

*It was a challenge Bill couldn't ignore. His mortal enemy had dared him to combat in that space more than five astronomical units from earth. Though he knew his weapons were far inferior, he knew, too, that Sparling had in his power the girl Bill loved.*

*Bill reached up and grabbed a fin of his ship. They had won!*

By LEW MERRILL

# SPACE BURIAL

BILL SPARLING, roused from his well-earned nap by the shout of Vulcan, his Martian aide, went forward to the wheel of the little Jonesing spaceship. Putting his eyes to the refracting optoscope, Bill could see a curious, elongated body some five hundred miles ahead.

He glanced at the dial of the Jonesite gravity tank. Plenty of gas to take him to Hungaria, the first of the outer planetoids. He thumbed the speed control, and saw the indicator drop to a thousand miles an hour—to five hundred—to a hundred and ten. That was as slow as he dared drive the old ark; anything under that would bring her within the gravitational field—not of Hungaria, but of menacing Jupiter. And many a better and stronger Jonesing ship had been wrecked by the terrific planet, dashed to destruction in the heart of its boiling mass.

The *Girl Unknown* was idling in space now. Bill watched the distant object, then looked at the gravitational equivalent dial. The needle was creeping up—that red thread whose approach to the black line meant danger. Once it crossed it, the anti-gravitational force would be less than

Jupiter's attraction. Bill increased his speed to a hundred and thirty, and the red line remained stationary, began to recede. The elongated body was coming plainly into view.

"Is a man!" shouted Vulcan. No Martian could use the explosive, tongue-to-palate sound of "t."

It was the body of a man. Bill watched in amazement as the *Girl Unknown* moved toward it. Then a cry broke from his lips. He recognized that face, with the shock of snow-white hair, the straggling white beard, even though the habitual black clothing had been stripped off and the corpse flung to destruction in its thermotex underwear.

It was the body of old Houghton, the missionary on the Hilda group of planetoids, beyond the gap that separated them from Eros and Hungaria. Everybody knew and loved Houghton. Even his enemies, of the nectarine trade, respected him, despite the fact that he was their bitter opponent in their nefarious business.

A last glance through the optoscope showed Bill the manner in which the old man had met his death. The top of the head had been crushed in by a ferocious blow.

Mechanically Bill's hand went to the grappler. The first cast hooked the body, and the mechanism drew it up through the void-locks inside the ship. Bill placed it on the long seat and looked at it, swallowing hard, thinking.

The body was not, of course, decomposed, in the absence of air and bacteria, though it was considerably desiccated, owing to the dissipation of the body fluids into space, so that it was becoming mummified. Probably Houghton had been dead about a week.

Bill's anxiety grew. If Houghton's enemies had got him, what about Ursula? When she was graduated from high school in New York she had insisted on rejoining her father at his headquarters on Hilda, where she had been born, and grew up. Bill, who had brought Houghton news of his daughter, and vice versa, on his periodical visits, had joined the chorus that urged the girl to remain on earth. In a few years, Houghton's service would end, and the Board would pension him. Life on the planetoid Hilda offered nothing, except the company of her father.

One of the marvels of astronomical research had been the discovery that the major planetoids retained an atmosphere. But there had been only vegetative life on them, until their settlement by political exiles, two hundred years before.

These had quickly slipped into a state of white savagery, existing on the ground-fruits that were plentiful on all the planetoids. They had been forgotten during the century of civil wars on Earth. And now they had come into prominence because of the illicit "nectarine" trade.

Because the population of Earth, now numbering no more than a million, had almost ceased to reproduce itself, owing to inbreeding, a score of governments welcomed the introduction of fresh blood in the shape of planetoid girls, through whom the race could be rejuvenated. These were sold at fabulous prices. And the central government at New York had strictly forbidden the traffic, on account of the abuses to which it gave rise.

Despite the presence of space-cruisers, the surreptitious traffic in human flesh continued. Houghton had devoted most of his energies to helping suppress it. Now they had got him. And Bill Sparling could guess who was at the back of the dastardly murder.

His fears for Ursula grew. For she was the "Unknown Girl" after whom he had named his ship. A lucky strike of Jonesite, and he would be in a position to ask her to marry him.

IN SPITE of the development of anti-gravitational fields, which made possible journeys to the planets, these had always had a considerable element of danger in them until the discovery of Jonesite. And that had been the scientific sensation of its decade.

Among the innumerable particles that filled all known space, certain ones had been discovered that remained more or less stationary, instead of rushing on an erratic course at the rate of thousands of miles a minute. These were hard gray pellets which, analyzed, proved to be of osmonium, the heaviest of the elements, one of the uranium group.



And, like uranium, osmonium was constantly giving forth a radioactive property that had the unique effect of neutralizing gravitation.

The most valuable of the elements, osmonium could not be discovered in sufficient quantities. Hence the vast fleets of Jonesing ships, plying among the planetoids, the staking out of claims, the violence and lawlessness among the crews, the rivalries and battles.

Hungaria, the outermost planetoid, was pretty well policed. But the Hilda group, at a distance of 3.9 astronomical units, was the hunting ground of the Jonesing ships, which were not averse from a little nectarining on the side. Past solitary Thule were the six of the Trojan group, at 5.2 units distance from Earth, and here even the space-cruisers did not ply.

For the six Trojans were too perilously close to the orbit of Jupiter when in aphelion.

Well, there was nothing to do but commit Houghton's body to its last repose. Bill wrapped a blanket about it, spoke the few words of the burial service that he could remember, went to the front, and took the wheel from Vulcan. A glance at the complicated direction chart above his head, a brief calculation, and he changed direction, set the speed control again. The ship leaped up to a thousand, two thousand, four thousand miles an hour.

"Huh! Ranger!" shouted Vulcan, shaking his wooly head. "Danger" was what Vulcan had meant to say. He pointed to the g.e. dial. The red thread was almost over the black needle.

"It's all right," said Bill. He stepped back and opened the void-locks. He took old Houghton's body in his arms and placed it in the cage. Soundlessly it slid into the void.

Bill changed direction for Hungaria. The red thread slipped back. He had driven the ship just close enough to the orbit of Jupiter to insure that Houghton's body would fall into the maw of the giant planet or join the ceaseless, innumerable procession of its satellites.

Space-burial! Well, it was a fitting end for the old missionary. But fear for Ursula, and black rage on account of her father's murder, tore at Bill's heart. He meant to pick up certain trails on Hungaria, principally that of Jeribald and his gang of Jonesites and nectariners.

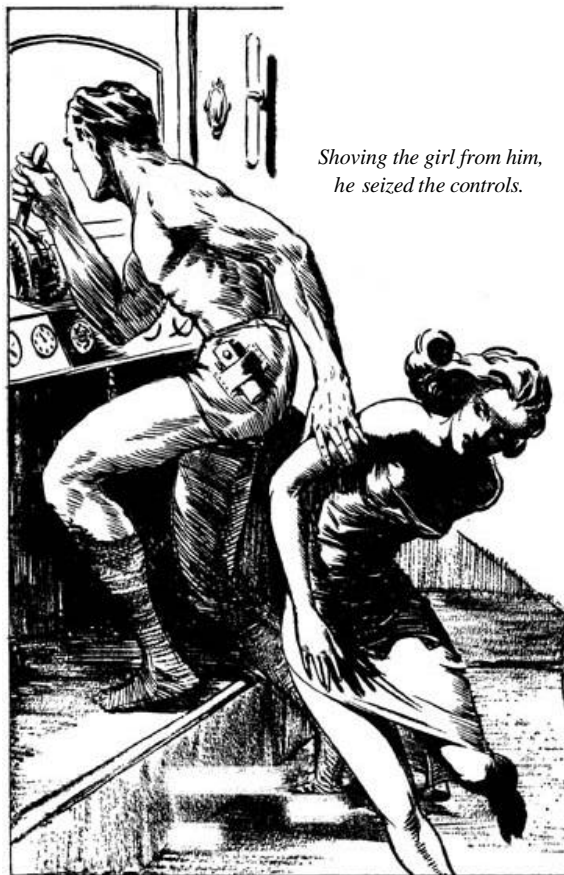
LI MOW'S was packed to overflowing, for Bill had arrived at the time of the semiannual sale of Jonesite. It was crammed with the Chinese buyers who almost monopolized the trade. Several score of Jonesite fishers, whose ships lay moored in the air-harbor, were staggering about the group of buildings that comprised the bar, letting themselves go in drunken frenzy, fighting, quarreling, or drinking at the bar, and displaying fistfuls of the precious chunks to prospective purchasers.

The atmosphere on all the planetoids that possessed an atmosphere corresponded to that on Earth—had, in fact, been captured from Earth's moon and from Mars, scientists thought, through some principle not yet completely elucidated. The main difference was that a visitor to Hungaria had to wear half-ton shoes—containing a nucleus of matter under dwarf-star condensation—to keep from covering a thousand yards at every stride, on account of the slight gravitational attraction.

Stamping up toward the building, Bill heard titters from windows. Girls in extreme *dishabille* were leaning out, gesturing to him. Girls of any

age from eighteen to thirty. Li Mow prided himself upon his *clientele*. Other space-houses might take the dregs and leavings of Earth, especially the "nectarines" who were trying to drift back to their planetoids—and seldom reached them. Li Mow was particular.

Earth, under her woman rulers, had taken all the joys out of life. Death for drinking, death for smoking, death for love outside the marital bond—which accounted for most of the bootleg love provided by the "nectarines." But even the captains of the space-cruisers winked at what went on upon Hungaria. You couldn't push human nature beyond a certain limit. Hungaria was the red-light district of the planetary system. It had to be, and the woman rulers had to wink at its existence too.



*Shoving the girl from him,  
he seized the controls.*

THERE fell a silence as Bill approached the long bar, and Bill read the confirmation of his worst fears in it. Jeribald was the most notorious nectariner among the planetoids. That wasn't Bill's business, but Jeribald and his men were suspected of having robbed and murdered one of Bill's friends.

A crude job. They had miscalculated their space-burial, so that the battered body had come floating down to the surface of Hungaria later. There was no

proof. But Bill and Jeribald had been at odds ever since. This silence made Bill's heart hammer slowly and heavily. He was thinking of Ursula, alone on Hilda.

"Hello!" Li Mow greeted him, pushing forward a glass and bottle. "Velly glad to see you, Bill. You start for Jonesite glounds?"

"Where's Mr. Houghton?" demanded Bill abruptly. The old man used to hold a missionary meeting about the time of each sale; his old ship, scraped and battered by swarms of aerolites, between Hungaria and Hilda, was a space-mark.

"Not come yet," said Li Mow.

Bill looked about him, and saw that everybody present knew what had happened to Houghton, even the little dusky Martians, scurrying about with glasses.

"All ships not yet come, Li Mow continued. "Jellibald ship not yet come. You bling Jonesite? You want to sell?"

"No, I've been on Earth the past season," said Bill. His mother was sick, had urged him to remain, but Bill wanted one more trip to a field he had discovered, where the Jonesite pellets were thick. Then he believed he could persuade Ursula to leave her father and try luck with him.

"I'll have plenty Jonesite for you when I come back," he said.

"Plices go down. You better hully," said Li Mow, and everybody laughed. "Jellibald find a new field, plenty Jonesite there. He no care if plice goes down. Beyond Hilda group, near Thule."

Now Bill understood, from the grinning faces about him. That was no doubt the field he had himself discovered. He had staked it out with flags and Jonesite beacons, a quadrangle in space fifty thousand square miles in extent that no tug of gravity could affect. Within that space, by law, all Jonesite pellets were his.

But Jeribald wasn't likely to respect his claim. Jeribald had Tuck, Garrou, and Blacky, the Martian, with him, three outstanding ruffians, and his ship carried a three-millimeter neutron gun, in flat defiance of the law against the arming of spaceships. She could smash anything except a space-cruiser.

HOT rage burned in Bill as he turned away, conscious of the covert sneers of everybody in Li Mow's. Out among the Hilda planetoids, where it was every man for himself, the will of the strongest man was law. Poor Danny Briggs had disputed that law, and his battered body, gravitating to Hungaria, had attested to it. Bill had been waiting to catch Jeribald ever since.

He let his hand close over his neutron pistol. The feel of it under his pultex gave him courage. He moved up the street toward the harbor, over which the lit boats moved like fireflies as they scurried between the small wharf and the ships at anchor. Again he heard the tittering of the girls at the windows. Then his name called:

"Bill! Bill Sparling!"

The girls knew him, of course, and always mocked him, because he would have nothing to do with them. But the sound of his name made him turn. He saw a woman's face hazily outlined under her robe in the light of the little solar lamp behind her.

"Come here, and I'll tell you what you want to know."

"What do I want to know?" Bill parried. But then he recognized the girl. Her name was Astra, and she had been nectarined to Earth in childhood. Jeribald had got possession of her, and brought her to Hungaria, used her as his intermediary in many shady transactions that concerned Jonesite. Also in matters political, since Hungaria was one of the military bastions of Earth. Whoever ruled Hungaria, was master of Earth, the proverb ran. Hence the presence of the space-cruisers, which were not among the planetoids solely to preserve order among the Jonesites.

The girl disappeared. A handle clicked, a door slid back. The little solar light within shed a shaded glow over the room, with its sumptuous furniture. A rich, hand-woven rug covered the floor, a thinner one the divan, which was piled with pillows.

"I never thought that I should see you here, Bill Sparling," said Astra.

"Nor I you," answered Bill. "I thought that Jeribald always took you along with him on his trips to the Jonesite fields."

INSTEAD of answering, she flung back the silken robe that covered her. Beneath it was a short, gossamer-thin garment, spun of spider-silk, and flashing with all the colors of the spectrum as the solar light caught its shimmering folds. It fell from bosom to knee, but hid nothing of Astra's beauty. From the curve of the shapely shoulders, from the perfection of her small, firm breasts, to the tapering waist and the curving thighs ran streaks of opalescent flame.

Astra shook her head, and her heavy, red-gold hair tumbled in a cascade down her back. She extended two arms of alabaster, put her hands on Bill's shoulders.

"You've been so blind, Bill. I've loved you so long, and Jeribald kept me close when he had me in his ship."

She drew closer to him, and the perfume of her made Bill giddy; the warmth of her made his heart beat fast as her arms circled his neck.

"I've seen you often and I've always loved you, Bill. Jeribald guessed it. That's one of the reasons why he hates you. Kiss me, Bill, and I'll tell you what you want to know."

Her lips met his with crushing pressure, and the roundness of her breasts became a broken bar against his chest. Astra hadn't been a nectarine for nothing; she had been taught the arts of love in the infamous school on Hilda, against which poor old Houghton had fought so vainly.

Against such arts, Bill had as much chance as a kitten in the grip of a terrier. His head swam, and, grasping Astra in his arms, he swayed heavily toward the divan.

Astra's spider-silk underwear seemed to melt into her body, which became a rippling, iridescent glow. Streaks of that opal fire traversed it as it strained itself against Bill in undulations that shot fire through all his arteries.

Then slowly the thought of Ursula came back to Bill, and whips of shame scourged him. He groaned, and heard Astra's tinkling laughter.

"Take me with you, Bill, and I will show you where she is," she said.

"Has Jeribald got her?"

"He said he was going to seize her and take her to his hideout in the Trojans."

"The Trojans? He can't venture there."

"His hideout is on Nestor. He has enough Jonesite to keep his ship from being drawn into Jupiter's orbit. But we may find him on the field you staked out near Hilda. He is seizing all the Jonesite there. You take me, and I'll show you."

"I—can't—take you."

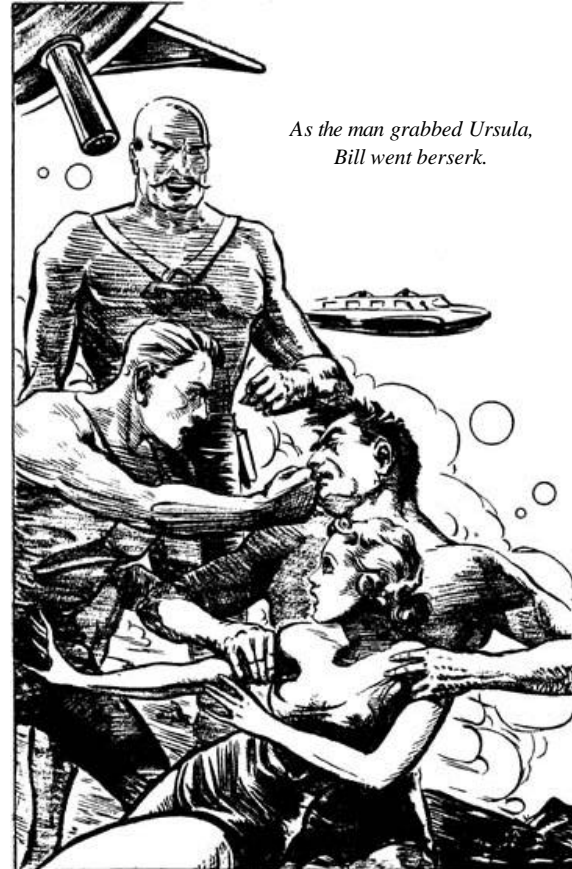
"I am going to show Jeribald I don't care, because I have you now. If you don't take me, I won't show you his hideout on Nestor. I know just where it is; he has described it many times."

THERE wasn't any arguing with Astra, and it was no use telling her that he loved Ursula. The minds of the nectarines didn't look forward to the future in the way of Earth-minds. Astra meant to accompany Bill on his journey, and that was the end of it.

Taking a boat back to the *Girl Unknown* with Astra, Bill found Vulcan engaged in checking the fuelling of Jonesite gas from the supply tender. The brief darkness had already given place to the subdued daylight on Hungaria. The sun, one-third the size that it appeared from Earth, was traversing the heavens in its swift course. Bill relieved Astra and himself of their half-ton shoes, and found

another pultex suit for her, a perfect non-conductor of temperature, alike on the air-encircled asteroids and in airless space. He laid it out beside her, and set out a meal of Earth-baked bread and some tinned stuff.

He had set a course direct for Hilda. The *Girl Unknown* could outspeed Jeribald's more powerful but clumsier ship. If Jeribald was on the claim that he had staked out, Bill meant to anchor behind the rocks of Hilda and try to capture the larger boat by surprise. He didn't dare let his mind dwell on Ursula. He resigned himself to the long hours of waiting.



*As the man grabbed Ursula,  
Bill went berserk.*

Astra snuggled up beside him. She had put off her robe in the hot compartment, and she was a nectarine girl, for whom life meant love. In the circle of her arms, and dazed by the shimmering undergarment, Bill was lost again.

Hours passed. Day and night followed each other at brief intervals. Sometimes Astra whispered to Bill of a life on Earth, after she had avenged herself on Jeribald for the trick he had played her. Sometimes Bill lay, sunk in exhaustive, gloomily anticipating the future, until Astra's white arms involved his senses again. He hated her in the intermissions of her embraces, and he couldn't see how he could manage to free himself from her.

Out of the lethargy that held him, Bill was aroused by a shout from Vulcan, who, like all Martians, slept only at intervals of two Earth-weeks, and had been sitting tirelessly at the controls.

"Hilda, Mas'er! Hilda!" he called, raising his black face with the earnest, dog-like eyes, and wagging his stumpy tail.

Through the optoscope Bill could see the onrushing mass of the irregularly shaped planetoid. Hastily he scanned the heavens as they shot forward. There was no sign of Jeribald's space-ship.

"Anchor off the Mission!" Bill ordered the Martian.

CLAD in their pultex, and wearing their heavy boots, Bill and Astra disembarked on the rocky shore. The sight of the Mission appalled Bill. That was Jeribald's work all right. The pirate hadn't been content to kidnap and kill old Houghton; he had blasted the buildings of heavy stone to pieces with his neutron gun. On Earth such enormous masses heavier than the stones of the Pyramids, could hardly have been lifted save by hydraulic power, but on Hilda it had been a simple matter for Houghton to construct the Mission with his own hands.

The whole building was blasted to pieces, except for one corner, where, from beneath a crazily sagging roof, a dozen girls came trooping forward.

Wild girls, the descendants of the original exiles, nude save for the gossamer wisps of spider-web about their waists, for Hilda was hot during its brief day, and in winter the denizens retreated into the underground caves that were a feature of the asteroid. All young, all exquisitely molded, running forward to Bill with little cries of delight.

Their white bodies swayed, their small breasts oscillated as they clung to him, while Astra stood by in scowling silence.

"Where's Ursula?" Bill demanded. "The girl who lived here with the old man. Where is she?"

"*Ka pesna hu ka sorkha*," answered a big brunette, with a languishing look.

"She asks you to take them all away to Earth," Astra interpreted.

"Ask her where the girl is—Houghton's daughter."

There was a voluble interchange. "She says Jeribald took her away fifteen days ago, and he is coming back to take them all to Earth. She says they love you and want you to take them instead."

Fifteen days! But that meant fewer than two Earth-days. Bill grasped the girl again. "Where's Jeribald?" he shouted.

"She says," interpreted Astra, after another interchange, "that you will find out if you go to your Jonesite ground."

BILL hurled the *Girl Unknown* through space. The meteors thick about the Hilda group, battered her sides, gray chunks of Jonesite, aggregating a substantial sum in value, crashed against her duralloy sheathing. Bill had taken the controls; Astra was curled up in the rear compartment; Vulcan, his time for sleep not yet arrived, watched his master with adoring eyes. Bill hurled the vessel forward until her engine quivered, and the sound of the mechanism, inaudible without, crackled and roared as it echoed through the hollow of the shell.

He was nearing his claim now, and constantly he gazed through the optoscope, looking for Jeribald's ship.

It had grown dark, and that darkness seemed Bill's one hope. If he could creep up unobserved, and dodge the deadly neutron gun, he might grapple Jeribald's ship and board her, fight it out, he and Vulcan against Jeribald, Tuck, Garrou, and Blacky. A desperate chance, but not more desperate than leaving Ursula in the power of the man.

Still there was no sign of Jeribald's ship. But something loomed up at about a hundred miles' distance. It was one of Bill's Jonesite beacons, with the flag atop, a structure some fifty feet high by six inches in thickness—of course it would never topple without compelling gravity—composed of lumps of crude Jonesite sufficient to render it neutral despite the shifting attractions of the whirling asteroids.

When he was within a hundred miles, Bill saw a patch of red on the flag. He slowed the ship, looked at his g.e. dial. The red needle leaped toward the red. Bill had calculated the position of Jupiter. He had halted there to stake out his claim when the pull of the mighty planet was neutralized by the proximity of Hilda. Hilda was receding. It was a gamble Bill had to take. He stopped the engine, felt the ship rock and strain, flung out his grapnel through the little hand-lock and drew in the sheet of red papyroid, scored by the transverse passage of a dust-sized aerolite.

A challenge from Jeribald: "If you dare, Sparling, meet me on Nestor." And beneath it, "Love," and the name erased by the aerolite. But in Ursula's writing.

Astra was looking over Bill's shoulder. "You dare not go to the Trojan group. They're too near Jupiter. Turn back, Bill. Take me away."

"I'll follow Jeribald to hell," said Bill.

Astra clung to him. "I'm afraid, Bill. And you're afraid. You dare not go to the Trojans. You haven't

power enough in your ship to try. Take me back to Earth, Bill."

Bill flung the pleading girl from him and settled himself at the controls.

OUT in the void between Hilda and the Trojans was neither night nor day. The sun, a little moon, glowed red in the Zenith. And through the weird gray twilight loomed another moon, almost as large, Jupiter, the angry planet whose realm Bill was invading. Thus Bill drove toward the Trojans—toward Hector, Achilles, Agamemnon, Patroclus, Priam and Nestor, on which last Jeribald had his hideout.

Islets in the void, but islets rushing through that void in a mazy dance, obedient to their dancemaster, Jupiter. The group was more than five astronomical units from Earth, and beyond was only a single asteroid, Hidalgo, the most distant of all. Beyond the Trojans no man had ever penetrated, because the great bullying dancemaster, Jupiter, barred the way, or beckoned to a flaming death.

Now Nestor came into view. And off her shores, ablaze with solar lights, Bill saw Jeribald's ship at anchor. But there were other lights ablaze in the immense castle that Jeribald had built for himself on Nestor, where he kept his nectarines, after raiding them on the Hilda group. Huge, gray, gaunt, it loomed up through the twilight, challenging Bill's daring.

Castle or ship? Bill had swerved aside the moment that the ship came into his optoscope. His own was so much smaller, there was a chance he hadn't been seen. He rounded the irregular mass of Nestor and anchored a bare three hundred miles from Jeribald's vessel, hidden from it and also from the castle by a ridge of rocks.

"Bill, what are you going to do?" Astra pleaded.

Bill braked his g.e. auxiliary, and felt the *Girl Unknown* quivering under the gravitational strain. On Nestor a man needed more than half-ton boots; he needed a Jonesite gauge to prevent being pulled up to the skies like a fish out of water. Bill handed one to Astra, explaining to her to keep it on her person, another to Vulcan. He reckoned that drag would hold them.

"Get your pistol, Vulcan. We're going to take that ship," he said.

Astra screamed, "He'll blast you to annihilation. And what will I do then? I love you, Bill."

"I'm putting you ashore," said Bill. "If I don't come back, go to the castle. I guess Jeribald will

save your life. And don't lose that gauge I gave you, or it'll be your finish."

"But he's expecting you at the castle. He's planning to talk business there."

"That's why I'm going to the ship instead," said Bill.

Their pultex air-masks over their heads, the three went through the lock. But the bubbles in the eyelenses showed that there was air on Nestor, and they threw back their hoods and went ashore. Astra cried, and clung to Bill, but he forced her roughly away. He had made his plans. Jeribald wouldn't dream he would dare attack the ship; once master of it, he could hold the castle under the threat of the neutron gun and exact what terms he chose.

But he meant to kill Jeribald, for Houghton and little Danny Briggs were crying in his heart for vengeance.

He looked at Vulcan. "Ready?" he asked.

"Qui'e rea'y, Mas'er," said Vulcan.

The Martian was a mechanical adept, like all his race. No need to explain the Jonesite gauge to him. Slowly Bill turned the handle from ten to eight, shutting off the interior power. Now he was rocking on his feet. Seven—and he soared upward through the air, pulling his hood about his head. Six—and his flight accelerated as the pull of Jupiter overcame the Jonesite counterpoise. Five—four, and Vulcan and he were flying arrow-like toward the ship, which was swiftly nearing.

Bill twirled the needle back to six and checked his flight. Vulcan, ahead of him, slowed too. Cautiously they drew near, approaching from the stern end, so as to be out of range of the swivel neutron gun. Seven—and Bill moved forward no faster than a fish swims. He grasped the near fin of the propeller and swung himself through the lock.

Instantly he heard ribald shouts and laughter coming from the interior. He burst through the inner door, into the midst of Jeribald's ruffians. Tuck he recognized instantly by his belly-girth, but Garrou wasn't there. Instead, there were three others, whose faces seemed familiar; probably Bill had seen them on Hungaria, where Jeribald had signed them on. Each of the four held a girl upon his knee, a nectarine, of course, picked up by Jeribald from the outer planetoids. The girls were laughing. The air stank with the smell of liquor.

Before any of the startled men could pull a pistol, Bill had fired. His weapon blasted Tuck into a smoldering cinder. One of the others leaped, and a streak from Bill's pistol whipped his arm from his shoulder. The man dropped, screeching horribly. A wisp of ray drew a black line across Bill's cheek, and the pain rocked him. He fired, and the third man was down, the look of amazement ludicrous upon his



blackening face. The flame of the fourth man's pistol shot over Bill's head. The two collided, staring at each other, and then Vulcan's shot drew a black hemisphere upon the other's cheek, and he fell, instantly dead, his withered tongue protruding from the blackened corner of his mouth.

BILL turned to the cowering girls. "Where's Ursula?" he shouted.

They didn't understand, but one, bolder than the rest, came sidling forward with arms outstretched and quivering haunches. Bill thrust her away, ran to the hold entrance and pulled off the hatch cover. He leaped down. It was almost dark within, but it was light enough for him to see that Ursula wasn't there. In the castle, then. Bill scampered up again. He heard a muffled outcry. Vulcan and Blacky, Jeribald's man at the controls, were in deadly combat. But no Martian would kill a Martian. Even an Earthman wouldn't kill a Martian, which brought bad luck. The two were rolling over and over and pummeling each other.

But Jeribald's ship was now outside Jeribald's castle, and three neutron guns were covering her at a distance of a few yards with their slender muzzles. Blacky had worked the trick while Bill was fighting with Jeribald's crew.

Upon a platform just beneath the muzzles of the guns were Jeribald, Garrou, Ursula and Astra. Ursula's robe had been stripped from her, and for the first time Bill saw the rounded curves of her, the softness of her breasts. Even in that moment of despair a thrill went through him.

"Bill!" she cried, stretching out her arms to him.

Bill sprang to her and clasped her to him, feeling new strength fill him at the pressure of her soft body. Holding her, he looked up at Jeribald.

"You think you've won," he said.

"It looks like it—it looks like it, Sparling," sneered Jeribald through his black beard. He raised his voice. "Tuck!" he called.

Bill laughed. "Tuck's dead. So are the rest," he said. "I wish you'd been there, you damned murderer."

Garrou was covering him with his gun. Astra, beside him, was mouthing viciously at Bill. "You poor fool, Jeribald left me orders to bring you to him," she scoffed.

"Very pretty," said Bill. "So—what!"

Jeribald took Bill's neutron pistol from his unresisting hand. "Well, you can guess, Sparling," he answered. "You've been a damned pest on the Jonesite grounds for a long time, and I'd already earmarked that claim you staked out. Get back into the ship!"

He waved Bill back. Ursula screamed and clung to him. Garrou forced her away. Bill went berserk then. He leaped at Garrou and struck him a blow that sent him reeling. Jeribald's obscene laugh drowned Ursula's cries.

"Don't be a fool, Sparling," he said. "Maybe I can use you after all. We'll talk later."

He shouted, and a dozen Martians came swarming out of the castle. They seized Bill and dragged him into the ship, and down into the hold.

But, as he was pulled past the controls, Bill saw Vulcan on the floor, fast asleep. This was his Martian sleeping-time, like that of all the Martian races, adjusted to the long night and day of their planet. Nothing could wake Vulcan till his sleep period was over.

RAGING, Bill crouched in the hold, under the guard of the Martians. They had no neutron guns, but even one of the wiry little fellows was more than a match for the strongest Earthman, apart from the paralyzing sting each carried in his stump of a tail.

He hadn't been there long before other Martians appeared, driving a bevy of nude nectarines before them—Jeribald's plunder of the inner asteroids. Young, half-afraid, yet laughing, and all excited by the prospect of the visit to Earth, they trooped in until the hold was filled with them. They had been anointed and perfumed in Jeribald's castle. That perfume, filling the stagnant air, was designed to allure. In the press of the jostling girls, Bill felt his head begin to swim, his mind to wander.

Ursula—Astra—what was one woman more or less? Life was rich among the planetoids, with wealth to be gained, and women for the asking. If Jeribald intended to make him an offer, was he going to refuse, and go to certain death!

On the other hand, Bill didn't feel that there was room in the same universe for Jeribald and himself. If only he had some weapon. . . .

He had slipped his Jonesite gauge into his shirt. It was of old-fashioned magnetic steel, hard enough to break a man's head with, but only eight inches long. A fantastic weapon. . . . Bill's brain began to clear. He pushed away the girls who jostled him. He must think only of Ursula.

Garrou came toward him, leering at the nectarines. In his right hand was a pistol. He motioned Bill to precede him, up the steps out of the hold, onto the stern deck.

Jeribald was there, with Ursula and Astra, a group of Martians about them. Astra snarled and spat at Bill as he approached. Jeribald said:

"I've been thinking about what I'll do with you. I don't throw things or men away when I can use them. This damned girl's been holding me off. I've made



your life the price I'm willing to pay. You sign over your Jonesite claim to me, I'll have the registration transferred, and take Ursula. How about that, Sparling?"

"You can go to hell," said Bill. For though Ursula hadn't spoken a word, he had read her answer in her eyes. No, rather death for both of them.

"That's final, Sparling."

Bill sprang at the man, bringing his gauge down in a sweeping stroke. He missed Jeribald's head, but the heavy implement slashed Jeribald's ear and half-severed it.

With a howl of rage and pain, Jeribald snatched Garrou's neutron pistol from his hand and leveled it—then checked himself.

"Bury them both!" he shrieked, dabbing at his ear. "I'll watch them die—die slow! Into the lock with them!"

Prepared for the worst though he was, Bill's blood ran cold with the realization of the fate in store for him. The slow descent, foot by foot, toward Jupiter, increasing—while Jeribald's ship kept pace, so that he could gloat over them. The quickening tempo of the flight, until Ursula and he would spin with inconceivable velocity, hour after hour, toward the giant planet, fully conscious, until its heat engulfed them.

In that moment everything about Bill was preternaturally clear. He saw the castle, and another bevy of nude girls on the platform in front of it; he saw the pain-distorted face of Jeribald, with Garrou at his side, and Astra, spitting out curses. His gaze went forward—and then he saw that it wasn't Blacky at the wheel, but Vulcan.

The Martian had somehow awakened, at the very beginning of his long sleep—out of loyalty to his master, as Bill thought afterward. And Blacky lay beside Vulcan, looking as if he had been stunned, his stumpy tail feebly twitching.

Ursula and Bill were seized and flung into the lock. The door closed on them.

"I'm ready to die, dearest," said the girl. "I know you came for me, didn't you? Poor dad! They murdered him while he was asleep. I'm glad we're dying together, Bill."

She moved toward him, and then his arms were about her, holding her fast, and her arms were around his neck. They'd go together into eternity in that way.

A lever clanged, the outer door of the lock opened; the two were hurled into the void. Suddenly Bill laughed. Why, Ursula had no pultex

over her, no mask. She would freeze painlessly to death in a moment, even before she suffocated in the airless depths.

AND all the while Bill held the Jonesite gauge in his hand, and had forgotten.

Not far away he saw his own ship lying offshore. He saw Jeribald's ship suddenly careen upward, like a startled horse. Saw it all in the first instant of their plunge, felt himself and Ursula dragged slowly away from the shore of Nestor; then saw a chance of life for both of them—a hope—the surety.

He shot the indicator to the bottom of his gauge, turning on the full force of the emanations from the Jonesite within. Pull against pull—a little Jonesite gauge against the vast power of Jupiter. Instantly the movement ceased. And, lying oscillating in the atmosphere around the planet, Bill began striking a course toward his own ship.

But as he did so he saw Jeribald's ship shoot like a rocket toward Jupiter and disappear.

He swam through the air, dragging Ursula with him. She lay against his breast, her arms about his neck, her bosom crushed against him. Faster and faster, till Bill was compelled to move the indicator back and check the speed. Now he and Ursula were floating beside their ship. Bill reached up and grasped the fin, hooked one arm about it, and, with an immense effort, hauled Ursula after him.

They plunged through the lock and stumbled into the empty interior. They dropped, exhausted.

Leaving Ursula there, Bill tottered to the optoscope. Turning it, he saw the phantom trail of Jeribald's ship, thousands of miles away.

A trail of light, cut off at the extremity of the atmosphere of Nestor. Jeribald was heading straight for Jupiter.

And suddenly Bill understood. Vulcan had overheard, with the supreme auditory faculty of his race. Or, if he hadn't overheard, he had determined that they should all share a common fate. The faithful black man had jammed the g. e. control, rendering the ship unmanageable. The pull of Jupiter had had no counterpoise of Jonesite gas. It was the same as if he had shut off the flow in his own little gas gauge.

Space-burial for Jeribald and Astra and Garrou!

But Bill didn't like to think about the nectarines aboard.

He started his engine, turned about, set a course for Earth, and lashed the wheel.

Then he went back to Ursula. And, in the tightening grip of her white arms, he managed to forget all else.