

FUTURE FICTION

15c—MARCH

INTERPLANETARY GRAVEYARD
by EDMOND HAMILTON

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL
ISLES OF THE BLEST
by FREDERIC ARNOLD KUMMER



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AFTER DOOMSDAY

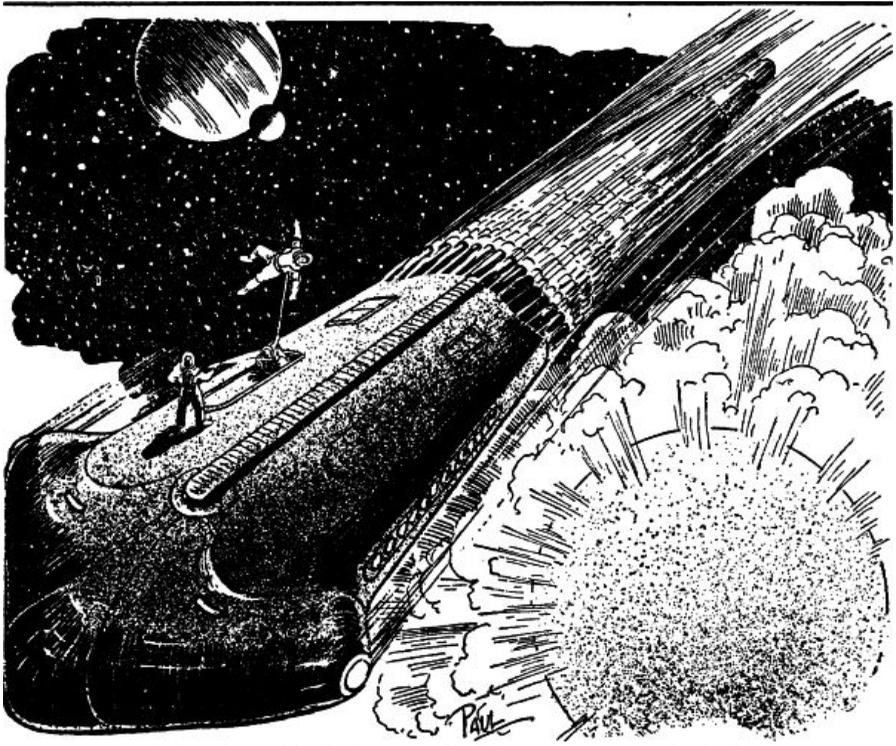
by

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym John Cotton.

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Wolfe Carnac was the Noah of the future, for his little space-ship held the last remnant of humanity—a pitiful hundred souls snatched from a burning world in the grip of an exploding sun! But mutiny threatens to destroy the last hope of the race!



Like a batted ball, the overalled figure rose from the hull.

Stars occasionally burst, expanding enormously, giving out a vast amount of heat, and then dying down again. No one knows why this occurs, but it does seem to happen to stars not at all unlike the sun. If it happened to the sun, the earth would stand about as much chance of survival as a butterfly in a furnace.

—*The Last Judgment* (J. B. S. Haldane).

CHAPTER I

THE LAST HUNDRED

Only a single derided scholar of the thirtieth century had foreseen the explosion of the sun—but it was exploding, like an incandescent bomb more than eight hundred thousand miles in diameter, swelling and spreading into a fiery cloud that grew miles in a second. Within the first ninety minutes after the explosion began, the parched globule that was Mercury had flamed into lava and then vapor. Something more than two hours later Venus disintegrated into a dark, filthy mist. And then it was the turn of Mother Earth, her oceans rising in banks of scalding steam, her continents churning into shattered flakes, her internal fires gushing out to hasten the destruction of everything over which mankind had fought and toiled and dreamed and prayed . . .

Yet there were human eyes left to see that unthinkable catastrophe. A scant hundred men and women, spared by the fate that was blasting the inner planets to atoms, stared pallidly through the glassite ports of a javelin-shaped rocket craft that sped outward at an angle from the place where Earth had been. Most of them stood motionless, as if stunned or fascinated. But at length one man—towering, stout and red-faced, with rich and flashy raiment—blinked and shook his heavy head as if to break the spell. Pushing backward and clear of the little knot of his fellow-beings around the port, he gazed in evident mystification at the interior of the long, narrow compartment that housed them.

Quickly he judged that he could cross from bulkhead to bulkhead in ten of his great strides, and traverse its length in fifty. Glancing up, he judged the ceiling height at eight feet. Then his eyes sought the floor, or deck, of metal. At his end of the compartment it was covered with a felt carpet and set about with cushioned furniture, like a lounge. The far end was similarly appointed, but the central space, half set off by two pairs of spiral companionways, was occupied by three long metal tables, each with two rows of chairs.

Another man left the group at the ports and approached the big fellow. “This seems to be the salon deck,” he ventured softly. “Shall we get acquainted? I’m Professor Scaife.”

“And I’m Saul Ruger.” The huge red hand shook Professor Scaife’s lean, dark one, while the canny pig-eyes in the great face studied the new acquaintance’s thin body, hollow cheeks, bald head and large, lustrous eyes. “Professor, you said?”

“Ex-professor,” smiled Scaife ruefully. “I was discharged from—oh, well, why consider it now? The university’s gone, with the rest of the world we knew. My wife and I were broke, and came abroad when the invitation was broadcast, more for free food and shelter than anything else. Practically everybody else seems to have had the same idea.”

The two sat down on a divan.

“At least you know *why* you’re here,” said Ruger. “I only remember being awfully drunk last night, and following a pretty dancer out of a cafe.” He sniggered. “She was shy, but I figured that I could—”

“You must have wandered aboard without knowing it,” suggested Scaife. “Lucky for you. This ship got away at midnight, just the right time. Other rocket craft that tried to escape after the explosion started—” he made a sudden erasing gesture. “They must have been too late.”

Ruger mopped his flushed brow and looked around the compartment again. "I remember hearing jokes about this craft," he told his companion. "Just what is it?"

"It's named the *Ark of Space*. Appropriate, eh? Built of some secret alloy, very long and narrow, most of its interior is taken up with some atomic fuel supply and the engines. This section isn't more than a fifth of the whole length—comes about two-thirds of the way back, as I judge, like the handgrip on a spear."

Ruger's eyes turned up to the low ceiling. "Is there another deck?"

"Four in all. This is the second from the bottom. Beneath us is the supply hold. Next above us is the cabin deck, with a hundred-odd cabins, each five feet by seven. And above that is the control level. Forward are laboratories and a garden under artificial lights."

The sound of the two voices attracted others from the ports, and several sought seats nearby. Ruger, who liked an audience, became more voluble.

"I've been a gambler all my life," he bragged. "One of the real sports of the Thirteenth Century, I guess. Stock markets, cards, races, all that—but this was the luckiest break I ever had. To stagger aboard this haven of refuge dead drunk, escaping when sober men went up in smoke! If I could only find the girl I was chasing—" He shrugged in resignation. "Well, I can't have everything. Say, Professor, where are we headed?"

Scaife shook his head. "Nobody seems to know."

"Mars?" someone suggested.

"Hardly," replied Scaife. "This explosion must be on the point of finishing Mars along with the other inner planets. We're past that stop, anyway. Even Jupiter will probably be too hot to support life, and Saturn will be more than tropical."

"That brings up Uranus," put in Ruger.

"And that may be our destination," added Scaife. "With this increased light and heat, Uranus should be habitable."

The professor's wife approached. She was a young brunette, attractive in a voluptuous, sultry fashion. "How will we get to Uranus?" she demanded. "No expedition has ever gone beyond Jupiter's moons."

"We must get there, Lille," answered Scaife grimly.

"Yes," chimed in Ruger again, smirking appreciatively at the woman. "We can't go back to where we started, you know."

Several hearers laughed, and the big man expanded at this tribute to his wit. "Who's the skipper of this craft?" he asked.

Nobody could tell him, though one or two remembered hearing the name in newscasts.

"Well, let's interview him," said Ruger. "We're his responsibilities and he should be glad to inform us of—" He broke short off, then crowed delightedly. "Hey, look who's here!"

His roving pig-eyes had caught a figure just turning from a port across the compartment—a slender, feminine figure.

"Say, Professor," he chuckled to Scaife, "yonder's the pullet I followed aboard. It's going to be a nice little trip after all!"

He rose, huge and jovial. The slender girl saw and recognized him. Her violet eyes widened, her oval face grew a shade paler, and one hand lifted nervously to her mane of dark hair. Ruger, his greedy smile widening, took a step in her direction.

"Attention!"

The new voice was clear and commanding as a gong. Every person on the deck—Scaife on the divan, his companions in nearby chairs, Ruger on the point of resuming his gallant

pursuit, the worried girl who was his quarry, the groups at the ports along either side—all turned to look.

A spare, fit-looking man, almost as tall as Ruger, had just descended one of the companionways. Behind him came half a dozen more, who quickly ranged themselves behind him.

“Attention!” called the leader again. “Assemble here, all of you. I’m Dr. Wolfe Carnac, the commander of this vessel, and I’m here to tell you what to expect of me and what I’ll expect of you.”

CHAPTER II

A MODERN NOAH

Rapidly, the hundred passengers gathered, dropping upon chairs and divans, perching on sills, kneeling or squatting on the carpet. Gathered close together, they looked even fewer—a very tiny knot of humanity to represent their lost planet. Many of them were shabbily dressed and only a few prepossessing. Their faces reflected all things—stupidity, shrewdness, distrust, eagerness, mystification. Every pair of eyes was fixed upon the tall man who had summoned them.

He wore the uniform of a space-captain, with braid and insignia removed. His booted feet were set wide apart, his nervous, corded hands were hooked by their thumbs in his belt. His head, riding high on the upright collar of his black blouse, was the head of a commander and a thinker. Its tawny, backward-brushed hair bore a stripe of gray up the middle and silvery patches at either temple. The moustache that rose in a point on either side of his nose's proud curve was almost black. His chin thrust forward like the prow of a boat, seeming to point the way for his steel-colored eyes.

He waited for the commotion to die down.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began at length, "it is my intention that we understand each other as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

"I seem to have foreseen the explosion of the sun and its results, and to have been alone in that foresight. Some of you may have read the entertaining articles and heard the humorous newscasts that discounted my theory. You may also remember the merriment that rose over the building, at my own expense, of this space-ark in which we now escape destruction."

His clear voice grew a trifle sad. "I spent ten years and all my money in finishing it. Then I invited one hundred persons, choosing from among the most brilliant thinkers on the inner planets, to come with me to a less dangerous part of the universe."

Dr. Wolfe Carnac's wide mouth curved in a mirthless grin. "I found one of that hundred willing to listen to me. He is my second in command. Meet Wynn Keogh."

One hand gestured a man forward from the group at his elbow. Wynn Keogh was youngish, chubby, blond with knowing eyes. Some of the hearers had known of his fame as a biologist.

"I turned then to a less famous but more open-minded class, the brilliant but obscure students of science," went on Carnac. "Instead of ninety-nine converts, I won four." Again he gestured in introduction. "Dr. Uffer, who will act as our surgeon; Forrest Lord, geologist; Ralf Manheim, chemist; Esau Quillan, astronomer."

Four bashful-looking young men bowed. Again Carnac spoke:

"And three days ago, desperate in my desire to rescue some handful of my fellow-beings, I announced publicly that I would take aboard any fifty men and fifty women, asking only that they be healthy and under forty-five years of age. The free meals I offered attracted some of you, I believe. The last man and woman came aboard at 12 o'clock, midnight, New York time, yesterday. And we left Earth immediately, just four hours before the explosion began. So much for our pre-flight history. Now let me make myself clear on our present position."

His voice took on a semi-military rasp.

“First of all, I am the commander of this craft and of all who expect to remain upon it. My orders will be final and unquestioned. Is that clear?”

A murmur arose, which Professor Scaife, standing up, made bold to put into words. “We recognize your authority, sir,” he ventured, “but what are we to do?”

“You’ll have plenty to do,” replied Carnac readily. “Inasmuch as you are to be the ancestors of a new race, you must maintain good health. You will rise, retire and go to meals—twice a day—upon the sounding of a gong. On the fourth level is a small but excellent gymnasium. In classes of twenty each, you will exercise an hour daily. Each person must also circle the fourth-level promenade eighteen times continuously each day, a walk that approximates a mile. Once a week you will report to the surgeon for physical examination.” He paused, listening to a quick whisper from Wynn Keogh. “Yes, and there will be work details, in which you will all share—laundry, sweeping, kitchen police, laboratory and garden assistance, and so on. These duties need occupy only a small part of your time.”

“Will we have amusements?” boomed the giant Saul Ruger.

“Not many, I’m afraid,” was Carnac’s answer. “I suggest a revival of the nearly-forgotten art of intelligent and diverting conversation. There are also cards and other games, and a limited supply of books—”

Cries interrupted him, cries of astonishment at the mention of so ancient a form of entertainment.

“I said books, and it would do you good to read a bit,” said Carnac firmly. “Even if we could spare the power to operate a television set, there are no broadcasting stations left. Ladies and gentlemen, this ship is your world, and you its only inhabitants! Adjust yourselves to that condition.”

“Dr. Carnac!” It was Lille Scaife this time, rising from beside her husband. “Where are we going?”

“We shall attempt settlement upon a planet in the system of Alpha Centauri,” was his quick response, and louder cries of amazement greeted him. He held up his hand for silence.

“It may seem a novel solution to our problem, but it is our only one,” he insisted, a little harshly. “We are provisioned for some six years—”

Still more cries drowned his voice.

“Six years! Isn’t Alpha Centauri about four light-years away?”

“We’d be going almost as fast as light!”

“What about fuel?”

“And acceleration and deceleration?”

Carnac’s voice rose to dominate the clamor once more. “We will approach the speed of light,” he announced, “allowing for a year to accelerate and another to decelerate.”

Professor Scaife spoke again, before the din could rise. “May I challenge that idea, Doctor? Wouldn’t so great a speed be injurious to the ship and its contents?”

Carnac shook his head. “We’ll be safe at anything up to the ultimate speed of more than 180,000 miles a second. Earth, in revolving upon its axis and circling the sun, had a speed of some 150 miles a second. In turn the sun, or what is left of it, moves around another point in the universe, which undoubtedly revolves around yet another, and so on. The aggregate of all these speeds quite conceivably approximates that of light—”

He stilled more commotion with an imperious gesture. “Ladies and gentlemen, I have pointed out that I am the commander and that my orders and decisions are to be accepted without question or hesitation.”

“Wait!” Saul Ruger surged to his feet, his face glowing above his great shoulders like a sunrise over a mountain. “Mr. Scaife here made a suggestion just before you showed up, Dr. Carnac. Uranus is closer, and probably habitable with all this extra sun. Why not—”

“No,” interrupted Carnac unceremoniously. “The increased light and heat will plunge Uranus and the other outer planets into cataclysmic change cycles. If we are emigrating to a new world, we want one with a fixed and seasoned mode of existence. It will be quite hard enough to adapt ourselves to such a mode without meeting ever new changes.”

“But are Alpha Centauri’s planets habitable?” persisted Ruger. “I didn’t think even the best telescopes could tell us that.”

“Our own sun had three habitable planets—Venus, Earth and Mars,” said Carnac patiently. “This does not include Jupiter’s moons, which would have been settled ultimately but for this catastrophe which is even now turning them into a bundle of burnt-out Mercuries. Alpha Centauri has at least fifteen planets, perhaps more. Chances of a habitable world among them are more than good.”

He paused. Ruger started to say something else, thought better of it and sat down.

“I will now be arbitrary and declare these remarks at an end,” Carnac finished. “Further questions must go through administrative channels which we will set up as soon as convenient. Good-day.”

The meeting broke up, everybody chattering at once. Carnac, turning to mount the companionway again, paused as a hand touched his sleeve. He turned to see a slender girl, her beautiful oval face touched with a smile that enhanced the deep violet of her eyes.

“Dr. Carnac,” she said hesitantly, “I’m Elwa Zain. I wanted to say that you mustn’t think we’re all suspicious or ungrateful. I came aboard by mistake, but I want to thank you for saving my life. I’ll obey any order you give.”

Carnac’s gray eyes were not exactly hard, but they grew dull and troubled.

“Up to now I felt that things would move smoothly on this flight,” he said gently. “But with beautiful women to complicate matters!—”

He moved on up the companionway without finishing.

CHAPTER III RUMBLINGS

The aft quarter of the upper deck was partitioned off and fitted up as control room and commander's headquarters. Nearest the door and on either side of it were the control boards with their rows of rocket-control keys, dials and gauges, a stand with space-charts and logarithm tables, and the desk which held the log book and other records. Behind these were two bunks and lockers, one at either wall, for Carnac and Keogh. The back of the compartment was filled with racks in which rested weapons—rust-ray throwers, electro-automatic rifles and pistols, ray-sabers, bombs and canisters of ammunition. On the walls hung a dozen space-overall outfits.

Keogh and Carnac sat side by side at the controls, the vital commander reading a series of formulas from a scribbled sheet while his plump subordinate touched combination after combination of keys. Finally Carnac laid aside the paper.

"We're accelerating at the highest rate of speed compatible with comfort right now," he pronounced. "How are we for direction?"

"Dead on, sir," replied Keogh, his blond head bending above the gauges.

"Good." Carnac was silent for a moment, musing. Then, "Keogh, I was almost broken-hearted when we first shipped our passengers. They looked like the lowest of spindrift scum, the poorest of building material for a new race. But I find some good types among them, especially the younger ones."

"One fine looking woman," muttered Keogh, his face canny as a Buddha's. "That professor's wife—"

"Careful, lad," warned Carnac. "Better leave other men's wives alone."

Keogh nodded, but said nothing. A buzzer sounded and Carnac touched a button. A small screen lighted up on the table-top before him, revealing the image of Ralf Manheim's brown, half-Mongolian face.

"Yes, Manheim, what is it?" prompted Carnac.

"Delegation of passengers, sir," came the brisk voice of the lieutenant. "They want to speak to you."

"Might as well see them," said Carnac. "Send them in."

The reflected face snapped out of sight. A moment later the metal door swung open and the huge bulk of Ruger strode through. Behind him came the cricket-like Scaife, then a squat, powerful-looking fellow whose bashed-in face and crumpled ears bespoke the professional bruiser.

"Yes?" Carnac said expectantly.

"I'm Saul Ruger, Captain," said the big man. "This is Professor Scaife, who spoke to you in the meeting yesterday. And this," indicating the third visitor, "is Jor Wight. We've been chosen by a group of the passengers to talk to you."

"Then talk," granted Carnac, but Scaife looked hesitantly at Keogh. Carnac saw. "You may go, Keogh," he ordered, and the second in command rose and walked out.

The three spokesmen moved slowly forward, ranging themselves around Carnac's chair. He gazed at them, watchfully but tranquilly. Again Ruger spoke:

“Captain Carnac, we’re willing to fit into the scheme of things. Even to sleep in those little five-by-seven cubbies—”

“My bed occupies less room than that,” pointed out Carnac, nodding at his narrow bunk.

“As I say, it isn’t that,” continued Ruger. “It’s that we’d like a voice in—” He hesitated, a bit daunted by Carnac’s level gray stare.

“Voice in what?” urged the commander bleakly.

“In the administration of this ship,” supplied Scaife.

“Yeh,” grunted the brute-faced Jor Wight. “We want a say in things.”

“Sorry, gentlemen,” said Carnac. “I have already announced that I am the sole commander. I have always meant exactly what I said.”

“Hey!” Jor Wight snarled. “What’s the idea, pulling that stuff on free, red-blooded—”

“That will be enough,” broke in Carnac. “Suggestions I’ll listen to. But demands for a voice in operating this ship or otherwise conducting the expedition are out of order. Good-day.”

“Is this final?” Ruger almost growled, but Carnac did not deign an answer. The three turned and walked stiffly out.

Again studying the dials and gauges, Carnac opened a notebook and, consulting tables of figures, began to select and jot down new formulas for the next stage of the flight. In the middle of his work, he turned to a vision screen and switched on the power. It showed him the back track of his ship as in a mirror, and an immense, fire-furred globe of white-hot gas that was the many times swollen sun almost filled the rectangle of the screen. He made a brief checkup. Yes, Mars was doomed. Though outside the range of the explosion itself, the Red Planet was crumbling in the heat. Carnac’s hard lips twitched a little, as if in pain at the spectacle.

“Captain! Dr. Carnac!”

He turned at the voice. Wynn Keogh had returned, and with him was a dark woman of bold, healthy beauty.

“I’m Lille Scaife,” she announced. “Mr. Keogh and I have been talking.”

“Yes, very profitably,” supplemented Keogh, bridleing a bit as he glanced at his handsome companion.

“You received a passengers’ delegation just now, Dr. Carnac?” continued Lille Scaife. “And they seemed rebellious as they left?” She smiled triumphantly. “I’m well informed, you see.”

“I see,” he agreed rather colorlessly.

“Perhaps, sir, you and Mr. Keogh,” she gave the second in command a sudden eloquent glance, “would like a spy system, to operate among the passengers. It would be valuable in many ways.”

“Mrs. Scaife,” said Carnac, “when I need a spy system I shall form it myself.”

“But Mr. Keogh agreed—”

“Keogh, remember what I advised you a while ago?” Carnac’s eyes raked his subordinate. “About something that’s best left alone?” His voice grew insistent. “Do you remember, I say?”

“Yes, sir,” mumbled Keogh.

Lille Scaife had slipped out again, without so much as a farewell. Carnac looked at his subordinate more kindly.

“Better not start any marital disharmonies,” he said.

Keogh changed the subject. "There's another passenger outside to see you. A girl. Shall I send her in?"

"Yes, I'll make a clean sweep of these early-voyage visits."

Keogh followed Lille Scaife out, holding the door for Elwa Zain to enter. Left alone with the newcomer, Carnac frowned a little. It frightened her, and the words on her lips died.

"You're Miss Zain?" queried Carnac. "Perhaps I owe you an apology for my shortness yesterday."

"It was about that very matter that I came," she managed, encouraged by his apparent relenting. "I was afraid that I'd given offense in some way."

He shook his head. "No, I meant what I said. A handsome woman will cause trouble in so small and cramped a group, and there are at least two handsome specimen—yourself and Professor Scaife's wife. There, that's as much of an explanation as I ever give for my arbitrary remarks."

"You think Mrs. Scaife is handsome?" she said, then went on without waiting for reply. "Dr. Carnac—or Captain Carnac, if I should call you that—I came aboard by accident. I was a professional dancer, and on the last night of Earth I was annoyed as I left the stage of the cafe where I worked. When I started home, he followed. I fled here—and so, I find, did he. May I ask for protection?"

"Has he bothered you?"

"No, but—"

"Then wait until he does," interrupted Carnac, even more brusquely than usual. Sitting, he studied his gauges yet again, struck a key or two on the control-board, judged the change in position and speed. "May I be left alone now?"

She mumbled something and left. Carnac's frown deepened. He did not want to be moved, especially after his recent lecture to Keogh; yet he felt an interest in womankind for the first time since he had begun work on his *Ark of Space* a decade before. He sighed over the controls. After all, why should he be so austere? He was only in his early thirties. Maybe, when the trip was well begun . . .

"Doc!"

He swung around in his chair. Jor Wight was back in the room, his battered face twisted into a fighting grimace.

"I slipped in when that Zain girl left," he volunteered in a snarling voice. "Say, you talked mighty high when the delegation was here. I didn't like it, see?" He moved a tense step nearer. "And do you know what I do when guys talk high to me?"

"Get out of here," ordered Carnac.

"How would you like a punch in the eye?" A knotted fist raised.

"Get out," repeated the commander. One hand flipped open a drawer in the metal table, then the hand stole in and emerged with a small rust-ray thrower. Jor Wight saw it and paused in his advance.

"You wouldn't burn me," he protested.

"I will unless you're gone before I count three. One, two—"

Jor Wight's exit was the swiftest of the entire day.

Carnac relaxed, thrusting out his booted feet. In an hour's time he had antagonized a delegation of his passengers, discovered a dangerous weak spot in his chief subordinate's makeup, gone far toward offending a girl he liked, and repelled a threatened attack at point of a weapon. Who said space voyages were boresome?

His eyes, quartering the floor, glimpsed a folded bit of paper almost at his feet. Stooping, he picked it up, smoothed it out. It bore three words.

Carnac's face hardened as he read them:

URANUS OR NOTHING

It was a warning. Somebody had dropped it there for him to pick up.

Who?

CHAPTER IV

THE STRUGGLE IN SPACE

From the outside, the *Ark of Space* looked as Scaife had described it to Ruger, a metal spear. Four hundred yards long and twelve yards in diameter, it tapered to a point at the bow. The front half and more of the cylindrical hull was filled with fuel mixture, kept liquid by high pressure. Then came a twenty-five-yard section divided into two levels within—the lower for a garden under artificial lights, the upper fitted with pens for animals to aid in the hoped-for colonization, and also containing a laboratory compartment for the air-freshening apparatus and other scientific necessities. Behind this—the hand-grip of the spear, Scaife had dubbed it—was the fifty-yard section occupied by the passengers and the controls. The final hundred yards was taken up with the rocket motor, and from its rear jets gushed a constant flame, like a fiery plume to guide the great javelin in his flight.

Dr. Wolfe Carnac, quitting the interior through a lock-panel in the control chamber, stood erect on the outer plating. His spare body was swaddled in an insulated space-overall, his head protected by a casque of clouded glassite, his hands muffled in elbow-length space-mittens, his feet strapped into boots with magnetized soles. With a slender, cane-like rod of steel, he began to tap the hull. His practiced hand felt a reassuringly solid vibration—apparently the speedy journey through Earth's atmosphere had not damaged the craft's integument in the least.

Moving forward, he tapped his way along, meanwhile glancing to right and left. The star-spattered gloom of airless space surrounded him save for the swollen patch of light behind, where the exploded sun hung. Measuring his craft with his eye, Carnac thought of the same spear-simile that Scaife had employed. Then, with a slight grin, he visualized himself as a very small wizard riding upon a very large broomstick, tipped with a sheaf of fire instead of a bundle of straw. Or, as he moved cautiously forward on magnetized shoes, he might be compared to a mouse running along a length of drainpipe. Tap, tap, spoke his rod upon the gray curve of the hull. He noted a slight opening between two plates, tried to probe it with the pointed end of his tool.

What was that new vibration?

It shook the sensitive rod which he held pressed against the plates—an impact, another and another—footsteps, stealthy and close at hand.

Carnac glanced quickly around. He stood alone on the hull. But what was beneath him—that is, on the opposite side of the narrow metal cylinder? A man in space-armor and magnetized boots could cling there as easily as he clung here.

He took a step or two sideways, coming in view of a new quarter of the hull's circumference. A figure popped into sight, helmeted and overalled as he was. Another glassite-masked head appeared behind the first, staring up at Carnac around the curve of metal. Next instant the two had thrown themselves at him.

As quickly as though he were in gymnasium trunks instead of space-armor, Carnac fell into a position of defense. His bar defended him like a sword. He was just in time to ward off a blow struck by a bludgeon in the hands of his foremost assailant—a bludgeon that looked like a hoe-handle from the garden compartment.

The stroke spent itself on the steel bar, and Carnac disengaged his own weapon and lashed out with it. He struck the man's helmet, but the rod was too slight to break the tough glassite. The second man was closing in on his flank, and Carnac broke ground warily toward the stern of the ship.

The fellow with the club moved confidently to attack again, while his companion tried to circle wide, lifting a pistol-like something in his gloved fist. Carnac's heart chilled—a rust-ray, perhaps stolen from his own arsenal! By happy chance, he ducked low just as the weapon spouted a narrow beam of light. He heard a momentary roar as it grazed his helmet, then without straightening, he charged the man with the club. His bar, darting out, struck not at the body, but at the feet. Square across the metal toes of the boots he smashed home, then whirled the rod up saberwise to strike and hoist the fellow under the armpit.

Like a batted ball, the overalled figure rose from the hull, rose higher and higher. Carnac felt a surge of savage triumph within his muscles. As he had hoped, his blow on the feet had jammed the magnetic units of the shoes, so that the man weighed no more than a feather on the gravityless exterior of the hull. Helplessly struggling, the would-be assassin floated farther and farther away toward the rear of the craft. In a moment, the jet of the rocket engines would send him into nothingness. Carnac turned toward his remaining attacker.

That worthy, clumsily fingering the ray-thrower in his heavy mitten, took careful aim. Carnac threw his bar in a desperate attempt to strike down the muzzle. It missed. Again came the pencil-thin gush of the ray's flame. Carnac felt it ripple the side of his overall. An instant later he swayed, light-headed. His air supply was escaping through the scorched hole.

Another spurt of the ray would surely be the end of Carnac, but the other's weapon seemed to droop, and then he was dashing hurriedly down under the hull. What had frightened him? Carnac glanced backward. Somebody had appeared on the plating toward the stern, somebody hurrying up with an electro-automatic rifle.

Carnac started toward his rescuer, one mitten trying to stanch the escaping air. He seemed fragile, ready to float away like the enemy he had knocked loose from the ship a moment ago. All but his feet, that is—they weighed tons inside his shoes. He took a step, another and another. What was the matter with his glassite helmet? It was all very well for it to be clouded slightly against the glare of light in space, but this—he noticed for the first time—was too dark entirely. He must complain to the manufacturers. No, silly . . . the manufacturers had been disintegrated, and their factories with them. Now the clouding was opaque . . . his ears rang . . . this was the end, and a silly end it was, for one who had outwitted fate and escaped the destruction of four worlds. . . .

CHAPTER V ULTIMATUM

Consciousness returned laggingly to Wolfe Carnac, as though it were not quite sure of the way back. First he was aware of a swishing hum at the center of his brain, like a dynamo off key, then a faint groan. He recognized the voice that groaned. It was his.

After that he saw darkness, where a moment before he had seen nothing. His eyes were closed, as though heavy coins weighted the lids. Was he dead? No, for never did corpse know this tingling of hands, feet and lips—this twisting of nerve centers. He groaned again and opened his eyes.

He was lying on his own bunk in the control room, and between his eyes and the curved metal ceiling he made out the anxious faces of Keogh and Elwa Zain, so distorted to his dizzy vision that their looks of consternation seemed ludicrous. Carnac laughed, albeit feebly, rose to a sitting posture and rocked his head like a stunned boxer.

“Thank God you’re all right!” gasped Keogh. “If it hadn’t been for Miss Zain here—”

“Miss Zain?” said Carnac, his head clearing and strength flowing back to his limbs. “I thought I collapsed outside, with the air gone from my suit.”

“That’s right,” nodded Keogh. “Miss Zain it was who went out there and dragged you in.”

“On impulse,” added the girl. “I had heard murmurings—hard to run down, I know, but disquieting—against you. I thought to come and warn you, but you had already gone out in your space-suit.”

“Then why not tell Mr. Keogh?” suggested Carnac, with a bleakness that he himself found hard to explain.

“Nobody answered my bell at the control-room door,” she explained. “I made bold to—push in.” She seemed to fear disapproval. “Mr. Keogh wasn’t there, and I saw at once that you were in danger.”

“How did you diagnose that?” Carnac almost cried.

“By the fact that three hooks on your space-overall rack were empty,” she replied. “I knew that Mr. Keogh wouldn’t be outside at the same time you were—”

“He should have been at the controls,” interrupted Carnac, and Keogh flushed in embarrassment.

“Your other lieutenants—Uffer, Manheim, Lord and Quillan—I had seen, every one, just a few moments before.” Her expression betrayed something of triumph. “Therefore, one of the three missing suits was yours, while the others were undoubtedly borrowed by trouble-makers.”

“Who had entered unbidden in Keogh’s absence, as you had,” supplied Carnac.

Keogh mopped his plump face. “I’m sorry,” he began, but Carnac waved him to silence, his eyes on Elwa.

“Therefore,” he resumed for her, “you took the job of rescue upon yourself?”

“I had not time to call help,” she said, almost apologetically. “I grabbed a fourth suit, put it on, caught up a rifle, and slipped out by a lock panel. You know the rest.”

“Thank you, Miss Zain,” said Carnac. “I owe you my life. It’s too bad that I had to be rescued by an officious passenger.”

Her face grew suddenly pained and she tossed her mane of dark hair. Carnac rose, almost completely revived, and spoke to Keogh.

“What about the two men outside?”

“The one knocked loose from the hull was apparently destroyed as he drifted into the rocket blasts,” was the reply. “I suppose the other is still at large out there.”

“Order Manheim and Lord into space-overalls, give them rifles, and send them to arrest him,” snapped Carnac. “Warn them that he has a rust-ray. Then gather the passengers on the salon deck. I’ll speak to them.”

Keogh saluted and left, apparently glad to escape his chief’s accusing eyes. Elwa hung back a moment at the very threshold.

“Dr. Carnac,” she ventured, “you act almost sorry that you’re alive.”

He softened a bit. “Forgive me if I was harsh. I hope *you* aren’t sorry.” Then he was silent; Elwa was gone.

Crossing to the controls, he checked gauges and dials automatically. In the back of his head, fierce thoughts squabbled.

He had been rude. After all, it was a slight breach of discipline that she had committed. Hadn’t she more than atoned by her wisdom and courage in saving him? How could he explain, to her and himself, his bad manners?

“A short while ago you were telling yourself you were young,” he taunted himself savagely. “Now you’ve joined the old crochet class, and at the same time you’re a childish idiot. Afraid you’d be swelled by Elwa Zain’s good looks; you’ve treated her shabbily.”

He scowled for some minutes, then a buzzer sounded. He flicked on the vision-screen power and saw the well-nourished image of Wynn Keogh.

“Passengers ready to hear you, sir,” said his subordinate’s voice.

Carnac called Quillan to take the controls, descended the companionway to the cabin deck below, then to the salon deck. Sitting in a group, the passengers watched him expectantly. As at the first meeting he had called, the hundred men and women seemed a pitifully small knot of survivors.

Standing before them, the commander let his eyes flit from one face to another. Side by side sat the bald, shrewd Professor Scaife and his voluptuous wife Lille, with beyond them the huge form of Ruger and, still farther back, Jor Wight, the broken-faced fighter. Carnac was somehow surprised to see these leaders of dissension all here. Who were the two who had attacked him outside, one of them now ashes in space, the other being hunted by Manheim and Lord?

“Ladies and gentlemen,” began Carnac, “at the beginning of this voyage I announced the objective as the system of Alpha Centauri, and explained why I felt that no nearer world was satisfactory. However, I cannot longer ignore the seeming determination of a faction here present to land on Uranus instead. Shall I again set forth my arguments against such a move?”

“No necessity,” spoke up Scaife at once.

“No,” chimed in Ruger’s growl. “We remember everything you said.”

“Very good,” rejoined Carnac. “I give in. Those of you who wish to disembark and attempt a settlement on Uranus may do so.”

A cry of joy went up and the hearers surged to their feet, their voices swelling into a cheer that vibrated the solid metal bulkheads. Carnac, gazing at the suddenly jubilant faces, felt a pang. Not one of them, not one believed in his argument for a further but safer destination.

Not one! Then his eye sought the face of Elwa Zain, at the very rear of the gathering. Her expression was not of joy, but of enigma. What did she think?

Scaife was pushing forward toward Carnac.

“Thanks, Doctor,” he was crying, while waving for silence. “I wish to thank you on behalf of the passengers.”

“No thanks, please,” Carnac demurred. “It was definite pressure that brought about this decision.”

“But we’re grateful,” insisted the professor. “Uranus, I say again, will be a hospitable world. With determination, energy and a few supplies—”

“Who said anything about supplies?” snapped Carnac, and sudden shocked silence fell. Into the commander’s eyes dawned grim mockery.

“I offered to land upon Uranus any persons who wished it,” he said. “I meant just that. We shall enter the atmospheric envelope of the planet, descend close enough to drop all malcontents by parachute. But not an ounce of supplies shall be unloaded!”

CHAPTER VI

PRELUDE TO MUTINY

Over the roar and commotion of a hundred throats rose the clear, authoritative voice of Carnac.

“Silence!” he thundered, and again his hearers let their protests die half spoken.

“I’m not a despot or a fool,” he blazed. “I explained once that Uranus is in the grip of a change cycle, through which men can hardly exist. Some of you think otherwise—think it to the extent of trying to kill me.” His eyes, gray and hard as gun-muzzles, raked back and forth across the press of men and women, and no gaze was steady enough to meet them.

“I’m tired of bickering! Those who wish to leave may do so, but I’ll give no supplies to you. By heaven, I’ll save what I can of humanity’s remnant, and if this is the only way I can stimulate you into a reasoning condition—”

“Hold on!” bawled a challenger. Jor Wight shouldered his way into the excited front rank. His own eyes flared threateningly.

“Big words won’t do no more,” he spat. “You ain’t our daddy, Doc. If you don’t do what we want—why, we’ll make you!”

“That’s the talk!” shouted someone else. Was it Saul Ruger? The big ex-gambler was watching Wight, but did not move forward to his support.

Carnac faced the bruiser, glad of a single person to treat with. “Wight,” he said. “I’ve never feared your sort yet. Get back.”

“You bully!” It was the voice of Elwa Zain. She skirted the little crowd to stand beside Wight, and it was Carnac she accused.

“Because you saved us, must you trample on us?” she demanded heatedly. “Haven’t I, at least, shown that rescue works both ways? I paid my debt to you an hour ago.”

“Don’t presume on that fact, Miss Zain,” warned Carnac.

The disfigured face of Wight grew crimson and his anger exploded like a bomb.

“You can’t talk like that to no woman!” he cried. “Not while I’m here!”

Clenching his fists, he moved forward as if to strike.

At the same moment a sharp, abrupt snap sounded at Carnac’s elbow, the stick-breaking report of an electro-automatic pistol. Jor Wight slammed down upon his face and lay still. Wynn Keogh moved to a position beside his chief, pistol still poised. The excited throng gave back.

“There’ll be no mutiny!” trumpeted Keogh.

“Get upstairs to the cabin deck!” called Carnac. “Every man and woman to your cabins, and remain inside until you hear an assembly bell!”

For a moment, there was hesitation, then some timid spirits moved toward the companionways. The others followed. Carnac watched them go, one by one. Finally, as the din of departure sank away, he spoke to Keogh.

“Was killing Wight necessary?”

“Afraid so, sir. If not now, later.”

Uffer, the surgeon, materialized from somewhere to stoop and examine the fallen figure.

“Dead as a log,” he pronounced. “Shall we get rid of him?”

“Yes, out through a lock-panel,” nodded Carnac. “Burial in space. And there are so few left to carry on the race—it’s a pity.”

“Yes, a pity!”

Elwa Zain moved forward. She had hung back as the crowd had left, and now she faced Carnac sternly above Wight’s corpse.

“We’re responsible for this death, aren’t we, Dr. Carnac?” she said with a bitter smile. “He, moved by my quarrel with you, offered violence. Mr. Keogh, fearing for your safety, shot him down.”

Carnac shook his head at her. “I don’t know just what condemnation your emotional feminine logic is trying to visit upon me, but I, as commander, have neither time nor inclination to listen.”

“I’m an enemy, then?” she flung out, her pretty mouth curling in scorn.

“If you don’t go to your cabin,” he told her, “I’ll arrest you.”

She moved stiffly toward a companionway. Carnac watched her go, his grim expression touched by something like unhappiness. Keogh’s voice recalled his superior’s attention to a former problem.

“Here’s Manheim and Lord back, sir.”

The two lieutenants, unhelmeted but still in their space-overalls, came to salute. Their eyes widened as they caught sight of the dead man on the deck.

“Trouble, Dr. Carnac?” inquired Manheim.

“A bit. What about your job?”

Lord made the report. “We found nobody outside, sir. He must have sneaked back in before we went out.”

“Too bad. If we’d captured him, he might have confessed who sent him out there to kill me.” The commander brooded. “Well, probably we’ll know soon enough. Keogh!”

“Sir?” responded the second-in-command.

“How long to Uranus?”

“At our present acceleration, about ten days.”

“That’s time enough for everything we can possibly do.” Carnac’s moody tone became crisp and official. “Everybody up to the control room for a conference. Quillan is up there now, and you men and he are all I can count on.”

“Thanks for trusting us, sir,” said Keogh for the group, “but I hope we aren’t the only ones. Maybe we can sniff out some of the passengers who will stick by you.”

“Maybe,” conceded Carnac, “but most of them will just cheer on the faction that seems strongest. I can count only six on our side—six against a hundred.” He paused, eyes on Wight’s body. “Six against ninety-nine, I should say. Or ninety-eight, since another man was killed outside. I hope the casualty list doesn’t run any higher.”

He led the way upward.

CHAPTER VII

REVOLT

“Ready for the concert downstairs, sir.”

Carnac looked up at Keogh’s words, then laid down the pen with which he had just made the eleventh day’s entry in the log book. Swinging around in his chair, he quickly checked the controls.

“Quillan!” he called.

“Sir?” came the ready voice of the young subordinate.

“Take charge while I look in at the entertainment, will you? In a little while somebody will relieve you.”

“Right, sir,” replied Quillan, sliding into the vacated seat.

Keogh gazed for a moment at the substitute, as if in disapproval. “Wouldn’t you rather have me stand by?”

Carnac shook his head. “You’ve done so much, planning this show, that you’re the logical master of ceremonies. I want to see you in that role.”

Keogh’s round face relaxed in a flattered grin. “I’ve done nicely at that,” he conceded. “I’m proud of my men’s chorus especially—Ruger, Scaife, all the others that we thought would be the worst trouble-makers.”

“If they’re busy entertaining us,” said Carnac, “we’ll be too far past Uranus for them ever to ask to be set off there.”

“Exactly. The show will last three hours, at least—and then we’ll be more than a million miles past Uranus.”

The two sauntered out of the control room and down the companionway to emerge upon the salon deck. The passengers, seated in lounging groups at either end, applauded their appearance as though there had never been a threat or a dissenting murmur. Carnac smiled, briefly but kindly.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he addressed the audience. “The show seems to be Mr. Keogh’s. Let him get on with it.”

He bowed to his lieutenant amid new applause, then moved to an easy chair and sat down. Keogh bowed in turn, then drew from the bosom of his tunic a folded sheet of paper.

“First, allow me to present Mrs. Scaife, our accompanist,” he began, and the professor’s exotic wife rose to take a chair in the center space. In her lap she held a valise-like pianolette of outmoded twenty-ninth century make, but apparently in good condition. Her skilful hands touched its many valves, evoking chords of music in flute, brass and string tones.

“And our first number,” continued Keogh a little pompously, “will be a dance by Miss Elwa Zain.”

He retired to the companionway as, to the accompaniment of Lille Scaife’s burst of heady minor melody, the slender figure of the dancer glided into the open.

She wore a long dark cloak which she lifted with outstretched arms, revealing a tight-fitting silver dancing dress that left shoulders and legs bare. Then, in time to the quickening music, she danced—a slim but vigorous flash of motion, now poised on tiptoe with her cloak swishing like spread wings, now swathed, crouching, seeming to shrink and swell in turn, her whole body emanating rhythm to the last trained ounce. Somber grew the music, and Elwa’s

dance interpreted fear, despair, tragedy. A gay note in the accompaniment, and she was a pirouetting, smiling elf, swirling, swaying and posturing as though perpetual motion had come true in her. Then suddenly it was over—over too soon, with Elwa bowing to the last note as it drowned in applause. She half-ran from the floor, her flushed face smiling with happiness over her own success, and Carnac on impulse waved her to a seat at his side.

“You were worth watching,” he told her with genuine warmth.

“You liked it?” she whispered, in almost childlike delight at his praise.

“I did. And I hope that soon—”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Keogh was announcing again, “we now display more of our talent.” He paused, as if to gain effect. “It may astound you—most of you, at least,” and he smiled briefly at Lille Scaife, as though they shared a joke. “Our men’s chorus!”

At his gesture, they rose from the seats where they had lolled in a group—sixteen men, among them the towering, florid Ruger and bald, scrawny Scaife. Ranging themselves in column of twos, they marched into the open space with the smart precision of soldiers.

“Halt!” cried Keogh in a voice of authority, and they obeyed. “Ready!” was his next shout, and half of the chorus faced one way, while the other half faced opposite. Intrigued, the onlookers leaned forward in their seats. Once more Keogh spoke:

“Draw weapons!”

Every man of the sixteen made a quick dip of his right hand into the breast of his jacket. Next instant those sixteen right hands held pistols or rust-rays. Keogh stepped back against the bulkhead so as to command both ends of the salon.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he continued in his announcer’s voice, “I wish to announce that we, as the self-appointed saviors of this expedition, are taking command. I wish to warn you that any argument will result in someone getting hurt.”

For once in his active and dominating career, Wolfe Carnac was absolutely mute and motionless with amazement. He sat in his chair like a man of wood, his gray eyes wide as they stared at his second-in-command. Keogh’s own gaze did not seek him, and Keogh’s voice went on:

“I know that not all of you have really worried about where we are going. In fact,” and he sounded elated, “the real thinkers now stand upon this stage. We don’t intend to die in unexplored space at Wolfe Carnac’s whim—we’re going to land on Uranus.”

Carnac raised his own voice at last. “You fool!” he roared.

Keogh bowed mockingly. “Found your tongue, Doctor? I’m afraid it won’t help you. Never mind quoting the law on mutiny. There aren’t any police to invoke. Stand up and surrender.”

Pale with rage, Carnac bounded to his feet. His hand whipped to the holster at his side. At least he would finish the career of his lying, traitorous lieutenant—

But even as he cleared the weapon, even as the eight men facing his end of the salon lifted their own pieces, somebody sprang upon him, gripping and tugging at his own arm and wrist. Elwa Zain, surprisingly strong, snatched the electro-automatic from his untightened fingers and fell quickly back out of reach, pointing it at him.

“No you don’t!” she warned him. “You’re a prisoner!”

CHAPTER VIII

THE RULE OF THE REBELS

For a moment, Carnac stood still, his demeanor half tranquil, half stunned. As a matter of fact, he was diagnosing, scientist-like, his sudden sense of adequacy. He had felt the forlornness of one gun against so many—but, unarmed, he had wits to fight with, and he still felt that his wits were the best on board.

His level gray eyes ignored the girl who had just tricked him and regarded Keogh instead. That worthy smiled.

“I’m glad we didn’t have to kill you, Doctor. We need you to land our ship. I realized that even as we attacked you outside ten days ago.”

“Then it was you who escaped?” Carnac asked, rather quietly.

“Yes. I failed deliberately, and barely escaped. As I say, I’m glad.”

Carnac’s teeth bared. “I suppose that I should offer suave congratulations and accept defeat gracefully. But I’m not a good loser, Keogh.”

“I don’t care what kind of a loser you are,” blustered back the leader of the mutiny. “You’ve lost.”

Carnac took a step forward. “Keogh, your position of advantage is only temporary.” Another advance. The armed mutineers stood tense, the audience remained cowed and silent.

“Careful!” the ex-subordinate warned him, motioning to his men to cover Carnac. “You saw how quickly Jor Wight died some days ago—how I killed him simply to keep him from blabbing out the revolt plans—”

“You’ve already admitted the need of me to finish the voyage for you.” A third stride toward Keogh.

“Doctor, we mean business. You’ll land the ship, as I said.”

Elwa Zain spoke suddenly. “Mr. Keogh, hadn’t the women better be taken away?”

“That’s what I think,” seconded Lille Scaife. “If our new commander is going to be pressing with his arguments on this question—”

“Very good,” granted Keogh, his eyes probing at Elwa as though to decide how trustworthy she was. “Turn that captured gun over to Mrs. Scaife, Miss Zain,” and, as Elwa did so, “then form the ladies into a column of twos and march them up to their cabins.”

Lille Scaife and Elwa rapidly did his bidding, then placed themselves at the head of the platoon of women. At Keogh’s “March!” the party moved to a companionway, then up and out of sight.

When they were gone, Keogh’s round, proud moon of a face confronted Carnac again.

“Now, Doctor,” he bantered, “since we’ve dismissed the more squeamish half of the audience, shall we go on with the question of whether or not you’ll take landing orders from me?”

Carnac was quite close to the mutineers, and he regarded their pointed pistols and rust-rays no more than so many forefingers.

“If you mean torture,” he said contemptuously, “that won’t work, either. Unless you land within an hour, we’ll be too far past Uranus—and at our present speed it would take weeks of expert maneuvering to bring us back.”

“Wonders can be performed within an hour,” grunted Saul Ruger from his place in the double line of armed men.

Carnac lifted his voice so that all could hear. “Men,” he appealed, “this revolt is a minority movement. Can’t the rest of you believe me when I say that a landing on Uranus is ill-advised and may be the death of you all? Haven’t I already explained that the tremendous changes brought about by the exploded sun’s magnificent light and heat are undoubtedly too great for us to meet and adjust?”

“You’re right!” yelled back someone from the section of the audience behind him.

“Sure,” chimed in a voice from the opposite end of the salon. “Let’s back the Doc up!”

But Keogh snapped his fingers as a signal, and the audience subsided before the suddenly levelled guns of the sixteen mutineers.

“That’s better,” purred Keogh. “Keep your seats and you won’t get hurt.” He spoke to his nearest confederates. “Ruger, Scaife! Come with me, and bring Carnac with you. You others, stay on guard here. We’re going up and take over the control room.”

The scrawny professor and the huge gambler fell out of line and took their places on either side of Carnac. Keogh led the way up the steps, past the silent corridors of the cabin deck where none of the women could be seen or heard, on to the top level. Without speaking, the four marched to the door of the control chamber. It was closed.

Keogh, leading, tried the knob. It did not move.

“Locked!” he snapped, then spoke into the microphone on the jamb. “Quillan? Open up.”

Silence.

“Open up, I say; it’s Keogh.”

The speaker box overhead answered:

“We heard you, Mr. Keogh.” The quiet tones were Elwa Zain’s. “We’re in here, all the women. And we won’t open up.”

Keogh nodded Ruger forward. “Burn the door down with that rust-ray.”

“Not so fast,” Elwa’s hurried warning came. “We’ve got a hostage. Put that ray to the door, and it will eat through into the body of Lille Scaife, who’s spread-eagled against this side!”

“That’s true, Wynn,” came the gasping assurance of the professor’s wife. “They’re staging a counter-revolution—they’ve got me.”

Keogh swore. “Let her go!” he bellowed into the microphone. “If you—”

“Whatever you do, she’ll have suffered first,” Elwa promised him. “Even after that’s over, and you’re inside, we’ll be hard to whip.”

“Save me!” wailed Lille Scaife. “Wynn, you said you’d protect me!”

The thin fingers of Scaife clutched Carnac’s arm in an agonized grip. His lips mumbled wretchedly:

“Keogh, we can’t turn back now. Even if we must sacrifice—”

“No!” quavered the rebel commander. “Lille, darling! Have courage!”

“Wynn,” she pleaded. “You’ll save me?”

“I swear it,” Keogh almost jabbered. “I got into this thing for you, sweetheart. Now—”

Scaife was mumbling again:

“You love my wife, Keogh? And she loves you?”

Suddenly he had moved from beside Carnac, flinging his spider-body upon Keogh, fists flailing.

“Carnac!” he screamed over his shoulder. “Fight for your life! I’ll take care of this skunk!”

CHAPTER IX ON TO THE STARS

Scaife did not need to urge Carnac. The commander of the expedition had stood quiet and speechless during the parley at the door, but his nerves and muscles had been tensed for a desperate try. Now, even before the jealousy-crazed professor's first blow met Keogh's fat jowls, Carnac had turned upon Ruger.

All the way up from the salon deck, the prisoner had studied this biggest of his guards with critical eyes. The huge Ruger had an overhanging paunch that bespoke softness and poor condition, and into the midst of this, Carnac darted a hard fist. The gambler's scarlet face turned pale and his mouth opened fishlike. Next instant, Carnac had clamped Ruger's weapon hand in both of his and was struggling to possess himself of the rust-ray.

But Ruger, recovering from the wind-breaking blow, summoned his strength to bring the muzzle of the ray into line with the doctor. Carnac writhed aside and then under the weapon, pulling Ruger's arm across his shoulder. With a heave, he threw the heavier man. The sizzling streak of rust-flame impacted on the metal bulkhead with a sound as of ripping tin, left a jagged oxidized trail as it shifted, then abruptly died as Ruger, falling heavily, lost his grip on the weapon. Carnac, dropping a bony knee on his adversary's breast-bone, shifted his hold to the throat.

He was baffled for a moment by the great folds of flesh, and in that moment Ruger's big hands tore open Carnac's collar and gouged painfully at the jugular vein. Releasing his own hold, Carnac sprang up and back to free himself.

He had a momentary glimpse of the other pair of combatants. Like Ruger, Keogh had dropped his weapon and was disarming the feebler Scaife. Then he pinned the professor in a corner by one clutched shoulder, while his other fist belabored the thin face. This much Carnac saw before Ruger, scrambling up with clumsy swiftness, returned to combat.

It was like the charge of a boar upon a wildcat. Carnac easily sidestepped a floundering rush, pivoting to take his enemy on the flank and sending right and left smashes to ribs and jaw-angle. Ruger reeled but did not collapse, then clutched Carnac's throat again. This time the commander did not fight clear. Instead his own clutch fastened upon Ruger's lapels. One active leg doubled upward, the foot digging into the pit of the gross belly. Next instant Carnac flung himself backward and down, at the same time dragging Ruger's face close to his and hoisting the giant body by straightening the bent leg. The gambler somersaulted in midair and fell with a crash that vibrated the metal deck.

"Well done!" cried the voice of Elwa from the speaker-box overhead. "We saw that in the vision screen!"

The door suddenly flung open. Ruger, shakily trying to rise after his stunning overthrow, gave a snarl and clawed for the fallen rust-ray near him on the deck. An electro-automatic snicked and he melted down like a lump of butter on a griddle.

Elwa, the pistol in her hand, advanced across the threshold. Behind her moved Quillan, a rifle in his hands. Over his shoulder stared the drawn face of Lille Scaife, surrounded by her determined captors.

"Keogh," said Elwa quietly, "let Professor Scaife go. You're through."

Keogh, still pummeling his sweetheart's husband, suddenly released his hold and stepped back, hands raised in submission. "Yes, I'm through," he conceded wearily.

Scaife, staggering and bloody, laughed wildly.

"*You're* through," he yammered, "but I'm not!"

A leap, and he had reached the rust-ray for which Ruger had fumbled as he died. A scoop of his hand, and he had it. "You stole Lille from me—"

The narrow stream of fire gushed. For a moment the whole upper half of Keogh's body glowed, like a chubby Buddha of red-hot metal. Then the legs beneath it collapsed. Keogh subsided, a mass of clinkered ash from his waist up.

Carnac made two strides toward the professor and wrenched the ray from him. Scaife made no resistance. He contemplated his work with a smile of almost childlike satisfaction upon his battered lips.

"Throw blankets over these bodies," Carnac ordered the watchers at the door. "Quillan, get sleep-gas bombs from the third cabinet at the back. Drop a couple two flights down into that crowd on the salon deck."

He felt weak and unstrung, but straightened himself with a violent jerk. He must keep command until the rebellion was crushed. Quillan darted through the press of women to do Carnac's bidding. Lille Scaife, still guarded by two armed girls, came slowly into the open, cringing under the accusing glare of her betrayed husband. Elwa walked to Carnac's side and placed her hand on his arm.

"I'm glad it came off with no more killing than this," she said gently.

"You knew rebellion was coming?" he demanded.

"Didn't we all know it? With the men plotting and counterplotting, I organized the women. With the exception of Lille Scaife, they were willing to listen to me and follow whatever cue I gave them. That is why, hoping for luck, I disarmed you before you forced your own destruction. Then I came and captured the control room."

"You're a wonder!" he cried, with absolute honesty of admiration.

Quillan was heading down the companionway, with a gas bomb in either hand.

An hour later the fumes had been winnowed from the salon deck, but twoscore figures still sprawled silent in the chairs and on the divans or lay stretched on the floor. Carnac and Elwa were gathering up the pistols and rust-rays dropped by the now-slumbering mutineers in the center of the space. Straightening, they rested for a moment.

Elwa gazed almost tenderly upon the sleepers, her dark robe clutched over her silver dancing costume. "They seem so peaceful now," she mused aloud. "A little while ago they were gun-pointing rebels and frightened captives."

"When they awake," replied Carnac, "we'll be far past Uranus. There'll be no reason for another outbreak, the more because the leaders are all disposed of. I'll hold a court-martial, of course, but there'll be no real need for harsh measures."

Quillan, coming down the companionway, saluted.

"Sir, I've been wondering," he said. "Who'll be second in command in Mr. Keogh's place?"

"Have you a nominee, Quillan?" asked Carnac.

"Well, it seems to me that, what with the way Miss Elwa Zain—" he paused. "Not teaching you your business, sir, but she thought it out so well first and then acted so splendidly when the time was ripe—"

Carnac laughed. “Quillan, you took the words out of my mouth. It isn’t often that I permit anyone to do that. Yes, we’d be unwise and ungrateful if we chose anyone else.” He faced Elwa. “Well, do you accept your commission?”

She put out a hand, and he clasped it warmly. But neither felt that a handclasp was enough. As if by single impulse, they drew closer together.

[The end of *After Doomsday* by John Russell Fearn (as John Cotton)]