leads loose and dropped them across the main bus bars from the generator. The circuitry's ruined."

"Oh great! How do we do without it?"

O'Banion shrugged. "Maybe we'd better ask Bellini. He should know how to get us out of here. Incidentally, what happened to him?"

"He slipped," I answered. "Slid into a couple of stingers."

"Hmm—sure made him stiff, didn't it?"

"It's lucky he wasn't killed. But I wish he'd come to. He's the only one of us with knowledge enough to get us out of here."

"Not the only one," Albertini interrupted. "I can do it too. It's easy."

"So?"

"Sure—all water on Venus flows from the poles toward the equator. Except for the polar mountains in the northern and southern hemispheres, the whole land's damn near flat. Down in the equatorial regions the water's literally boiled off as steam and the water from the polar condensation flows into refill what's boiled off. So you just pick a big waterway with a visible current and work upward against it. Ultimately it'll get you north again, and once we hit civilization it'll be easy to make a call into Venus city."

"Sounds easy," I said. "What's the catch?"

"Swamp suckers. The big waterways are full of them this far south."

"And how do we beat that? We haven't enough size or power to blast our way through a wall of sucker meat. Not if they're as big as those last two."

"They're not—at least I don't think they are," Albertini said. "And we'll have to take the chance. Otherwise we can run around in circles until our fuel deteriorates—and then we're done."

"Not a pleasant thought," O'Banion commented.

Funny, I mused, how different environments produce different responses. On Mercury, O'Banion funked out worse than I did, but here, in a situation just as bad, he was as cool as ice. I wondered what made the difference.

BELLINI never really became conscious the entire four weeks it took us to claw our way northward against the opposition of swampsuckers and other noxious forms of Venerean life that were smaller but no less deadly. He had moments of lucidity but quickly relapsed into the partial coma that had held him since the tetanic rigidity had worn off. He couldn't move and we took turns massaging his flaccid body to keep the circulation going and to prevent decubital ulcers. From what I saw, I doubted if Ivan Bellini would ever again be a useful member of society.

And as the days passed I became increasingly anxious. After two weeks I became frantic, after three, resigned, and when the fourth week arrived I lost hope. My contract was violated. By no stretch of the imagination could the "Queen" make it back to Earth in time for me to fulfill it. Time was up in another two weeks, and Martinelli would enforce the penalty clause for nonconformance.

I'd been suckered. Everything pointed to it. Martinelli wanted a free trip and a chance to enforce the penalty clause in our contract. At one stroke he could avoid payment and stand to collect a sizeable penalty fee. Yet, somehow, I didn't believe Bellini's story that Martinelli wanted me dead. It was out of character. You can't collect from a dead man, and I knew that my contract had the proper escape clauses. In the event of my death the "Queen", if she survived, went to my family in Oregon. They'd sell her, of course, but Martinelli wouldn't be able to collect from my estate. Probably my crooked employer meant it literally when he told Bellini to get me out of the way and the dumb slob had interpreted him wrong.

No matter how it came out I was going to be taken. My passage money, the bort, and maybe the "Queen" herself would have to be sacrificed to satisfy Martinelli. As I thought it out a cold anger filled me. Martinelli might have me over a legal barrel, but I would have payment out of his hide if it took the rest of my life.

We ran into a swampland ranch about midway through the third day of the fourth week. The rancher, a leathery muscular character, superficially like Bellini, was glad to loan us a radio and a directional loop and give us directions how to reach Venus City. As quickly as I could I contacted the spaceport operator. "Get me Egon Bernstein, chief engineer of the 'Virgin Queen' in dock at Bay 18."

"Sorry," the operator said.

"Sorry, hell! This is Lundfors —I'm skipper of that can."

"That's impossible," the spaceport said.

"So it's impossible. I'm still Captain Lundfors!" I yelled.

"And I'm still sorry, but I'm afraid I can't help you. You see, the 'Queen' filed a flight plan for Earth over two weeks ago. By now, she should be half way there."

"Without me?"

"I assumed you were aboard, sir. At least the flight plan was filed in your name."

I sighed—so I was marooned. I wondered how Martinelli had accomplished that trick. It was easy to see what he planned. He'd loaf across the ecliptic and arrive a day or so late—which would be enough for the penalty, but not enough to hurt his plans. I wondered how he'd gotten the crew to back him up—probably told them I was dead and gave them some smooth story that they swallowed like sugar-coated cascara. If I had been angry before, I was furious now. Martinelli would pay for this—and he'd pay plenty.

TO MY surprise, I found an account listed in my name at the Spaceport finance office. It held slightly over ten thousand credits and a note from Bernstein:

Martinelli says you're dead. None of us believe it, but time is running out and the 'Queen' will have to be on Earth to finish her contract. Martinelli doesn't want to go—says it's your ship and until you're proven dead we have no right to take off. But I think he's trying to get out of the contract. So whether he wants to or not, he's coming aboard. He'll probably have plenty to say about what we're planning to do with him, so to keep the record straight and get us out of a bind with the law, here's your passage money on the next liner. With luck you should be waiting for us when we land. Sorry we can't wait, but you and I both know the ship comes first.

Bernie.

Good old Bernie! My thoughts jumped ahead. Without a licensed pilot aboard, Bernie wouldn't be able to land on Earth. Sure, he could call one up, but those things take time. It could be a couple of weeks before the "Queen" could get down if they arrived in a crowded period—and all periods were crowded on Earth. I had to get home quick.

I went down to the dispatcher's office. "Anything fast for Earth?" I asked.

"The 'Silver Streak'", he said. "One of IPC's plush jobs with a two-week flight time."

"Good. I'll take a passage."

"Sorry—she's full up. But you can sign up and hope there's a no-show."

I grimaced, signed, and placed five hundred credits on the line to guarantee my passage. The dispatcher turned to deposit the cash to my passage credit and I took a quick look at the "Streak's" passenger list. One name struck my eye—Bellini—Ivan Bellini! He must have reserved passage before we went after the swamp sucker. But he wouldn't be aboard. The sucker had seen to that. I was almost grateful to the beast.

TWO weeks later I was stretching my legs against the nearly forgotten gravity of Earth.

It didn't take me long to find that the "Queen" was still in orbit waiting for a pilot. She had three days left to fulfill her contract. It took me two of the three days to find a rocket jockey who'd take me upstairs and match orbits with the "Queen", and another half day to persuade my friends around the port to advance me enough money to pay him. But I managed it finally, and half an hour after the jockey got his greedy little hands on the money I was entering the "Queen's" emergency airlock.

Bernie met me on the inside. "Skipper!" he said. "You made it!"

"Naturally," I replied. "After what you did, do you think I'd let you down?" I looked at him with that special look that says so much without saying anything. The same look he had given me on Mercury. "But we're not safe yet," I added. "We have less than seven hours to get downstairs. Now get cracking. We have work to do."

"Yes sir," Bernie said with a grin that nearly split his face.

"Oh, wait a second," I said as he turned toward the companionway.

He paused, half turned in the hatchway.

"Where's Martinelli?"

"Locked in his cabin. Should I let him out?"

I grinned thinly. "No, leave that to me. I'd like to see him again."

Bernie chuckled grimly. I suppose what I was thinking showed pretty plainly on my face.

Since we had a dock reserved, and I had a pilot's ticket for Earth's atmosphere, we received our clearance in quick time and I laid the "Queen" in dock at precisely 2345.15 hours, nearly fifteen minutes before the deadline. The contract had been completed on schedule, and Martinelli would have to pay up. But first he was going to pay in another fashion.

I made my way down to his cabin, unlocked it and dragged him out. He looked at me with goggle eyed surprise. "Lundfors! How did you get here? You're supposed to be on Venus."

I grinned and shook my head. "You're on Earth," I corrected. "On time. Now pay up—two million one hundred thirty thousand five hundred and twenty seven credits."

"I haven't got it," he said. "I'm broke." He laughed a flat bark that was nervous rather than amused, and I suppose he had a right to be nervous, since there's nothing lower in my book than a contractee who can't pay his bills when they come due.

I poked him in the ribs with a thick forefinger. "What do you mean?—You weren't broke when we left."

"But I am now."

"You still have the symphony?"

He shrugged. "Of course, but what use is it? I can't produce it. Or don't you remember. Raposnikov's will gives it to me only if I can present it at the Decennial Celebration."

"So you produce the symphony."

"How?"

I shrugged. "I don't care how. You produce it, or I'll hang you up to dry. No court on Earth will deny my claim."

"He nodded. "Admitted," he said, "but you can't squeeze blood out of—"

"A turnip," I finished. I eyed him appraisingly. It was a strain not to knock his teeth down his throat, and he wasn't helping matters any. But I held back the temptation and tried to remain sweetly reasonable. Since I held all the cards there was no sense in weakening my hand with a case of assault and battery.

"Why did you do it?" I asked. "What's the idea of trying to break your contract?"

"I told you. I'm broke, busted, penniless. I have no money."

"You had plenty when we started this trip."

"That was a year ago."

"What happened to it?"

"It's gone," he said. He grinned at me. That did it. I hit him then, a good solid smash to the mouth that dropped him to the deck and made my knuckles tingle pleasantly. I'd wanted to do that for better than a month, and the feeling was good. But it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

He picked himself off the deck and wiped the blood from his lips. "I suppose I had that coming," he said reasonably.

"There's more," I said. "That's just the beginning. That was for conning me. There's Nalton, Anderson, T'shonke, and Stanley not to mention Vance M'bonga and Tayler. You have a lot more coming to you."

He shrugged. "I suppose so," he said dully. The defiance was drained out of him. "But before you beat me to a pulp, I want you to know I'm sorry. I had no

intention of killing or injuring anyone, and I had no intention of cheating you until I reached Venus. I did bribe Bellini to keep you out of the way until you defaulted on your contract, but that was only after I discovered that I was broke. I had radioed Earth for more funds and they told me that there wasn't any. I had to make a decision, and knowing how you feel about money, I thought that if I could make you default on your contract, you'd be forced to wait until I presented the symphony. I wasn't going to cheat you. I intended to pay you once I had sold the "Nine Worlds" copyright."

I laughed humorlessly. "I don't believe it," I said.

"That's your privelege. But you can believe this. Right now I'm not worth a cent. Without money to hire an orchestra I can do nothing. Unless I produce the music it's not mine, and if I use a public orchestra I will not receive more than a percentage of the copyright fees. So figure it out. If you want your money, you'll have to help me produce the symphony."

"I suppose you want me to give you a loan?" I asked sarcastically.

"Precisely. The diamonds you have will be plenty." He said this without batting an eyelash.

I COULDN'T help laughing. The sheer effrontery of the man was amusing. He was an artist all right. No one else would have the unmitigated gall to attempt to cheat a man and then try to borrow money from him. I shook my head. "Just what do you think I am?" I asked.

"Sensible, I hope," he said. "I also think you're a man who owes about two million credits to the spaceport authority."

"You're right there," I agreed.

"Then look at it reasonably. If you pay part of your debt with the money you have, you'll still be owing too much. You'll lose the "Queen" and with her your reason for existence. But if you take what you have left and back me you'll recoup everything."

I laughed at him.

"I'll give you a contract," Martinelli said desperately. "You can have all the profits if I can conduct the music."

"It wouldn't be legal," I said. "You could break a contract like that without half trying since it would obviously be given under duress. The money involved—"

"Money! Do you think I care about money? If you do you're an idiot!" Martinelli's voice was angry. "I can always get money. This means more to me than all the credits I can spend. I want the honor of conducting the

greatest music ever written on its first public performance. I want to be worthy of the faith Nicolai Ilarionovitch had in me. He was my friend. He respected my skill as I honored his genius. He left his music to me because he knew I would treat it properly. Money! Bah! I spit on it!"

So help me he was telling the truth! I was certain of it. Truth has a ring peculiarly its own. Martinelli wanted to conduct that symphony more than anything else in existence. He wanted it badly enough to commit murder for it. I didn't believe his story about Bellini now. He was perfectly capable of arranging my death if he thought it meant that he would be the man on the podium when Raposnikov's score was played. But somehow that didn't matter now.

For the first time I recognized what drove him. He wanted immortality. He had sacrificed everything for this chance and before he ever could grasp it, it was being snatched away. I felt sorry for him.

"I can't understand why it happened," Martinelli said bitterly. "I shouldn't have failed. That money should have doubled. I looked the properties over carefully. They were as nearly certainties as any productions I've ever seen. I can't imagine how they could have gone wrong."

"Do you mean to tell me that you speculated with money earmarked to pay an account?" I asked in a shocked voice.

"It was a legitimate investment."

"In what?"

"Two shows and a musical comedy. They were good."

I groaned. It took a mind like Martinelli's to figure that angelling shows was an investment. "They flopped, I suppose," I said.

He nodded.

"You're the idiot," I said bitterly.

"At any rate, I'm a poor businessman," he said. "Yet I wouldn't have invested if the cost of this trip had been less. Three or four hundred thousand would have made the difference. But since I didn't have it, I invested in the stage properties to make enough to cover your bill and the additional cost of producing the symphony." He looked at me and shrugged. "Now I can do neither."

It was my turn to feel bitter. I had been too greedy. We could have done the trip for less, but I was too interested in squeezing the last credit out of it. And so I'd lost it all. I shrugged. Actually I didn't have much choice about my future. Martinelli was the key to it. If he succeeded I prospered. If he failed I was finished. I had enough wealth to finance him but not enough to

pay the outstanding accounts, and this bill was too big to write off. There was only one thing to do—take Martinelli to a polygraph, and if he was telling the truth—well—I would like to hear the rest of the symphony with the sound effects we had collected. Men had died to get them, and they deserved something better than nameless graves. They deserved a monument, and Martinelli could give it to them.

"I'm a fool," I said. "I'm just about the biggest fool in the entire solar system, but if you're telling the truth I am going to finance you."

Martinelli looked at me incredulously, and behind him I had the odd impression that Raposnikov was standing there —smiling.

I'VE heard the "Nine Worlds Symphony" a good many times and in a good many places since its first appearence at the Decennial, but in my opinion there has never and will never be a rendition of it like the first. How do I know? Well—Martinelli and I have the only two tapes of that in existence and each time I play mine I hear something new. It's wonderful music. And it is complete compensation for the months of hell I went through to keep the "Queen" while Martinelli screamed, prodded, sneered, cajoled and bossed a hand picked orchestra and sound effects group into the greatest performance that will be heard in this or any other century.

THE END