

BLIND MAN'S BUFF

Malcolm Jameson

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BLIND MAN'S BUFF

By MALCOLM JAMESON

The Commission had a fine-sounding offer—just show 'em how much of Venus you wanted and it was yours. Trouble was, you had to make a map of the unmappable!

The bright dot had grown to a disk days before, now it was a dazzling silvery sphere, looming straight ahead. Lorimer, the assistant umpire, sat in the radio booth dozing, his headphone strapped on. Hartley made a few last adjustments to his adored Maggy—the instrument with the X-ray eye—and then walked over to where Travis sat staring into the visiscreen.

"The big money sure ganged up on us," remarked Hartley, surveying the outside scene as reflected before them.

"They've got numbers, if that is what you mean," said Travis, with a grim chuckle, "but I'm not so sure about the brains. The Farrington-Driscoll combine always did their dirty work statistically. They're doing it now. Most of those poor devils you see out there won't be alive this time tomorrow. Driscoll's game is as simple as the Rule of Three. The mortality of ships trying to land on Venus is roughly a hundred to one. Ergo! He sends a hundred and some odd ships. His competitors—like you and me and old Buck Turner—are playing singletons. All of us combined, if we were combined—which we are not—haven't a ghost of a show along with his bird dogs."

"Unless we're smarter," amended Hartley.

"Yes," grunted Travis.

Other ships were to the right and left of them, abreast but curving downward in a great circle that closed forty miles below their keel. The formation centered on the lone cruiser that carried the chief umpire and which followed the base course between the Earth and the planet of their destination. Shortly they would arrive at the point ten diameters distant from Venus, and that was where the take-off would be. After that it would be a free-for-all scramble for the honor—and untold riches—of being the first man down.

Most of the ships carried the yellow-and-blue markings of the newly formed Venusian Land Development Co., the Farrington-Driscoll enterprise. Buck Turner's rusty old tub floated somewhere on the far side of the circle. Nearby were two crazily converted yachts manned by adventure-struck

college kids. A quadrant away there were several other independent entries, all of an impractical nature. One was a man who fondly held the theory that the only way to tear away the deadly veil of Venus was to take actual soundings with wire drags and then drop kite balloons with moorings. His idea was to plant buoys, so to speak, to mark the more dangerous crags. Another was a fellow who claimed to be an expert meteorologist, and whose ship was fitted with bins containing colored flours. By dumping those on the Venusian cirrus he hoped to make stains whose motions he could study. By charting the general circulation of the upper air and noting the presence of updrafts and eddies, he hoped to deduce the locations of the hazards below.

Travis and Hartley's own hope was pinned on magnar—the Maggy, as they preferred to call it—a squat machine that embodied all the virtues of super-radar plus, but inverted. Where old-style radio used oscillating electric currents to generate magnetic waves, magnar operated on reverse principles. Surges of magnetrons set up electric strains which reacted from the surroundings. The results were incomparably more satisfactory than with standard electronic equipment since it was penetrative and analytic as well. But marvelous as the instrument was in its tests under terrestrial conditions, its behavior on Venus was yet to be ascertained. Curious magnetic phenomena had been observed there, due probably to the proximity to the fierce radiation of the sun. Auroras were encountered at all latitudes, and there was known to be a low belt practically opaque to all but long waves. But for better or for worse, they intended to depend on their device to get them safely down, and for the later

complying with the strict rules laid down by the Bureau of Genomics in the staking out of their claim.

A gong struck warningly, and Lorimer came to life.

"It's the standby signal," he said, and cut in the loudspeaker.

"All ships, attention," boomed the voice of the chief umpire. "In five minutes we will arrive at the take-off point. See that you are not ahead of the station or you will be disqualified. Everyone listen carefully while I refresh you on the rules. Ships will go in with open mikes, so that I can keep track of your whereabouts. Upon making your planetfall you are to ground your ship where it may be, leaving the assistant umpire on board for communication purposes. Set up a radio beacon at once so that if necessary I can visit you to check up. After that you are free to explore the territory about you."

There was a pause for acknowledgments up to that point. Travis nodded. He knew the rules. The signals came through loud and clear. Violent earthquakes and torrents of boiling volcanic mud falling as rain drove him away shortly after he landed, but the beacon he left behind served long enough to allow him to regain the stratosphere safely. It ceased sending within the hour, indicating that subsequent earthquakes had destroyed it, but it showed what was possible.

"After your reconnaissance," went on the voice from the cruiser, "you should then stake out your claims. Vague descriptions, wooden stakes, blazes on trees, or loosely piled stone cairns will not do. There was too much litigation

arising from the careless early surveying of Mars. Good topographic maps must be submitted, tracts described by metes and bounds, and the corners tied to salient landmarks. If possible, the survey should be tied to the planetary grid. In cases of conflict, title will be awarded to the most accurately mapped.

"Imagine that!" sniffed Hartley. "Expecting good topography in a dense fog. It's a good thing we have the Maggy."

Travis was silent. He was wondering how those clauses happened to be in the conditions. Could it be that Driscoll had a hand in it, knowing their meaninglessness but having devised some way to beat the game? For the term planetary grid implied either a previous triangulation survey or the establishment of circles of latitude and longitude, a manifest impossibility in view of the record. Perhaps Driscoll meant to perform such a survey. He had an army of men, and was known to have taken aboard a great quantity of infrared equipment. Given time and men enough, Venus could be triangulated, using heat detectors and directional walkie-talkies. It was a disturbing thought.

"Ten seconds to go," warned the cruiser, after which came the long buzz.

"Hop to it, and good luck," were the umpire's final words.

The screen was no longer jet-black with the bright silver ball in its center. It was half-and-half silver and black, the velvety star-spangled sky covering the upper part, and the

dazzling shell of Venus the lower. The dividing line had been a strongly curving arc—a segment of the upper limb of the planet. But it had flattened little by little until it showed no curvature. It was a straight line—a horizon. What lay below appeared to be an endless, featureless field of snowy white, flat as a floor. It looked like snow, but it was not. It was an expanse of spicules of ice, the frozen upper cirrus that marked the boundary between the stratosphere and the zone of cloud and fog. Travis shifted the controls. He took the ship off its tangent and put it into gently curving "level" flight. The altimeter stood steady now. Its reading was twelve kilometers.

They had not hurried. At the signal "GO" some of Driscoll's bird dogs had, as well as the enthusiasts among the other entrants. All wanted to be the first in, as the bursts of violent fire from their reserve tubes showed. But as they fanned out, each toward the assigned section of the Venusian perimeter, Travis hung back. There was no rush. Most of the early birds would die, if history was any guide, and he did not choose to be among them. He saw that Driscoll cagily hung back too, and the strategy of it was plain. The foxy financier would wait to see which of his scouts survived, then follow in on his beam. If none survived—well, he could write the expedition off and go home again. There would always be another time.

"What do you hear?" snapped Travis, addressing Lorimer, who cringed in the radio booth listening through headphones to the other ships. The man's face was white and his eyes large and glazed, and at times he shuddered violently.

"I ... it is a shambles down there." he said, licking his lips. "They're crashing right and left. You hear 'em reporting, then all of a sudden there's a scream ... something about a pinnacle looming up in the mist ... or else no sound but a burst of static ... oh, sir, don't you think we'd better turn back?"

"We're not as crazy as we look," said Travis grimly. "But we're not turning tail yet."

He made other adjustments to the ship. Much of the momentum had been braked down by the air resistance. Now only one tube was jetting, and that at just a trickle to maintain steerageway. Travis pulled the levers, that extruded the vessel's stubby wings and stabilizer fins. From here in the ship would have to be handled as a glider, but with ample reserve power at the throttle.

"Warm up the Maggy," he said, "and start shooting."

Hartley turned on the magnetoscope. That was an attachment that converted distances and bearings into light rays. Magnetronic tubes did the trick, throwing the resultant visual image onto a concave screen on the far side of the compartment. For a moment the screen showed nothing but haze, but as fog dissolves and pictures emerge from behind it, the haze melted. What was revealed was truly amazing.

The layer of frozen cirrus vanished. Several miles below its level there suddenly appeared what seemed to be an azure sea sprinkled with scattered rocky islets, arranged in long, twisting chains. But it was like no ocean man had ever

looked upon. Its surface appeared hard and glistening, as if of ice, but that illusion of rigidity rose and fell in mighty pulses, now covering, again revealing more of the rough crags that jutted through it. There was a mirage-like quality about the whole scene, for nowhere did any of the islets show shores or beaches, though their jagged outlines expanded and contracted in phase with the heave of the strange crystalline sea.

"That must be your ionosphere," ventured Travis, squinting at the astonishing vista. "That is the phenomenon that distorts radio beams, though it seems to stop ours cold. But at least we are able to define it sharply. That is some help."

"Go down as close as you can and see what it does," suggested Hartley. "Maybe the angle of incidence has something to do with it. Maybe it will recede or vanish."

"Right-o," said Travis, and nosed the ship over into a dive.

Inexorably the gleaming surface seemed to rise up to meet them. It did not give an iota, or fade. It was an absolute thing. The magnetoscope version may have been pure illusion, but what met their eyes appeared hard and unyielding. If Travis maintained his angle of dive, it could be but a matter of minutes until the ship would be put to the acid test. It would either crash against reality or else plunge through—*what?*

"Stop! Don't go on down. Please don't!" wailed Lorimer. Unnoticed he had stolen over and was staring wildly at the screen. "It's suicide, I tell you."

Travis eased off on the controls and half-way flattened out.

"What do you mean?" he asked, roughly.

Lorimer was thoroughly frightened. Trembling and whimpering he blurted out what he had been overhearing on the inter-ship. Most of the other entrants were gone—all the independents and scores of Driscoll's ships. Many shattered themselves against hidden crags, a few reported themselves stuck in morasses that were about to engulf them. A number of the Driscoll vessels had mutinied and turned tail. Only one was down safely, and he was complaining to Driscoll and the umpire of his plight. He was being tossed about on a turbulent ocean and shipping water with every giant wave, for his altimeter had been at fault and he cracked his plates on striking. Venus was living up to her deadly reputation.

Lorimer never finished his piteous narration. He caught another glimpse of the pseudo-sea over Travis' shoulder. It was now but a matter of yards away and impact was at hand. Lorimer uttered a little moan and keeled over in a dead faint. Travis shot the slumped figure a contemptuous glance and flicked a lever.

"Shall I try the chute stunt?" asked Hartley, cheerfully, as Travis pulled the ship into a saving climb.

Travis shook his head.

"Too risky. I had rather we stick together. What about supersonic frequencies. Can you tune the Maggy to those? I doubt if anyone ever thought of using them for soundings."

"I can try," said Hartley, and proceeded to alter the magnostat setting. He was not sorry to hear the parachute alternative was out, since it had been a forlorn hope at best. One of them was to jump overboard with the automatic beacon, trusting to luck that he fell near a place where the ship could land. If radio failed there was still hope of sending up messages tied to soundage ballonets. But snaring those, or even seeing them in the upper air would be a tough task for a fast-moving vessel.

The sonic soundings did work. The Maggy was not geared to convert that data to vision, but Hartley could interpret the echoes.

"That string of islands to the right," he said, "terminates in a sheer cliff. What I get from beyond it is very faint and much delayed. I think the precipice is a high escarpment or else the near wall of an immensely wide canyon. Try it there."

"Here goes," said Travis, grimly, and started the hazardous plunge.

The passing through the mysterious ionosphere was an impressive moment. They winced in spite of themselves at what looked like imminent deadly impact. Then the

magnetoscope faded into a blur of milky blue, matching the formless haze of swirling mists that still showed on the standard visiscreen. The terrible uncertainty lasted for a second, and then the picture cleared again, this time with the strangely oscillating azure surface vaulting close overhead. Stretched out below them was a magnificent vista—incredibly weird, but as open to their gaze as any bird's-eye view ever obtained on Earth. Magnar had pierced the veil of the promised land. Venus was theirs!

The terrain was a magnificent jumble of Earth forms. The sierra that formed the crenellated top of the escarpment was lost above the ionosphere, but all else was there for the seeing. Steep talus slopes at the foot of the mighty cliff led down to what on a normal planet would have been a plain. But this plain was broken by scores of volcanic cones, many of which were shrouded in a curious pall of dirty brown—probably volcanic ash turned to falling mud by the ever present moisture. Elsewhere there were badly tilted plateaus and solitary mesas, between which meandered great rivers. Far away and to the right lay the sea. It was a real sea this time, and dappled with islands, great and small, many surrounded by reef-inclosed lagoons. The borderline between the sea and land was a vague marshy area where the rivers lost their identity in a maze of tortuous bayous, deltas and lagoons. Over all, wherever the ground was fairly level, there were vast forests of incredibly high trees.

Travis cruised along with his eye peeled for the best place to land, for once they were down they would have to leave the ship and proceed as best they might in the amphibious crawler in the hold. Suddenly he caught sight of a curious

arrangement of naked stones near the crest of one of the tilted plateaus.

"That's a funny outcropping," he began. "it looks for all the world like—"

The rest of the sentence died on his lips, for Lorimer came suddenly to life. The man was crazed with fear. He dashed across the room, screaming with hysterical frenzy.

"I won't let myself be murdered," he howled. "You are not going through with this madness!"

Travis and Hartley hurled themselves at him, but Hartley's flying tackle and Travis' vicious uppercut landed too late. The damage was done. Lorimer slumped back into unconsciousness, but it was by the eerie light reflected from the still glowing visiscreen. Everything else was dark. The magnetoscope was dead. Lorimer's wildly clawing hands had managed to yank half the switches on the panel open. The emergency lights slowly blinked on, but meter pointers still oscillated wildly, especially those having to do with the magnetic circuits. The abrupt interruption of the current had set up magnetronic eddies that would not die down for minutes.

"Get the supersonics going again if you can," said Travis between his teeth, "but it looks as if I'll have to land this baby blind."

He cursed fervently, trying to recall all the varied detail of the topography he had been studying. But there was no time

for reasoned action. The altimeter reading stood at a bare kilometer, and was dropping fast. Before he could get the vessel under control it lurched heavily to the crackle of snapping branches and the scraping of tree-tops along the underside of the hull. The lurch turned into a bucking forward fall punctuated by many jolts and bumps. For a moment the ship seemed to tear itself clear but only to go into free fall. There was the briefest sickening instant of thudding impact, and their voyage was ended. With a squishy thud and a lazy roll, the ship came to rest. Travis and Hartley sat up in the respective corners into which they had been pitched and listened. To their ears came the steady lapping of water alongside their keel and the patter of raindrops on the roof.

"So this is Venus!" said Hartley, wryly.

"Uh-huh," grunted Travis, hauling himself to his feet. "So it seems. Better get the beacon set up. I'll take stock."

"Dismal place," was Hartley's comment. He was gluey mud to his midriff, having just climbed back into the entry port. Back of him was a curtain of hot rain that splashed to the ground only to rise instantly in clouds of steamy vapor. Dimly seen below was the crawler, itself mired to the hubs of the half-track rotors. Gurgling rivulets of water ran past it toward a larger stream they could hear roaring in the background. Vision stopped five yards away. Beyond that was only uncanny yellowish light, of equally mild intensity in every direction. Sogginess, and a dispiriting sort of amber semi-light was the keynote of Venus.

"What's the lay?" asked Travis. A distinctly chastened Lorimer peered over his shoulder.

"Trees, mostly. Unbelievable trees," said Hartley. "The California redwoods would be saplings here. If it's organics they want, we've got 'em. Shade doesn't seem to mean anything here with the light evenly diffused the way it is, because between the big trees there are all sorts of others, some with fruits like melons. And underneath everything is giant brush. Gosh. The going is plenty tough. I'm glad we don't have to survey this planet inch by inch."

"We'd better get going with the Maggy, then," said Travis. "Lorimer helped me set it up. All we need now is the pantos and your expert assistance."

Hartley washed the worst of the mud off him and then followed Travis up the ladder that led to the dome hatch. The instrument rested on the flatter part of the roof, shielded from the downpour by a hastily stretched tarpaulin. By it stood the box that was to receive the scale relief map the Maggy was to construct. It was a three-sided, open-topped affair, made of plates of transparent synthetic crystal. Travis fastened the pantograph's arms to lugs extending out of the magnar's side, and attached the quills at their tips. When he finished the rigging, the pantos extended out into the receiving box.

"We'd be sunk without our Maggy," said Travis, gazing at the veil of water that poured down on all sides. "Driscoll's men brought along a flock of infrared equipment and bolometers, but even with those they will find surveying this country a tough job. What the—"

The ship groaned and trembled beneath them, and they were shaken until their teeth rattled. They had to cling at the swaying stanchions to keep from being tossed off the ship. But the earthquake, though severe, did not last long. It died out in a series of shuddering tremors and then there was quiet again—the watery quiet of splashing rain and gurgling ravines.

"Log the time of that," Travis called down the hatch to Lorimer.

"Ready to ride," announced Hartley, promptly putting the earthquake out of his mind and going back to the machine. "Let's make this first try accurate. They'll be more like to accept the later abbreviated ones if we can show them all our paces. I'll start with the underlying igneous rocks and fill in above as I go. Use black for that."

Travis filled the panto quills with a tarry substance that when exuded hardened quickly into a dark glass. That was the symbol that stood for granite in their code. He had other plastics for the other rocks—dark red for sandstone, olive green for shale, a dirty yellow for limestone, and so on. Hartley cut in the juice.

It took the Maggy an hour to lay the foundation for their work. The weaving pantos worked in and out in an every widening arc as directed by the operator, squirting the colored plastics onto those laid before. Where volcanic necks intervened—and there were many—Hartley stepped up the current so as to force the reluctant radiation through, since when it was set to be reflected by basalt it would bounce

back from the nearer surface. It took skill and understanding, but in the end they were well pleased with the result.

What stood in their box was the skeleton of what was to be a diorama of their surroundings—so far just the naked land on which they rested. One could walk around the crystal box and see just how far down the basic magma lay, and how the stratified rocks above were twisted, folded, and faulted. It was the geologist's dream come true. If they had been interested in ores, they would have had only to adjust the radiation to the proper setting and delineated it neatly in any special color they chose. As it was, in case of challenge, a simple drill rig could verify their claim in a short time.

Hartley stopped long enough to have a smoke, though the sodden tobacco did not draw well. Then he changed his tuning slightly and ran in the mantle of soil and mud that clothed the bedrock. Toward the sea the alluvial muck was quite deep.

"Say," said Travis, "we have to put up with the ship's shadow, but what is that thing up there?"

He pointed to a narrow pointed, irregular wedge lying sidewise on the model's surface. It was a wedge of emptiness, in which nothing had registered. Except for its queer shape, it was the counterpart of the conical hollow in the very center of the model. That was the shadow cast vertically downward by the hull of the ship itself, since no amount of power would push the magnetrons through that thickness of alloy steel. Hence the pantos could only build an

irregular empty cone topped off by the cigar-shaped upper contours of the vessel.

Hartley scrutinized the wedge of vacancy.

"It may be thrown by a moraine. Who knows, they may have had glaciers here once upon a time. Put the black pigment in and I'll test for granite."

The result he got was surprising.

"That's a funny thing," frowned Travis.

"No action of ice or water ever left detritus like that, and I can't think of any normal upheaval that would cause it."

The cause of the shadow was granite, but in a form most unnatural. Far away from any known outcropping, it lay there in thin slabs. In the scale model they were of paper thinness, meaning that actually they were less than a yard thick. They were about ten times wider and occurred in all lengths up to several hundred yards. Not only did the slabs exist contrary to all known laws of granite cleavage, but their disposition was unorthodox. They lay roughly end to end, though by no means continuously since in spots there were wide vacancies. The pattern was that of a circuitous line that sometimes wound around low hills and at others went straight over them.

"What do you make of it?" asked Hartley. "The remnants of an old wall, perhaps, overthrown by an earthquake?"

"Too thin for a wall," shrugged Travis, "but let it go just now. When we extend the survey we will have to go up that way and then we'll take a look. Let's get on with the rest of the topography now. The light is getting dimmer and this rain is chilly."

Hartley put the Maggy to defining water, and the irregularities of the Venusian surface swiftly filled with clear plastic. Ravines turned into streams and saucerlike depressions into lakes. It was necessary for them to know the depths of the water hazards before they set out later in the crawler. And then, after shifting the quills, the pantos began sketching in the vegetable matter, reporting only what was composed of cellulose. The forests took shape, but not as clusters of individual trees. The scale was too small for that. They came out as masses of greenish glass or as a thin glaze where only grasses were.

"Hey," exclaimed Travis, pointing. "What's that there—another shadow?"

A clean V-shaped vacancy had been left by the moving arms—a tapering semi-conical tunnel through the tree mass where it intersected it, and barrenness beyond. It was far too regular to have occurred in nature.

The appearance of it puzzled Hartley, for it terminated where it met the face of a mesa he had run in earlier. That would indicate that the unseen obstruction was softer than the sedimentary rocks but harder than wood. Hartley twisted

a dial. The shadow persisted. He twisted other dials and stepped up the power. Nothing went through. Whatever it was was exceedingly hard.

"A ship!" said Travis, as the outlines of it suddenly began to grow under the weaving pantos. It was a cigar-shaped affair, and beside it were a pair of flat objects of the same material. Its lines were familiar. It was Driscoll's *Pathfinder*, and the two other objects were his crawlers. Their steel effectively masked what lay beyond them.

"It must have just landed," said Hartley. "It couldn't have been there before or I couldn't have shown the mesa complete."

"He used our beam to come in on, the skunk," said Travis, huskily, and wheeled toward the hatch.

"What are you going to do?"

"Call up the chief umpire and protest."

The umpire answered soothingly.

"Now, now, Mr. Travis—there is no need of distressing yourself. Venus is big. Tremendously big. There's room enough for both of you. I would suggest that you make contact and reach an agreement. One of you go one way, the other the other. After all, Mr. Driscoll has suffered terrific losses in ships and men and you can afford to be generous. As for that, there is nothing in the rules to cover a conflict of this sort. Later you may take your complaint to the courts, but it is beyond my jurisdiction. Moreover, no part of Venus

belongs to you yet—not until you have made an adequate survey."

"But we *have*," insisted Travis, raging. "My partner and I have developed an instrument that maps in total darkness, or through solid barriers for that matter. It is by means of that that we discovered this trespasser. I demand—"

"Ridiculous," said the umpire, crisply. "My assistants have reported conditions down there. You are overruled."

The click of the severed connection left Travis in a state of sputtering fury. The umpire's stupid action was not final, of course. A display of the map would show his error. But Driscoll's intrusion was not only not sportsmanlike, it had an ominous quality. For he had power and the cunning to exploit every technicality. It would have been bad enough to have him on the other side of the planet, for sooner or later they were bound to meet. But to enter into conflict at the very outset was bad. Very bad.

Travis strode to the safe and took out the rules. He scanned them, fuming, but in the end had to concede that the umpire was partly right. The rules were silent on the point. Everything hinged on the quality of the survey made. The best mapped claim would win, regardless of priority. Travis relaxed a little. In that field the Maggy should win hands down over the clumsy bolometric methods Driscoll would probably employ. Hartley agreed with him in deciding to ignore Driscoll for the time being, and carry on.

"Tomorrow," Travis declared that night, as the three of them were at supper, "we will stow the topographic map in the hold, dismantle the Maggy, and move on to the far edge of what we've already done and add another sheet from there. Lorimer will have to stay here to maintain outside communications. We'll keep in touch with him by means of our walkie-talkies."

Lorimer nodded agreement, when Travis suddenly sat bolt upright.

"*Psst!* Do you hear what I hear?"

Outside was the rush and hiss of the rain that never stopped falling, but over it was a louder sound—the rumble and grating of heavy gears and the burbling of an exhaust pipe half submerged in slime. A crawler was coming. Then they heard a hail, faint and unintelligible. The crawler noises grew louder, then ceased. Someone was rapping on the hull.

"In the ship there—ship, ahoy!" came the hail again. Travis rose scowling and spat viciously. The voice was Driscoll's.

Under the distress clauses of the inter-planetary code, he could not be denied entrance, but Travis' greeting when he opened the lock was frosty.

"I can't keep *you* out," he said, "but your gorillas stay in the crawler."

He closed the door in the faces of the four strong-arm men that Driscoll carried with him whenever he visited one of the

outplanets.

"Now what do you want?"

"I?" laughed Driscoll, with easy politeness. "Why, nothing for myself. I wanted to see if you were all right, that's all. This is a beastly place, you know."

"You know we are all right," said Travis, sternly. "You followed down on our beam and have doubtless been eavesdropping ever since. Quit beating about the bush and come to the point."

Driscoll raised an eyebrow in mild surprise.

"Your hostility amazes me. However, I did have another purpose in coming. My assistant umpire carelessly came off without a sufficient supply of report forms. He asked me to obtain some from your man."

Travis silently indicated Lorimer, who rose and went to his booth. Travis and Hartley looked on with steely eyes as Driscoll followed. Nothing apparently passed between them except the pad of government forms, but there was justification in being profoundly suspicious of anything Driscoll did. Driscoll pocketed the forms and uttered profuse thanks all around, but just as he was about to leave he added.

"As I am here, we may as well discuss our future relations, since it seems we are the only two to get through."

"Now it comes out," said Travis, with a curl of the lip. "Let's have it."

The two partners listened stonily as the financier unreeled his come-on talk. Venus, he said suavely, was too vast a field to be exploited on a shoestring ... skyports must be established and immense amounts of capital devoted to transportation alone ... the orderly development of the immense resources would require an army of technicians and astronomical amounts of specialized equipment. Simple pioneers could not cope with the problem. They simply cluttered up the field and impeded others.

"All right," snapped Travis. "So we impede. That is our right."

Driscoll was not upset. Look at the history of all such undertakings, he suggested, patiently. When did a pioneer ever cash in on his potentialities? Wouldn't it be better to accept the honor of having paved the way and then retire gracefully to easier fields? Would a million valors tempt them? Each, that is? No? Five million? Ten? Ten million valors was a lot of money. How much then? There need be no cutthroat race to stake out land. They could become partners in the big company by virtue of the transfer of their rights. Blocks of stock could be had in addition to the cash. Why not see the light?

"You're keeping us up," yawned Travis elaborately. "We've had a hard day. Good night."

Driscoll never dropped the mask of buttery smoothness, but as he bowed himself out there was an ominous glint in his eye.

"I never make an offer but once," he said.

"Fair enough," said Travis, and twisted the dogs home with a bang.

It was the earthquake that woke them up. It came in the middle of the night, just eleven hours after the shock of the afternoon. The din in the ship was terrific as every loose article banged against its neighbor. The dim standing lights flickered on and off and the bunks pitched wildly.

"We'd better get topside and check on the Maggy," said Hartley, blinking. "Rouse Lorimer to give us a hand."

But Lorimer was not in his bunk. They found him on the roof plate, since they wasted no time getting up there when they saw the hatch was open. It was Travis who was first up. He climbed through the hatch and stepped outside the shaft of light that stabbed upward into the misty haze of night. The beam from his sweeping torch fell upon no magnar or diorama, though the stanchions still stood swaying under the tarpaulin. The ruptured power lead still snaked across the slightly curving dome, but it terminated in a frayed end a yard away. There was nothing but a startled man in night clothes squinting into the flashlight's rays.

"I ... I came up to secure the equipment you left here," stammered Lorimer. "I ... it's not here!"

"We see it isn't," said Travis, grimly. He cast his light down onto the hull plates. They were beaded with moisture

and streaked with rivulets, but a wide, glistening smear showed where something heavy had slid over.

"We'll have to allow for these earthquakes hereafter. They may be tidal," he said. His voice was harsh, but he held it rigidly even. There was no hint of reproach or dismay. "It's too dark to assess the damage now. Let's go back to bed."

Down below. Hartley cautiously closed the door of their room behind them.

"You took it calmly."

"Why not?" asked Travis, wearily. "The rat pushed them over, of course, but there isn't a vestige of proof. The earthquake might have done it, you know. But it serves to tip us off to what to expect."

"Like?"

"That Driscoll's preparations for surveying this accursed fogbound land are not so hot ... that Lorimer is by now on his payroll, and probably tipped him off to the excellent performance of the Maggy ... that that umpire up in the stratosphere is probably not his creature after all, but just a dope. Otherwise Driscoll wouldn't have slogged over here through the mud to make us those fancy offers. I knew then that he was afraid of us, but I didn't expect him to act so quickly. He was slick about it, too. Our evidence is nothing but surmise that would be laughed out of any court in the world."

"Then you think we're licked?"

Travis gave a short, hard laugh.

"After we dig the Maggy out of the muck in the morning I'll tell you more. There's no use worrying about it now."

Neither one of them went to sleep at once. For Travis' part he felt a sense of relief that the first blow was struck. It was outright warfare now, even if veiled. It served to remove inhibitions. Neither Travis nor Hartley had come to Venus inspired by greed. Their motives were otherwise—a compound of scientific curiosity; pride in their miracle-working machine, and to some extent the love of adventure. Vaguely behind it all there was the sober conviction that the human race must have new frontiers or stifle. They needed money, to be sure, as did everyone, but only in reasonable quantities. Yet Driscoll's avarice was such that he was attempting to defraud them of even that. Very well. The only retaliation the land shark could appreciate would be in kind. His lies and sabotage must be countered with blows where they hurt—in the pocketbook. Travis considered that angle dreamily, and then dropped off to sleep.

The severity of their loss did not become apparent until well after the dim, slow-creeping dawn. They found the fragments of the diorama deep in the slush beside the ship. It was broken into three big chunks and marred with jagged cracks. Glumly Hartley fished the pieces out and washed them off. But except for a few chips irretrievably lost, it could be fitted together and cemented back into a serviceable map. The Maggy that lay under it was different—it was beyond salvage.

It must have fallen first and then received the impact of the heavy mass of glass. Its unique tubes and delicate coils were hopelessly smashed. There were spare parts on board to make good some of the damage, but to fully restore the instrument meant a trip back to Earth. That they could not afford to do. Departure now would forfeit all they had gained.

"We're sunk," said Hartley, gloomily.

"You're never sunk until you admit you are," reminded Travis, grimly. "We still have the helios and the bolos, and a few other tricks up our sleeve."

"Like?"

"I've got a hunch I want to play. We'll talk about that later."

They carried the topographic model inside and repaired it. Then they took photographs of it and locked it away in the hold. The Maggy they sadly consigned to a vacant bin. The advantage it gave them was gone. From then on they would have to explore Venus the hard way.

"Pile our stuff into the crawler, Hartley, and warm the motor up."

Then Travis called the chief umpire by radio. He spoke with restraint, but he was firm in his demands. The umpire had certain duties and he should perform them. The stratosphere was not the place. He should bring his ship down to the surface and park it between the two contestants. Travis went on to report Lorimer's panic on the flight down

and his subsequent "carelessness" in tumbling their equipment overboard while ostensibly trying to secure it. He wanted Lorimer's immediate replacement, and a guard for the ship, for he intended leaving it to carry out the required field work. He did not propose to submit tamely to being stabbed in the back while he was gone, and concluded by reminding the umpire what happened to some negligent officials after the scandals on Mars. The umpire sputtered indignantly but said he would come on down.

An hour later Travis and Hartley piloted the slithering, splashing crawler away. Travis grinned at recalling the umpire's reaction when they showed him the map. The fellow had been honest in the belief that they could not possibly have accomplished so much in so brief a time. In other respects he was simply a run-of-the-mine civil servant, more afraid of violating the letter of his instructions than any other thing. He was weak and not too bright, but he was not venal. They could go off into the fog and leave him behind as a buffer with a fair degree of confidence, for before leaving they had seen that he sent through to Earth a complete report of progress to date.

"I still don't get what you're driving at," said Hartley, peering into the dirty yellow mist that had replaced the rain. He was steering. His chart was a photo of the model, his compass a gyro set to an arbitrary base line called "pseudo-north." He ducked one of the numerous ponds and got back on the course. It led straight to the nearest part of the curious winding granite slab formation.

"You will," said Travis cheerfully. He was less depressed by the crippling of the Maggy than his partner. "You thought those pieces of granite were the remnants of a wall. Maybe, but my theory is that they are what is left of a road. Our own ancients built some pretty good roads. It could be that this planet is inhabited, or was. If so, and that long line of broken slabs is a road, all we have to do is follow where it leads and maybe we'll bump into something that will help us."

"Yes, but I still don't see—" objected Hartley, still puzzled, but he had to pull up suddenly. They had been plowing through the gigantic grasses that rose in clumps to untold heights above them, but for a few moments the visibility happened to be amazingly good. There were instants when they could see all of fifty feet. And there before them lay one of the old slabs.

It was canted sharply and riven by stalks of the bamboolike growth that had upset it, but it was obvious that Travis' guess had hit the mark. Despite the slimy moss that clung to the flat, tilted surface, they could not miss the two deep grooves—distinct, parallel furrows, the marks left on a hard road by generations of shod cart-wheels. The distance between the treads was just short of six feet, indicating that whatever vehicles had made them were not dissimilar in size to those used by men.

"This does it," said Travis, triumphantly. "Now we're getting somewhere. Do you remember when Lorimer went crazy on the trip down and cut our lights? We were studying some funny rock shapes on the top of a plateau. It looked like the ruins of a town to me. If so, it can't be far from here. In

any event, a road always runs from somewhere to somewhere else. Turn right and let's see where this one takes us."

They drove on. Often they lost the road, but for a while the map set them straight again. As Hartley manipulated the crawler's heavy wheel, Travis unloaded some of his views.

"We are required to make a survey. One look around shows how tough that is. Astronomical observations or triangulation as done on Earth are out of the question. We work in a medium that is worse than dark. That means we will have to triangulate by heat beacons, picked up by bolometer or radar or supersonics, all crude methods. A heat source is necessarily large, not a pinpoint like light. Radio is fuzzy in definition except where metal is the target. Supersonics are entirely unreliable in an atmosphere as humid as this. Now that the Maggy is on the blink it's a case of doing the best we can, and that best has to be better than Driscoll's."

"Well?" said Hartley, sheering to avoid a monster geyser that loomed up ahead. It was one of a row that was spouting boiling water thunderously into an already saturated air. The crawler slumped over into a quagmire and then had to wait other minutes while one of the recurrent earthquakes shook itself out. Simultaneously the thudding roar of a distant crater vomiting into action boomed in their ears.

"What a planet," gritted Hartley, hanging on to the bucking wheel. "When you do survey it what have you got? I bet whole gobs of this topography comes and goes overnight."

"Not improbable," said Travis, unperturbed. "Which makes it all the more desirable that we establish ourselves geographically—by latitude and longitude—if it could be done. Since that is tough we are left with a bolo survey. How good that will be will depend a lot on how good our base line is. Back there in the jungle where we were, and Driscoll is, it would take a year just to cut out one through those big trees. You would still have to mark the end of the line with a well-defined monument. Now cities are a lot more distinctive than trees or lakes or mountain peaks, and if we can find a few there, we have our corners ready made. Not only that, but cities promise other rewards—caches of ancient treasure, if the cities are as dead as the condition of this road seems to indicate they are."

Hartley nodded his agreement. By then they had progressed to the place where they were about to run off their Maggy built map.

"Just keep following the road," said Travis.

They continued to climb. After a bit the bamboo growth was less dense. It was also less gigantic, and the humid air was cooler, too, indicating a gain in altitude. The steamy vapor of the forest was replaced by the cold, swirling mists of the plateau. It was better going, and even seeing, in every way.

"Here we are," said Hartley, swerving to a stop as a rift in the fog showed what lay ahead, "and the dump is as dead as Babylon, from the looks of it."

Wreathed in trailers of clinging mist a high, crenellated wall stood athwart the road, pierced by a single, towered gate. To the left a part of it had been overthrown and tumbled forward into what may have been a moat, and chunks of rubble half filled the lower part of the gate. But Hartley surveyed it briefly and then slid in the crawler's gears. The clumsy vehicle grumbled, and then started to climb. In a moment it was through the relative gloom beneath the dark arch of the gate and clattering out into the streets of the dead city.

"Why, this town is half buried—like old Pompeii," exclaimed Travis, pointing. On either side there were rows of buildings, their lower floors submerged and with a mixture of mud and rubble masking the sills of the upper windows. "Its city walls have helped to hold the muck in or the rains should have washed it out long ago. No telling what we'll find when we go to digging."

They went on with their exploration. It was a fairly extensive town with many buildings of massive masonry, but it had been a dead city for a very, very long time. In the heart of it they came upon a great open square out of which protruded the upper portion of a sort of pyramid.

The pyramid was a six-sided affair, and curiously truncated. Slimy moss covered most of it, but they found handholds in crevices and managed to climb to the top. In that slanting surface they found a circular hole about a foot across, the only visible entrance, but when they crouched down and peered into it with sweeping flashlights they saw only a cavernous room half filled with stinking rain water.

"Well," said Travis, brightening and straightening up. "It looks as if we had something. Call up the umps on the walkie-talkie and tell him we have established our advanced base, but nothing more. Get it?"

The days that followed were ones of intensive exploration. They broke into the upper stories of the buried houses and dug out the volcanic ash and mud that filled them. They found bolted doors that had been forced, but beyond them they discovered passages leading to the nether parts of the house where the doomed Venusians had fled in fright when extinction came upon them.

Considering the prevalence of moisture, what they found was in a surprisingly good state of preservation. The original catastrophe must have been accompanied by dry heat, for the remains of the Venus creatures had dessicated to mummified cadavers easy to study. They were remarkably anthropoid, differing from man chiefly in that they were taller and more slender and also had six digits to the hand and foot. Beside them were an abundance of artifacts of every description, including weapons and armor. The armor was of incredible richness in many cases, being of gold and silver damascene inlay in hard steel, the whole crusted with gems of rare fire and color. In a single day the boys found wealth enough to satisfy the greediest.

Travis shortly left the work of cataloging the archeological finds to Hartley. It was imperative, now that they had come upon this antique city, that they stake out a claim that would

stand up against any machination of the Driscoll crowd. Therefore he set up his instruments and began the patient accumulation of recorded data.

The diffusion of light and heat was practically perfect, and the unaided eye had but the vaguest notion where the sun rose or set or the path it followed. But the helio was an instrument of rare delicacy and Travis felt he could find the sun within an accuracy of a degree or two. The bolometer readings were less satisfactory, since the greatest heat recorded was in mid-afternoon, but between them he was able to roughly know when it was apparent noon and more or less what the altitude of the sun was. The time of sunrise and sunset was indefinite, in the absence of knowledge as to what the horizons were, so he could not say what was the length of the actual day. But the noon to noon intervals, and the regularity of the tidal earthquakes gave him the length of the mean day. Venus revolved about its axis once in every twenty-two hours and a few minutes.

It was a triumph, of a sort.

"The latitude here is about sixty-five degrees," he told Hartley, jubilantly.

"Yeh. What about the longitude?"

"Zero—a hundred—anything I want to call it," grinned Travis. "Longitude is arbitrary. The first maps at home used the westernmost of the Azores for the kickoff point, thinking the world began there. Later the Americans used Washington, the French Paris, and so on until they got

together on Greenwich. It doesn't matter really. The guy that states it first and hollers loudest wins."

But Travis' elation was short-lived. His figures were rough, but they had a clear trend. Every noon's altitude was greater than on the day before. Venus' axis was also tilted to the ecliptic. She had seasons. The sun was climbing in the sky, which meant it was spring. Travis groaned. He might have expected it, but it was a shock. He would have to track that elusive area of light for a full Venusian year—two-hundred and twenty-five terrestrial days—to establish the full curve. And it would take another year or two on top of that to make sure he was right. It was too long. Driscoll would beat him to the gun with an inferior survey. Once the deeds were passed the jig would be up.

He frowned as he considered another difficulty. He would win over topography with astronomical latitude, given time, but at that his latitude was fuzzy. Within a degree or so was not good enough. It left a probable error of up to a hundred miles. He was wasting time. He had better drop this nonsense and tackle the slow but surer way of piecemeal triangulation. It was when he broke that news to Hartley that Hartley brought better news to him.

"Say," he said, "today I found this picture in the cellar of a house. We ought to break into that pyramid."

He produced a thin sheet of bronze on which was engraved a view of the central square. The lines were very fine, as if etched, and they depicted the great plaza as it must have looked in its days of glory. The massive pyramid

dominated the picture, and throngs of people swarmed in the square, holding their hands up in apparent supplication. A group of what were probably priests stood on the sloping platform made by the truncation, looking down on the masses below. It was apparently the day of some great festival, but the significant feature was that it showed a large portal leading into the pyramid at the level of the street. Its wide doors were open, and the men and women were streaming into it.

Travis studied the etching. The great door was delineated as being on the face of the pyramid immediately below the lowest side of the truncation, a great help.

"Well," he said, "this tells where to dig. Let's get going."

Digging in the heavy, compact mud was hard going, but luckily it was not far. They hastened the work by rigging up a scraper and used the crawler for a drag. In the end they also had to employ the clumsy vehicle to batter in the heavy bronze leaves of the door, for they were securely fastened from within. Then the doors crashed inward and the crawler lunged through into the dim interior. They stopped and turned on its spotlight.

"It's a temple, not a tomb," pronounced Hartley.

It was a huge cubical room, bare of all furnishing except a high altar reached by a flight of wide steps. Above the altar rose a pylon on whose face was a glittering sunburst,

evidently of pure gold and richly set with jewels. About the altar stood a few vases, and on the floor lay the smashed remnants of others. From them spilled mounds of gems of all colors that sparkled brilliantly under the beam of light.

Travis swung the light around and swept the walls. On either side of the pylon were two huge embossed characters of the Venusian language, and around the entire room ran a wide frieze covered with ornamentation of interlaced hexagons and duodecagons. Every square foot of the walls underneath was given to elaborate mosaics. The theme of most were battles, confirming the opinion already reached that the Venusians were a warlike people. One big picture represented a ceremony which might have been a coronation. The most revealing of all was the last they came to.

It was done in dark-blue glazed tiles, and spangled with diamonds set in tiny silver rayed settings. Across it ran a wavy line of narrow gold ribbon, the highest point of which was adorned with a replica of the sun symbol.

"As I live and breathe," shouted Travis. "A map of the sky. I hope whoever laid out that sun track was an astronomer, not an artist," and he hastily rigged his camera.

It took hours to give the pyramid a thorough search. By means of winding stairs behind that pylon they came to upper levels, each being smaller than the one below. Most were the living quarters of the priests, and there were some dark cells for the sacrificial prisoners. Some day archeologists would translate the hieroglyphics and learn what those about to die had scribbled on the walls. There

were other caches of treasure, too, but the greatest of all was the library. Here they found many scrolls, most of which were still in tubes sealed with wax. The majority were unintelligible, but they took away for study all that furnished clues in the way of illustrations and diagrams.

The topmost level was barred by another bronze door that defied all their efforts. In the end they had to get dynamite from the crawler and plant a charge. It was well they took ample cover on the floor below, for the aftermath of the explosion was unexpected. A freshet of trapped water came tumbling down the stairs and spread out on the floors of the rooms below. After a little it shrank to a dribble, and they climbed the slick, weedy steps to see the ultimate compartment.

Here they found another pylon and sunburst, though mossy from the dammed up water, presiding over a flat stone altar faintly illuminated by the light that shone through the hole overhead. Travis cast his flash about. Clinging algae showed the high watermark overhead. In the corners of the room were some strange instruments deeply incrustured with damp verdigris. They proved to be astrolabes, octants and transits of bizarre design, and one was fitted with a rude crystalline lens.

Travis and Hartley stood for a long time in sober thought, sizing up the place and trying to visualize the rites that had been conducted there.

"I think I'm beginning to get this," said Travis, suddenly. "It's clear enough these people were sunworshippers. This is a

combined temple and observatory. The Egyptians did something of the kind, and so did the Aztecs. My hunch is that that hole is set so that at the summer solstice and no other time the sun would shine in here and illuminate this altar. What blood orgies followed then don't concern us now. The thing is that we have a check on my own orientation—that truncation up there must face south, and, if I can dope out just where that ray hit the altar, I'll have a verification of the altitude of the sun on that day. It's not all I need, but it is a help."

"The climate must have been a lot different in the old days," said Hartley, peering up through the gloom at the small, blurry spot of light.

"Of course it was. Vulcanism is the answer. For a while this planet was stable, and then another era of mountain building set in. The scrap of geology we got from the Maggy showed us what the last upheavals have done. But it wasn't only earthquakes and eruptions that did the Venusians in. Extreme volcanic activity heaves a lot of water into the air. Our own ones do. They get it from the core of the earth where it is still held in solution in the general mass. The Venusians were losing cities fast and their skies were getting thicker. So the smarter ones of them got together and tried to escape. There must have been a very few advanced enough to conceive of space-ships—the Venusian Leonardo da Vincis, ahead of their time—but we know they managed it, and with a little better luck their race might have survived."

"All right," agreed Hartley. "But how does that help us?"

"We've got a swell observatory here—for Venus. The sun climbs higher every day. I'll keep checking it from the outside and you set up some equipment here. If your instruments register with mine the day it hits the solstice, my theory is proved. This will be the key point—longitude zero and whatever we find the latitude to be. Then we'll move on to another city and get another set of figures. It won't be long before we've whipped this thing."

That night they opened a bottle of their medical brandy and had a celebration. Then Hartley remembered that he hadn't made his routine report of the day. They didn't want well-meaning rescue parties come fumbling their way. He made the usual report that they were O.K., but finding the going slow.

"Ask how Driscoll is doing," prompted Travis, taking another swig.

"Not so good," said Hartley when he clicked off. "For us, that is. Umps says that he recalled the ships that got cold feet and deserted him, claiming that since they had not yet actually reached Earth they were still part of his expedition. So now he has scores of more parties out. Umps says he has taken in hundreds of square miles of territory on the other side of ours. They're even talking of sending for more gangs to start clearing a landing field."

"That's bad," growled Travis. He wouldn't have grudged it to any other man, but with Driscoll it was different. Calling

in extra help was hitting below the belt. "Did he mention finding any cities?"

"Nope, but he said that Driscoll looked pretty cocky. He's probably playing it cagey like we are."

"Uh, huh," grunted Travis. It wasn't good news. There were plenty of smart men on Driscoll's payroll, and there was no copyright on unraveling antique mysteries.

The summer solstice occurred two days later, but it took several days more to make sure, for the sun declined too imperceptibly to make certain of it with his crude tools. Travis spent the time poring over the documents unearthed in the sacerdotal library and the photostats of those dug up in Persia. The hieroglyphics were quite beyond him except for the numerals. They stopped him for a while until he angrily noticed that he had persistently overlooked the fact that there were twelve characters employed and not the usual ten.

"Of course," he declared sourly, "people with six fingers and toes *would* have a duodecimal based numerical system. I should have guessed it from their ornament, the shape of the pyramids, and all."

After that it did not take long to unravel the simpler computations left by the ancients, but in the absence of explanatory texts they remained incomprehensible operations in arithmetic.

Hartley broke open another scroll and unwound it on their makeshift desk.

"Say—" he shouted.

"A map!" exclaimed Travis, jumping to him. Then his hopes sank. It was a map, but of what? There was no shorelines or rivers or mountain ranges, nor was it another star map. It partook of the qualities of both. Sprinkled over it was a myriad of little black sunbursts, some smaller, some larger, and they were connected by a network of lines jagged as conventional lightning streaks. Each of the tiny symbols bore a pair of hieroglyphic characters, evidently the name of the place or thing, but he could not read them. Over all there was a light rectangular grid with numerals in fine script at their ends. Four of the horizontal lines were heavier than the others, and between the middle pair and in the center of the map were two double sunbursts done in gold leaf—one just beneath the upper line, one just above the lower.

They puzzled over the map for hours. Travis got out his code table of numerical values and ran in the translation of the figures. The vertical lines were marked with figures running up to three digits, the values being from zero to 999 on the duodecimal scale—just one short of the cube of the base. The horizontal lines had no number higher than 499 on the same scale. But all the values were consecutive, the horizontal series running from the top down, the vertical ones from right to left. The extreme upper and lower parts of the map were otherwise blank.

"It is a dead ringer for a Mercator projection," insisted Hartley.

"I know ... wait!" Travis came suddenly out of his gloom into life, then laughed. "This shows what a fixed idea can do to you. We keep thinking in terms of three-hundred and sixty degrees to the circle. These people had a simpler system. They had one thousand seven hundred twenty-eight degrees to the full circle—the cube of twelve! Now it makes sense."

He snatched open a drawer and yanked out the photos they had taken inside the pyramid temple. One was the picture of the giant pylon above the main lower altar. He grabbed a pair of reading glasses and gave one to Hartley.

"See if we can match those characters anywhere. They may stand for the temple or the town. My hunch is that it will be in the middle latitudes, so you take the upper half and I'll take the lower."

In a little while Hartley let out a yelp. He found a matching pair. And a relentless search for the next half hour showed there was not another spot on the map with the same markings. That indicated that each of the small sunbursts stood for a pyramid, and the ragged lines between were probably the connecting highways. What they had was an ecclesiastical map of Venus.

There was much more to do before Travis was satisfied. He ran and dug out the measurements of the upper sacrificial chamber. He had all along suspected that the slope of the truncated roof was such as to be normal to the midsummer rays. It was twenty-one degrees from the horizontal. He

deducted that value from the observed maximum altitude of the sun, sixty-seven. The answer was forty-six. That wasn't what the figures on the map showed, but the Venusian scheme was different. Latitude according to their convention ran from pole to pole, not from equator both ways. Travis did some fast subtracting and converting from the tiny Venusian degrees to the fat terrestrial ones. The answer was cheering. It came out to forty-six.

"It's in the bag now," chuckled Travis. "Now it all clears up. These golden double sunbursts denote the happy land—the Twice-Blest, so to speak. They get sun in the zenith twice a year inside the tropics, so the priests could have twice as many bloody parties. My money says that the temples there will be flat-topped, too. Way up here they had to tilt the top to let the sun in on the one day a year it did come, and the angle gets worse the closer you get to the poles. Up above the arctic circles there are days they don't have sun at all, so the temples are few and far between. But now that we have the key, what are we waiting for? Let's get going."

"Where to? The ship?"

"Not yet. We'll stop by at the next town and do a little double-check."

Without the map it would have been easy to have missed the place altogether. It lay in a shallow valley and all that showed above the reedy mud was a sloping piece of flat rock that might easily have passed for an outcropping of bedrock. They unplugged the solar hole of its muck and dropped a suction hose into the sacrificial chamber of the buried

pyramid. The crawler's pump was set to work and soon the dark water was gushing out. The boys ate their lunch, and then went to work with crowbars to enlarge the hole. It was unnecessary to blast their way to the great hall far down in the base. The upper room was also adorned with the temple's designating characters. They scraped the slime off them and compared them with the map. They tallied.

When they were up in the crawler again and sheltered from the rain that had now grown from a steady, miserable drizzle to a roaring torrent, they sat through another spine-wrenching earthquake. They had time to think and appraise the magnitude of the fortune that had befallen them.

"This means that we own this whole dog-goned planet?" asked Hartley, a little awe-struck.

Travis nodded.

"Hands down."

"But what are we going to do with it? I wouldn't live here if they gave it to me."

"I dunno. Kick Driscoll out and give it to the poor, I guess."

He grinned.

"I wouldn't live here either."

[The end of *Blind Man's Buff* by Malcolm Jameson]