

COSMIC CARAVAN

By ED WESTON

Amid the muck and torrential storms of Venus, a greed-mad band of space adventurers fights a soul-shaking battle in a tempestuous rush for the possession of boundless wealth!

A COMPLETE INTERPLANETARY NOVELET

CHAPTER I

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CHAPTER I

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"For the last ten years they've been experimenting with space ships," he said. "How many of them have really worked?"

"One," I told him. "If you call it working. Apparently, Hugo Thomas got

to Venus and returned near enough to Earth to radio about it. Then he vanished."

Hansen looked wise . "That's all his young protege, Sails, ever gave out. But Sails had the only equipment in the world to pick up that space message!!"

I sat forward at his tone. The incident had occurred five years previously. All the world had wondered how much the taciturn young scientist had failed to divulge.

"Thomas discovered enormous teklite beds near the Venusian north pole," Hansen told me. "He instructed Sails to build another space ship and go after it." I swallowed hard. "And Sails has built one secretly?"

Hansen just chuckled.

"Good grief!" I gasped. Then I squinted at Hansen. "But where do you fit in? Sails would only trust the very pick of the scientific world in this."

"Unfortunately for Sails', Hugo Thomas specified no scientists. He wanted an expeditionary party limited to clean-cut, typical young Americans." He paused and looked innocently at the ceiling. "Sails had to come to me for the financing."

He gave the names of the men selected. There was Costigan, the Lansing Landslide at Michigan ten years back. Deval, who knew how to take other men's inventive ideas and make them practicable. Akeley, whose

business was filling stations, but who dabbled with archaeology. Martin, who was a bug for exploration. Winslow, who owned a small tool and machine works somewhere. Fabray, a chemical specialist in metal gasses. Sampson, a construction engineer. A cluck named Jake Reese who unaccountably made money at anything he went into. "Sails," Hansen and myself. I considered my total lack of qualifications for such a trip.

"Why pick on me to share your suicide plan?" I asked.

Hansen grinned. "I named you," he said.

"Thanks for my murder!" I snapped. "Why?"

HE TAPPED my hand with a forefinger like a railroad spike. "Because you are the only newspaper reporter I know who'll tell the story just as it happened. Also Thomas suggested you."

"You wouldn't mean there may be dirty work?" I suggested. Hansen's eyes glittered. "Nobody can guess about that. What do you know of gravium?" I dug into my memory. "It's fabulous stuff. So rare it can be produced only in the most minute quantities by the most delicate synthesis known to science. And at enormous expense. It belongs to the platinum family. It is heavier than blazes. Its ore would be teklite if we had teklite on Earth. Which we haven't. So

we have no gravium."

He nodded. "Know why we need it?"

"Sure. It's the only known stuff which can insulate neutrons. Gravium's vitally needed for atomic furnaces."

He considered me for a long time.

"Gravium, pal, is worth one half million dollars per ounce," he said. "Any man who possessed a pound could run the world."

I began to conceive the magnitude of this cosmic jaunt!

He bit off the tip of a cigar and put an even glow upon the end. "Now you understand the reporter part. I'm not looking for a chronicler with idealistic urges. I'm not risking my neck for humanity!" I shot him a look of sardonic

humor. The fellow who prints the Lord's Prayer on the head of a pin could not have put all of Hansen's sins against humanity on the outside of a battle cruiser! He flew the Jolly Roger, but he was a good pirate in his way.

The idea of the trip was mad. It was crazy. If Hugo Thomas couldn't get back, what chance would we have? But if we did manage it, I'd have the biggest news scoop in history. And incidentally, enough money to buy a string of newspapers.

"I'm dotty, but count me in," I said. "Now let's have a drink." Then Hansen gave me another jolt—a bigger one, this time. He told me the ship was all ready and set to go, and that we'd leave in four

or five hours. I was stunned.

So we really were starting off for Venus!

I didn't want to think about it. I suggested another drink. In fact, I got plastered. But Hansen took care of me. Later he poured me aboard the ship and, before I got the feathers out of my brain, we were off. To a world familiar with Hugo Thomas' earlier ship there was nothing unusual in this craft, except that it was larger. It was shaped like a huge sea-ray and utilized common principles of jet propulsion within the atmosphere. Out of the atmosphere it was non-controllable. It was launched by catapult and flung off gravity by powerful rockets.

Its course was computed in advance and directed from flight inception by the time-angle of catapult and rocket performance within bands of atmosphere. If the computation was a fraction off, we had only a brief time in the atmosphere to rectify the error—or else!

The chief scientific advancements involved were in metals, alloys, insulation of the shell, the delicate in-gravity gyro-course controls, and the internal telescoping break system to remove the terrific shock of starting out of a stationary position and gaining 25,200 miles per hour, within forty minutes. This speed was just sufficient to escape the gravitational pull of Earth

and put us on a parabola. Greater speeds would have involved enormous increase of armor weight to combat the rising ratio of friction. Various bulkheads and insulation chambers of the shell totaled eighteen feet solid thickness. The outer skin was a foot and a half thick. It was estimated that by our return to Earth, this thickness would have been reduced to between four and seven inches by friction.

Sails had followed Hugh Thomas' instructions to the letter. Sails was a scientific fanatic. To him, this was the greatest event in all science history. But instead of having the world's leading scientists along, he had what to him were a bunch of playboys. He didn't like

that.

At first, when we took off from Earth, we were filled with excitement. But our exuberance soon simmered down to a simple state of wonder, like a child might feel in a dream.

THERE was something awe-inspiring about limitless space. We spent a lot of time looking out at that vast blackness dotted with billions of brilliant stars. It gave us a feeling of unimportance. But we soon got used to that and turned to common everyday talk—endless arguments over baseball, politics and bridge. It's not strange that Sails grew bitterly disgusted. But our smug conceit disappeared when we hit the cold field.

Until then, space temperature had

remained at dead zero. At no other time had it varied the slightest on our thermometers. But suddenly we passed through some invisible field which turned the air so cold it nearly froze our lungs. Dampness instantly shimmered as crystals. Hoarfrost lay across our flesh. Had the field been one second wider, it would have frozen our air-conditioning mechanism solid. This field came as a complete surprise. There was nothing to explain its existence, or why it was there. We had no warning.

We had barely recovered our self confidence when we had a second brush with oblivion. Light blasted out of that lightless void outside. It came right through our insulated shell and knocked

us flat. Do I make that clear? Light, which is supposed to have no body or weight, came through eighteen inches of insulated shell with such force that it knocked us down, and out, and left us shaky for days!

That frightened us plenty. Such unknown perils unhinge common sense and reason and stir up primitive fears. Space neurosis was getting us down. Then Hansen stalked belligerently among us.

"Maybe it was a devil," he bellowed. "But I'd fight fifty thousand devils for the fortune we're going to make!"

That toughness saved us. It shamed us. It put fight back into us and boosted our morale just at a time when courage was

needed most.

CHAPTER II

Gravium Fever

VENUS whirled like a great green pinwheel out of the black void on our starboard bow. It grew fantastically, floating obliquely toward our plotted conjunction. There was an awesome majesty to the pale glistening planet, festooned with wisps of clouds.

We shot suddenly into pea soup atmosphere. Circling the planet, Sails handled the craft now with admirable skill. Our rockets boomed. At last we bumped, landed, and jolted to a halt. Sails came to the door of the control room and looked at us with frozen contempt. I knew he was thinking of the

ten greatest names in science who might have been in our places.

"All right, gentlemen," he said with bitter sarcasm. "You are within two hundred miles of the Venusian north pole and your wonderful fortunes!"

Then somebody swung the thick ports open and we jumped down onto Venus. Impenetrable green fog strung by in slowly writhing blankets. A strange, sulphurous smell hit our nostrils. There was light, but it came from the fog itself—a green phosphorescent opalescence that glared most brightly where the fog was thickest. There was thick mud underfoot. We lifted our voices in mighty yell. Emotions of relief and victory surged up wildly. Laughing and

shouting, we tossed each other in the mire. We rubbed ooze onto our faces and into each other's hair. We romped with that unpent boisterousness of huskies in the year's first snow. Soon I remembered my job and slipped on actinic ray goggles to scrutinize the planet. What I saw cooled my high ardor.

It was a land of utter desolation—a place of brooding quiet fresh from some diluvian age. Before me lay a green wet world of vast distances and swirling fog. Huge lichens clung close to the hideous green muck. They were the only life.

A sudden clanking noise froze me and crisped the hair along my neck. I saw Hansen's hilarity vanish. He tested his

balance and took his bearings on the spaceship's open port. Deval fell into a position of defense. Akeley moved back a step like a waiting cat.

A diminutive tractor suddenly emerged from the fog. A huge man was sitting astride, riding the box like a bicycle. He resembled an Earth being, but he was green. Green from his long hair and bushy eyebrows and flesh to the fabric of his clothes.

He drew the tractor around and stopped. Hansen stared. He put out a big muscular hand and felt the man's shoulders.

"Hugo Thomas!" he boomed. "You're alive and here."

"Facts which I can verify," the

scientist answered.

His words came slowly and with difficulty, for he had been many years alone. Emotion made his voice tremble.

Sails rushed forward and embraced Thomas as one resurrected from the dead. Thomas' eyes glistened as he returned the younger man's bearlike hug.

Then he turned from Sails and put a big green hand on Hansen's shoulder. It was easy to see these two men understood and respected each other.

Thomas explained that he had radioed from a point near Earth, but a force field had whipped him around and straight back to Venus.

"You could have taken off for Earth again," I said, nettled. He shrugged.

"There was much work to do here and Earth had my message. Sooner or later somebody was bound to come along." Sharp humor crinkled his broad face. "I rather suspected it would be you, Hansen."

"You were careful not to suggest my name," Hansen growled. The scientist chuckled. "What need to? Gravium and you—a fortune and a big risk—the toughest mining job in history—It was as natural as the swing of a needle toward a magnet." Hansen rubbed his hands. "Then the gravium is here? There is teklite?" A glow smoldered in his eyes. Thomas gestured toward a low ridge. "Right on the surface." Hansen didn't hesitate. Unable to contain himself, he

started for the ridge. His feelings were contagious. I have seen gold rushes and stake races for diamond claims, but I've never seen men go berserk as we did.

FIFTY yards from the ship, men began to stagger and drop. We hadn't adjusted ourselves to the low gravity or atmosphere. Our lightest motions threw us off balance and left us spent. Heaven knows what our blood pressure must have been in our crazed excitement.

When I got to the ridge, Hansen and Akeley were digging furiously. Costigan came up gasping. Then Deval and Fabray, and Martin reeled forward and fell. Nobody paid the slightest attention. Every man was too frantic, digging his bare hands into that miasmatic muck.

I think Hansen's fever was wildest, and yet he was coolest of the lot. He stopped suddenly, staring into the fog. Seizing the filter scanner, he walked away. When he returned, there was a hard setness to his face.

"I can't make out the ship," he said in a worried voice. Weird ideas pass through the mind in a new world. Maybe the ship had disintegrated. Maybe it wasn't there. Maybe somebody had flown it away. It was like being marooned on a strange atoll, without any way of getting off."

I took the scanner and climbed the low ridge. Nothing but green glare met my gaze. I turned back, filled with terror. Now there was no sign of the men. I

yelled. The fog swallowed my voice. Really swallowed it, as thoroughly as sound absorbers in laboratories. Panic-stricken, I bolted down the ridge and bumped into Akeley without seeing him! Yet there was still the same intensity of light. Hansen showed his mettle at that moment.

"Well, we can't stay here," he snapped. "Our oxygen's running out. Back to the ship. Come on!"

"But what if we get lost," Reese whimpered.

"Then crawl!" Hansen barked.

He was brutal, but his voice gave us fresh confidence. There was plenty of fighting spirit in Hansen. He moved ahead, a gigantic shadow in the green

fog. I kept at his heels, yet the suck of his footsteps sounded as a bare whisper. I grew desperately tired—the weariness of utter exhaustion. I fell, got up, and fell again. The twentieth time I quit fighting the fog and oozing muck. I slept right there. I awakened with an instant sense of desertion. The light had not changed, but that meant nothing. I shouted. Slowly, the terrible fact seeped into me. The fog was now completely sound absorbent. Not a sound came back.

An unreasoning anger boiled up through me—a fury that I had come all this way through space to get lost within a few yards of my ship. I clambered to my feet and plunged ahead. My heart pumped madly, but I kept on until

something hard hit me on the forehead and blocked my passage. I could see nothing, but I felt the ship's hull, and recognized it, immediately in front of me. I groped for the hatch and dragged myself in. I have felt strong emotions in my life, but never such utter relief as coming through that port.

I did not recover from my oxygen exhaustion until several hours later. Perhaps my condition was complicated by the dampness of the atmosphere. I came into semi-consciousness, and grew vaguely aware of Sails talking passionately.

"Earth has got to have gravium dirt cheap, Professor!" he was shouting. "Science needs it as a man needs water."

Thomas sounded faintly amused. "Well, how would fifty dollars an ounce be for a starting price?

Eventually we may get it down to the price of steel or iron." I felt a vague disturbance at this thought, but I drifted back into coma. When I finally awakened, Hansen, Akeley and Deval were sitting at the ward table talking. Deval poured me a cup of coffee and brandy. Sails had gone.

I had forgotten about local gravity and I nearly knocked out my teeth with the coffee cup, but the strong, hot drink cleared my head and gave me fresh strength.

"You heard it, Akeley, and so did you, Deval!" Hansen said in hard tones.

"Gravium, the professor said. Not teklite. But the pure stuff! At fifty dollars an ounce!" He broke off and glared with rage. "That would mean about ten thousand dollars each for risking our bloody necks to get to this green hell and back through space!"

DEVAL turned to glance at us. "Sails would give his share to science," he growled. "That would kill the market for the time. We'd have something worth a fortune we couldn't sell!"

"Sails acts mighty strange to me at times," Hansen said in a rasping voice. "A few months in a sanitarium might do him good. But we couldn't put a man like Thomas away easily. If he gets back to Earth, he'll be a tin god."

"If he gets back?" Akeley demanded sharply.

Hansen met his look with one fully as black. Then he lighted a cigarette. Hansen was a shrewd customer. He never said too much at one time. He let his ideas take root.

We ate heavily and had just finished when Sails and Thomas came in. The scientist beamed. It was hard to think of doing anything to such a man.

After a glance at each of us, he nodded with satisfaction. "Good! You boys are all well again. You were lucky to get back. Hereafter, don't forget to watch the light changes on Venus."

"How can we know?" Hansen asked.

"Well, it's difficult," Thomas

admitted. "The light intensity never varies. But the angles of the rays do. They have peculiar properties in the fog. Filters are only serviceable five out of fourteen hours." Hansen considered. "We could rig guide lines from here to the ridge. But it's too wet for mining. We'd better wait for dry weather."

Thomas eyes widened. He coughed with embarrassment.

"Perhaps I should have warned you," he apologized. "This is the dry season."

"This?" Costigan whispered unbelievably.

Thomas nodded. "In a few days it begins to rain. Drizzles for seventy-six days, Earth time. Then it gets really wet."

I stared, trying to imagine such iron resolution. For five long years he remained marooned in this steaming green hell of wet and muck!

Hansen's thoughts were more direct.

"We couldn't mine an open pit with our pumps," he said hollowly. The scientist smiled. "I have the right kind of pumps in my spaceship." A look of savage relief came over Hansen's features. We all grinned. Except Sails. He continued to be dark and sullen and resentful. Maybe he thought of the wild notions we had spouted when we thought our fortunes were made.

We completed arrangements to visit Thomas and then went back to bed. If anybody had ever told me I could sleep

with a rajah's fortune within walking distance, I'd have thought he was crazy. Four days later our heads were clear, our spirits restored, and our hearts normal. We were oriented. I found Hansen eating in the main saloon. Costigan and Akeley followed me in. Hansen sat back and studied us while we were satisfying our hunger.

"Watch out for Sails and Thomas," he said at last. "This is going to end in a fight."

"I don't like trickery," Akeley objected. "Why can't we talk with Thomas first?"

"And spill our hand?" Hansen snapped. "Look, we got here safely and know where the teklite is, and with luck,

we'll get back. We can own the world." He gave us a hard, ruthless look. "Or we can be suckers and end in a poorhouse."

We were all scowling, and avoiding each other's gaze. We wanted to be decent, but we wanted to be rich, too. And scientists do get some screwball ideas about the unimportance of money. Again Hansen was smart. He just left the matter hanging.

We started out for Thomas' ship and marched through a maddening green glare and endless muck for five hours.

We found Thomas aboard his small ship, mixing something in a retort. I think he had forgotten we were on Venus. But he was glad to see us. He bustled around getting us some hot drinks, made with

real Earth whisky.

Hansen began studying the work Thomas was doing. He knew what the experiment was, much to the surprise of the scientists, and the two fell into a discussion of metallurgy. Sails maintained a jealous silence.

LATER, Thomas led the way outside and fished the ring of a trap door out of the mud. We followed him down a long ramp into dank underground vaults which, he explained with embarrassment, he had originally built upon the surface. In five years, they had sunk from sight. The room was constructed of some strange alloy with a fiery russet glow. The floor was spongy, a rubberoid product he had made out of

Venusian lichens. He nodded toward a large power plant.

"That armature is gravium alloy," he said casually.

Costigan nearly choked. The material of that plant, on Earth, would be worth probably a half billion dollars.

"But this was my greatest achievement," Thomas boomed with pride, gesturing at racks of large-sized hose. "I refined that rubber from the local lichens."

Hansen looked over the pumps and hose with a grim satisfaction. They were miner's pumps, tough and built for service.

"I could come over and help," Thomas suggested uncertainly. I studied him.

Suddenly I realized that, incredible as it seemed, he thought we might consider him useless—in the way!

"You've just begun those experiments to reduce production costs of gravium, Professor," Sails cut in, giving us a glance of mocking amusement. "The professor thinks every home should have its own atomic power plant."

Costigan stared. Akeley's lips twitched. Hansen's jaw grew hard. We all had the same thought. If we controlled all the atomic power, we could run the world, but not with an atomic furnace in every cellar. Thomas sighed. "Yes, I had forgotten the experiments. But you boys will have great fun getting that teklite out and

smelted."

Thomas lent us his tractor, an amazing machine which apparently could not be overloaded. We hooked on twelve large sledges of pumping apparatus and the tractor dragged them up the ramp without a shiver. We rode back to our ship in style.

When we were aboard, Hansen emitted a harsh chuckle.

"Boys, I have an idea the professor thinks we just came out here for the ride!" he said. "An atomic furnace in every home, eh?"

Akeley's teeth snapped together. "I'm not risking my life for glory. I came to make my fortune." He glowered at Hansen. "Whatever you're thinking, I'll

bet it's plain rotten."

"If about fifty billion dollars is rotten, that's it." Hansen laughed again but his face looked plenty tough. Nobody said anything more. I think we all know we'd follow whatever diabolical scheme he hatched. But none of us liked it.

CHAPTER III

"We'll Own the Earth!"

WITHOUT giving us a hint of what he planned, Hansen rooted us out for the start of the real work. He stood at the end of the ward room, tough and dynamic and with a sinister flame burning in his eyes.

"Men, we've got the dirtiest piece of mining human beings have ever tackled, and almost no equipment for the job," he growled. "We're going to work till we're ready to drop. Then we're going to work some more. Maybe we'll curse and hate each other. Yet when it's over, we can sit around for the rest of our lives. We'll own the Earth."

He put his own spirit into us. He had our hands itching to get at that raw teklite. We could hardly wait to plod back over that ridge and wallow in the muck.

It was dirty, heart-breaking work in that desolate, depressive green light. It took four days of sopping hell to build the guide line. Angle posts wouldn't hold. We had to make conical drain foundations for each post. We floated them as we would buoys. We lost tools and masks. Even a foot of wire was precious. We grew used to dead, weary muscles, aching lungs, pounding hearts, and sore, running eyes. Every night we threw wet clothes into a drying room, bathed, ate and staggered off to bed.

After a few days we didn't bathe so often. Finally Reese tried to drop into his bunk still dressed in wet clothes. Hansen kicked him out and tore the clothes from his back. Not for Reese's sake. He needed manpower and couldn't risk Reese becoming ill.

Hansen himself anchored the last post. Then he stood silent, staring at the writhing fog.

"Tomorrow we break ground," he said. "Every man bathe, wash and dry his clothes tonight." We tramped back along the guide line, like grotesque phantoms in that swirling, silent mist. I knew what it had cost Hansen to say, "Tomorrow." He was quivering to get into that wet hole and tear the first chunk

of teklite from Venus.

At mess, he suddenly stared around him. "Where's Costigan and Reese?" he demanded. Nobody had noticed their absence, but now everybody knew where they were. They had stayed out at the mine hole.

Hansen turned purple with anger.

Just then the inner hatch banged open. Costigan stumbled in, shedding mud with every lurch. As he cast loose his oxygen mask, I saw his face was scarlet. He carried a small lump to the table, dumped it with a thud, and sluiced it clean with a pot of coffee. It showed up a dull, mottled, purple-green, shot with streaks of topaz.

During that instant of dead silence, I

thought Hansen would strike him dead.

"Teklite!" Costigan rasped. "At the four foot level." Hansen reached out and grabbed the chunk, his fury changed into surprise. He had to strain to move the heavy ore. By an effort he lifted it, and his face grew gray. His eyes were like slits of fire, as if he had high fever.

"Forty pounds!" he breathed.

We had known gravium was heavy. Its density was 37.8, five times heavier than iron. But feeling it was fantastic. Senses refused to credit the enormous weight.

One by one that small chunk of ore was snatched from hand to hand. At first we babbled. Then we fell silent, as the ore made the rounds. Every rich metal casts its own special spell and fever, but

I have never known such a blazing urge as that teklite cast.

"The first pick after we cleared sludge," Costigan exclaimed. "There's billions there." I don't remember moving or racing out through that shivery green fog and mile and a half of muck. Only vaguely can I recall how we found Reese half drowned, but raving wildly and refusing to let go of a large chunk of ore too big to lift. Hansen laid him, out cold with one smash of his heavy fist and plunged into that hole. Shouting like madmen, we all followed him.

My first clear recollection is back in the ship, sitting with a clean chunk of teklite in my hands and staring at it. I kept hefting the ore, unable to believe its

weight, fascinated by its color. I remember thinking over and over like an idiot, "It's mine—all mine!" and being carried away with something akin to exultation.

HANSEN came in finally, forearm streaming blood but with the craziest grin I have ever seen. Grim, ruthless rapacity seemed to beat out of him in waves. He went into the galley and returned, rubbing something in a towel. Carefully, he laid the object down. It clanked. He ripped off the towel and we stared at a nugget of softly glowing green, no larger than a pea.

"That is real gravium, boys." he said from deep in the chest. "That nugget weighs a good eight pounds." We stared

at the nugget with fascination. Sixteen million dollars was lying there, scarcely bigger than a stickpin. It made the idea of our fortunes clear to us as nothing had up to now. The same thought ran through every head. We could get back to Earth and every man would literally be a king. Or we could go back as great five-day wonders, and give our treasure to humanity, and wind up forgotten in some poorhouse with other explorers and scientists of the past.

Hansen looked around the circle of faces and spoke thick tones.

"There it is, boys," he said. "Now you know. We can go back and make the world kick in at our price. Or we can let Thomas give it gravium at fifty bucks an

ounce." Deval licked fevered lips.
"What's your plan?"

"We form a miners' syndicate," Hansen growled. "That leaves Sails out. We can elect to pay him off in stock instead of a share of gravium."

Costigan grunted. "What about Thomas?"

I didn't like the expression I saw in Hansen's eyes. I looked away, but some of the same ugly wickedness was eating inside of me like an acid.

"We'll worry about Thomas later," Hansen rasped.

"I hate a doublecross," Akeley objected. Hansen rolled the nugget clanking down the table.

"Do you hate it more than what you

could get with this, Akeley?" he asked softly. There was no answer. The souls of many men have been bartered for less. Hansen brought out a snydicate agreement and we all signed. It contained no reference whatever of Thomas, and nobody mentioned his name or rights again. None of us wanted to think of the limits to which we might go. The lust to posses that raw naked teklite drove us like a drug. For two days we trudged through the endless mud carrying supplies. We built two work platforms and they sank into the slime. The third one, perched on barrels, like a raft, stayed precariously afloat. Then one corner went down and, our equipment followed, and we spent three miserable

days digging them out of the oozing muck. A sledge or drill was too precious to be abandoned.

Dissension and despondency were gripping us on the day when Sampson devised a corrugated iron platform, like a keeled raft, which held steady. It helped, but no more could be built. We needed every inch of material left for bracing and the smelter.

Suddenly Reese broke into tears.

"We'll never be able to mine here," he blubbered.

Hansen turned black with rage.

"Nature hasn't made the place that I can't mine," he roared. But there was a shadow of grim doubt forming in his eyes.

We went over to see Thomas again, sipping his brew while he finished some tests. Again. I noticed Hansen's face lose that wolfish look and fill with interest in the work.

"What's the stress differential at ten below Fahrenheit, for internal and external components?" he asked Thomas.

The scientist looked at him with thoughtful surprise.

"I hadn't thought of that angle, Hansen. To a constructor, it would be most important, of course."

"Plastics are licking the pants off metals," Hansen said. "Somebody's got to put metals back where they belong."

He looked at Sails as if he would like to fight about it.

Thomas turned back to his tests with a quiet grin.

"I didn't know you were interested in metallurgy—beyond what you could get out of a mine, Hansen." The miner gave a grim laugh. "I was an iron puddler at fourteen. A form tester two years later. I lost my father and two brothers because they couldn't control gasses on high grade steel."

"If we get gravium down cheap enough, we can make a better steel than tungsten at twenty dollars per ton," Thomas remarked.

FOR a second, something sparked in Hansen's eyes. Then the spark dimmed and he looked cold and ruthless. A lot of things could happen if gravium were

cheap enough. But Hansen running the world would not be interested.

"There are enough new minerals up here, to set up an entire supplementary and basic metals industry on Venus," the scientist went on. "If somebody would locate them." Akeley shot him a glance of interest, looked thoughtful, then snorted to himself.

"How did you get your spaceship off with just rockets before, Professor?" he asked curiously. Thomas laughed. "This ship isn't an airplane, Akeley. No, I'm afraid rockets would not be enough. I have a small catapult spring, however, and the two together just about do it." Akeley and Hansen exchanged glances, and something cold and dark and

malignant seemed to be born within that room. I saw Hansen's face, and the expression on it belonged to a stone gargoyle. In the days following, the ruthless drive for fortune crystallized within us, but it was running a race against the mounting depression of the atmosphere. Men turned surly and cooperation became a myth. Three times when strikes were made, the pump men deserted their posts in the wild rush to get down to the actual ore. The tunnels were flooded in those few minutes, and Fabray was trapped and nearly drowned.

On the twenty-fourth day, the fogs cleared like morning mist. We stared and then leaped and yelled. Thomas must

have been wrong! The evil of that dank planet lifted from our hearts. Dinner that day was almost sociable. We discussed a runway for our ultimate takeoff. We drew blueprints for cracking plant and blast furnace.

The ore was assaying rich—twelve and fifteen per cent. With our crude methods we would be lucky to free .05 per cent of gravium, but at that, we would be fabulously wealthy. We got drunk thinking about it, and discussed some pretty fantastic ideas.

In the morning we awakened stiff and cold. A soft purr sounded steadily outside. Green-tinted rain was falling slowly. We looked at it and literally turned sick. I followed Hansen out,

wondering where all the water on Venus drained to. Maybe it didn't drain! That was our terrible fear.

The drifts were constantly flooded now. Thomas built six additional pumps, but they clogged and needed constant attention. We worked in soupy, sulphurous muck up to our waists. Our lungs and hearts began to develop ailments.

There was a knife fight between Deval and Reese, and Hansen prevented murder only by slugging them both with a pick handle. Deval lapsed into sullen silence. Three days later there was a peculiar slide at the end of Drift Six and Deval climbed out of the hole with a grim satisfaction on his face. Reese

never came out. Suspicion of each other ran through us like a prairie fire.

None of the drifts were any longer safe. We dug in for a twenty-foot maximum. Our footings turned to rushing streams. The ceilings dripped like sieves and dropped off in chunks. We literally fought that planet for a few pounds of ore.

At the end of wet, grueling days there was the long pull back through the sucking mire of the plateau and the fear of the man who walked behind. We jumped at unexpected noises or the sight of our shadows. The last of our morale had vanished. The expedition was breaking up under the shadow of the lust for wealth and power.

CHAPTER IV

Venusian Triumph

GREEN rain pattered over Venus with its crazing rhythm. The brash green light came through a port and put its tints and shadows upon Hansen's rough-hewn face, making him look unholy.

"We need Sails to navigate back to Earth," Hansen said with diabolical calm. "But he is insane the moment we land. We stick together on that."

There were harsh mutters of assent. Akeley emitted a vicious, mirthless sound of laughter.

"And we leave Hugo Thomas marooned here," he said. "That's murder."

"Call it what you like," Hansen growled. "There is no other way. Those experiments of his would drop gravium to fifty or a hundred dollars per ounce." He lighted a cigarette. "When we get things in hand on Earth, we can send a rescue expedition."

I looked out at that terrible green rain. There were limits to human endurance, even for a man wrapped up in science. No person who had been there five years could stand much more alone. Hansen's voice came softly and dangerously as a snake. "Is there any man not tough enough for this?" No one answered. Murder is not pleasant, but it is less unpleasant than being killed. "All right," Hansen said with finality. "That clears

the air. We are working against time and don't forget it. We're going to build a furnace and smelter right at the mine and it's going to take every ounce of stamina we've got." His lips pulled back against his teeth in a wicked smile. "Just remember that leaving Thomas' weight behind makes room for a lot more gravium in the ship."

That was the size of it and fear and suspicion corroded in us. But we worked. Glumly, we ate and pulled on coats and clumped out into the rain day after day.

The mire of the plateau, oddly, had not become deeper. But the water atop of it had. It was up to our thighs in places. For three days now there had

been noticeable currents on the plateau. Moving supplies for the cracking plant and furnace would have been a one-day job on dry land. It took us three weeks. We kept losing our footing. Supplies were wet and skidded from numbed hands. We had to dive below water and fish them up by touch, clawing through that cold mud by inches. There was real current in the water now.

Men shivered and coughed and cursed the rain. But, stumbling with fatigue, we began to build. Costigan came in with the report that there was river current at the north end of the plateau and the water was up four inches at the mine. Only Hansen's ruthless drive took us through that. He beat us through as herdsmen

beat horses through a storm.

We had a meeting and it is good no artist was there to catch the picture. We looked like a circle of haunted maniacs. Even Hansen was down to skin and bone.

"We'll have to call in Sails and Thomas," he said.

Akeley's lips jerked in a vicious way. "It's dangerous," he warned. "All of us are talking to ourselves. They'll stumble onto our plan."

Hansen looked at him with eyes like agates. "We need their manpower. And men with some innards." He said that for the rest of us, but the shame had small effect.

The water had cut a channel between

the two ships, and now the current was boiling away in a green lather. Hansen sent the men to work and took me with him. We went afoot, breasting a flood up to our chests. Swimming the current was the most terrible moment of my life. Thomas blinked at us with his usual air of having forgotten we were on the planet.

"Sixty-five days!" he repeated. "Incredible! I should have come over. But these experiments made me forget."

Hansen roused from his tight sullenness. "Any luck on those tensile tests?" he asked. Thomas beamed. "Great luck. The internal and external stress remains the same under all temperatures. I think with time we could

perfect a metal impervious to temperature and weather." Hansen was tired. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

"I'd like to own that process," he said almost dreamily.

"Why not?" Thomas answered. "You're a good promoter. Well, we'll have plenty of time to discuss it in the next three years."

HANSEN'S eyes opened and he came slowly forward in his seat. "Why three years?" Thomas chuckled. "You don't intend to take off next summer and land on Jupiter do you?" Hansen turned gray around the lips. "I don't get this."

Thomas looked at his protege sharply.

"Sails, didn't you tell these men that

their last chance to take off for Earth is in twenty-one days or they'll miss the angle of conjunction?"

Sails darkened sullenly and made a lame excuse. Thomas looked shocked. He made a gesture.

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew and planned to stay." Something boyish and wistful came into his green face. "It is not very pleasant, but there is fascinating work to be done here." Hansen was staring out at the greenish glare and softly gurgling waters. His lips formed the words, "Three years!" His big, tough figure was trembling. But he did not crack. We waited a period of light and then made that grueling trip back to our ship. We ate and rested and then

struggled again to the ridge. We stumbled into the cracking shed dead weary.

"Well, we got the furnace hooked up and enough power to smelt all the gravium we can carry," Fabray said almost cheerfully. "But it will be slow work."

"I'll take an ounce for my share and be satisfied," Deval snarled. "I'd give one arm to get off for Earth today."

Hansen gave a harsh laugh. "You'll be waiting just three years, mister. Sails outsmarted us." Men stopped and stood like carven statues. The patter on the roof seemed to swell into a deafening roar. Deval was holding the first test of gravium, a small bit worth a hundred

thousand dollars. He dropped it and it sank instantly into the floor.

Hansen looked at the circle of drawn faces. If hysteria once started, it would sweep us like a prairie fire. The whole crowd of us might become raving maniacs.

Hansen cursed everything in hell and the cosmos. Then he actually laughed.

"Well, nothing ever licked me yet except this gravium," he said. "We've got twenty-one days to build a runway and by jumping Jinks, we'll build it! We'll get off from here if we have to rocket the planet away from us."

"Leave without gravium?" Akeley quavered.

The muscles bulged along Hansen's

neck. "Thomas has one hundred pounds refined in his vaults," he snarled.

"Hansen, you can't do that," I yelled. "Not that and the other too." He gave me an inscrutable look.

"Just let me worry about what I'm going to do," he said. We slogged back to our ship and found Sails and Thomas there. The scientist looked us over with concern. Morbid despondency had almost reduced us all to wrecks.

"Hansen, you must get the ship off at once. Your men can't last three years." Hansen's lips flattened in a mirthless grin. He had been figuring since his outburst of belligerent optimism, and he had discovered a new difficulty. We needed a full mile runway at least, but

against the pull of that water we would need a much stronger catapult than the one we had.

"How about using my catapult?" Thomas suggested. "Triple strength and now I've coated it with gravium."

Hansen's lips gave a queer jerk. "Somebody has to release that spring. Suppose we draw lots." Odd wistfulness came into Thomas' eyes. The mere thought of Earth was like a lovely dream after five long years.

"No, that won't be necessary," he said promptly. "You're Earth men. Your interests are down there. Much work remains to be done here. Since I'm nothing but an old scientist, maybe it's just as well I stay. I'll release the

spring."

Every eye in that room riveted on him. Remember, this was the man we meant to maroon—whom we had thought we would have to murder! Now, voluntarily, he was solving our problem and sending us on our way!

A smile flitted over Thomas' lips.

"Yes, there'll be plenty of working here between mining, smelting, exploring and laboratory experiments. Mostly, I think, I will miss cigars."

AKELEY looked at him sharply, then at Hansen, then at Fabray. Hansen glowered at his feet.

"All right, let's go," he said suddenly.

If that gravium fever had been wild, it was not comparable to the tough drive

this new fever goaded us into. We set madly to wheeling the great ship through the clinging mud and up onto that little ridge. It was an impossible job but we did it. When we dropped of exhaustion, Hansen came and kicked more energy into us. He did ten men's work himself.

The water was rising swiftly now. The currents grew. The gurgling became a hideous growl in our ears. Men slept sometimes on their feet, and came to and rushed back to handle cold wet metal with desperate determination.

Ruggedly, Thomas worked beside Hansen. His hands were raw from erecting the great catapult and raising that mile-long runway of wet muck. On the last day he took the tractor to his

ship. He came back towing his special catapult spring and teamed it up with ours. We tested our rockets and stood there to say goodbye. We were even too tired to remember the scientist's gravium. Except, maybe, Hansen. There was a strange look in his eyes.

"This leaves you stuck here—forever, maybe," he said. "It will be blasted lonesome." Thomas shrugged. "An old man, already past use. Probably another expedition will come along, equipped now with your knowledge." He picked a small package out of his tractor with some effort.

"The gravium I had refined," he explained. "I want ten per cent of this to go to Sails to be used strictly for

experimental purposes. The rest is yours to sell."

Costigan stared. "At what price?"

"Why, for what you can get, of course," Thomas said with surprise. Akeley scowled. "But you were talking about fifty dollars an ounce."

"Oh!" Thomas muttered. He looked away into the dreary green rain. "Maybe in a century or two. If we had miners here and a transport service established."

The hour of visibility was passing in its strange way. Not the slightest change of light. It was merely that figures receded swiftly from sight.

"Into the ship, now, all of you!" Thomas ordered, crisply. His tone was

the only sign I detected of how desperately he hated this parting. He clapped Sails on the back and pushed him toward the gangway. A cheer floated over his head. Figures were hard to discern even at arm's length now.

The port closed. There was a roar of the rockets and their red tongues lashed out through the blanket of pea soup rain. At the foot of the catapult the scientist stood with water swirling around his knees and his bared head lifted toward the ship. Both rocket ports blasted out their fierce, deafening retort. The tower strained.

Thomas waited until the last moment of stress and pulled the release chain. The ship leaped, dipped, skimmed down

its wet runway, and at the very end, caught airway and was off. Behind it, the water parted from the fierce rocket blast. A brief second and the ship's red tails had vanished in grim murk. Thomas clung to the catapult while waves tore against his legs. The water quieted and he stood there watching the place where the ship had disappeared.

The gurgle of the waters probably sounded very lonely now.

"Well, there's work," he murmured to himself.

"A lot of it, before they come back." Hansen's chuckle sounded like a dying whisper note, out of the gobbling rain.

Thomas wheeled around. "Hansen! What are you doing here?"

"Bosh! You've got to have somebody to mine your metals," he said. Akeley's metallic mocking chuckle came from across the platform.

"You don't think you're man enough to locate them, too, Hansen?"

"And smelt 'em?" Fabray demanded, forming as a dark shadow in the rain. "Why he thinks a smelter is a fish, Professor!"

"I wouldn't trust a one of 'em, doc!" Costigan's voice sounded. "They aim to rob you of your few cigars." Then I came out, too, and grinned at Thomas. All of us stood around and laughed. I don't believe any of us knew the others had hidden out in that shrouding cloak of invisibility. Men are funny about getting

caught at anything decent when they've been trying hard to play tough. Thomas had the tractor which was radio-compass equipped.

"Well, gentlemen, we'll give that next space party a real surprise," "In the meantime, I invite you all to a tasty Venusian dinner. Something I rather pride myself upon—baked lichens stuffed with canned beef!"