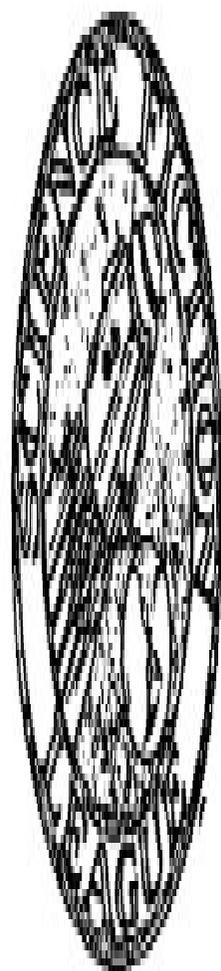


THRILLING

WONDER

STORIES



Vol. XIV

No. 3

The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction

December, 1939

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Suicide Squad

Date of first publication: 1939

Author: Henry Kuttner

Date first posted: March 2, 2015

Date last updated: March 2, 2015

Faded Page eBook #20150303

This ebook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Mary Meehan & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Suicide Squade

By

Henry Kuttner

Author of "The Star Parade," "Doom World," etc.

A Complete Novelet of Tomorrow's Daredevils

Thrilling Tales of Wonder

Vol. XIV, No. 3

December 1939

Table of Contents

[CHAPTER I: *Meteor Crack-Up*](#)

[CHAPTER II: *The Suicide Squad*](#)

[CHAPTER III: *Space Stunter*](#)

[CHAPTER IV: *Spacespin*](#)

CHAPTER I

Meteor Crack-Up

It was ironic that I should have been due for a promotion just when the *Caribee* cracked up in space and they broke Jimmy Sloane. After piloting STC crates from Venus to Jupiter for five years and getting two gold bars on my sleeve, I'd been cited for another bar and a master pilot's berth. I deserved it, though.

If you ask in the right places, they'll tell you that Mike Harrigan's log and record were things to brag about. That is, up to the night the *Caribee* was towed into Newark and J. C. Gayley, Director of STC, got the hardest jolt of his crooked career.

STC—that's Space Transport Company, the biggest interplanetary freight and passenger line going. It's called, more or less jokingly, the Jersey West Point; but getting a job with STC is no joke. The company's run like an army. The only difference is that they don't shoot the offenders in their ranks. They only crucify 'em, after an informal court-martial. They crucified Jim Sloane, and that's why J. C. Gayley got his jaw busted.

Talk about cramming for exams—why, for weeks before I passed the entrance tests at STC I racked my brain over the intricate spatial mathematics of interplanetary navigation.

My buddies were astonished when I got through, and I didn't blame them, for with my face and physique—okay for *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, maybe—I don't look much like a university graduate. Then, too, I spent a couple of years in the ring, and that didn't help my beauty any. But I got into STC finally, and discovered that I was under a stricter regime than an army in wartime.

STC blurbs its lines all over the worlds—"Space-travel the Safe Way!"

Safe! That's a laugh. There haven't been many wrecks in the Transport history, but that isn't because of the company's precautions. Instead of spending a million or two to perfect the rocket-tubes and safety-devices, the big shots decided it was cheaper to tell their pilots, "Bring your ships in safe—or lose your jobs!"

And losing your berth with STC meant sheer unadulterated hell. The company, with steel and oil and radium interests, is a world power. To be blacklisted means virtually becoming a criminal. No job is open to you. I remember one snow-frigid night on Broadway being accosted by a broken down derelict who croaked a hoarse plea for a dime.

I recognized the guy. I'd flown with him in the Earth-Venus war ten years before, and, seeing him now, I remembered that he'd cracked up an STC ship. Over a restaurant table, gorging himself with steak and french fries, he told me something of himself.

"It wasn't my fault, Mike—that business. The tubes back-blasted. They were choked with slag melted off the lining. But the *Star* was wrecked and you saw the papers?"

I nodded, eying the man's haggard ruin of a face. He coughed rackingly, gulped coffee, and went on, his faded eyes held an abject plea for belief that made me feel a little sick.

"Not my fault at all—you see that, don't you, Mike? Yeah—well, the papers were full of the story. The company blew my testimony to bits with their experts. When they'd finished the whole world knew my name and my face, and what I'd done. What they *said* I'd done. Killing thirty people—I couldn't get a job. I tried other transport lines first. Then I went down the line. Anything—but it wasn't any good. Maybe—maybe you could stake me, Mike—"

I staked him, and he went to Arizona and died in a few months. And now, three years later, the television in my gyroplane was blaring out the name of Jim Sloane, who had run an STC ship into a meteor two hours out from Jersey.

I changed the controls and leaned out, my face chilled by the cold wind at this upper level. Far below the Hudson was a black winding line on which tiny lights moved slowly. Beyond was the blazing jewelcase of New York, listening, like me, to the wrecking of Jim Sloane's career. I lit a cigarette, took a nervous puff, and crushed it out. I was wondering where Andy Sloane was.

Captain Andrew Sloane, STC's ace flyer and highest ranking pilot, was Jim's elder brother. The kid always idolized Andy, and nearly went crazy with delight when he, too, was put on the company's payroll.

Jim had acquired something of his brother's attitude toward STC—a sort of idealism, something I didn't have but that I could respect. And now—well, my stomach, felt tied into a knot. I knew what Jim's crack-up would mean to Andy.

Ever since we flew together in the war Andy had built up his brother to me. The kid was going to be a world wonder, according to him. I'd kidded Andy a lot, but he'd only jerk up his chin with a quick, habitual gesture and grin at me, his gray eyes narrowed a little. Up till now—

For when I landed at the spaceport Andy was there, his olive-drab uniform creased and rumpled, lines bracketing his mouth. He was hurrying away from the administration buildings, but halted when I hailed him.

I grabbed his arm. "What about Jimmy? Is he okay?"

Andy's face didn't change, it was stone.

"Safe, yeah. Aren't you flying tonight?" he asked.

"I was," I said. "Listen, what's the low-down on this?"

"Jim's washed up," Andy's voice was grim. "That's all there is to it." He started to turn, but I held on to him.

"The kid's a good pilot," I said.

"He missed the red signal. A woman was killed tonight, Mike. Her porthole went out."

This needs explanation, I guess. Studded over the shell of every spaceship, just under the hull, are Detectors—delicate instruments which instantly react to the approach of any object which has sufficient mass to register.

In space, these are set so that if a body—a meteor, say—comes too close, an automatic circuit is closed and compensating rocket blasts are fired. Thus, if a meteor comes in to starboard, its mass activates a set of starboard Detectors and the rockets go off, shooting the ship safely out of its path.

There's a double check on this: the pilot of the boat sits before a map of the hull, with red lights showing each Detector, and if he sees some of the lights go on and doesn't feel the jolt of the tubes blasting off, it's his job to operate the rockets manually. It takes split-second thinking, but pilots usually have hair-trigger reactions. That's a matter of habit and training.

A meteor had come in at the *Caribee*; the tubes hadn't blasted; and Jim had failed to fire the rockets. As a result, the ship's nose had been crumpled and a passenger had died when her port had cracked open, letting the air escape.

One word from her as she lay in her berth would have brought a safety helmet, robot operated, down over her head and sealed but for some reason she didn't say the word. So she died.

Andy told me of this, cold lights deep in his gray eyes, his face strained. I rubbed my chin thoughtfully, mulling over the various angles.

"Where's Jim now?" I said finally.

"I don't know," Andy clipped out, "And I don't care."

"Don't be a damn fool, fella," I said quietly.

He didn't resent my words.

"You know how I feel about the company, Mike," he just said, looking hard at me. "I pulled a lot of wires to get Jim in. Now he's—killed a passenger."

"You haven't heard his side of it yet."

"Yes, I have," Andy told me, and I felt a curious little shock of apprehension. "He admitted it. Said he fell asleep on the job. Up too late the night before, tearing up Broadway."

"Fell asleep?" I repeated. "Jim said that?"

"Yeah." Andy squeezed my shoulder in a grip that made me wince. I could hear his breathing. "Mike, if Jim had been in the right I'd have backed him to the limit. You know that. But this thing—"

He tried to say more, broke off suddenly, and turned to go striding off down the field.

I didn't follow. Instead, I went back to the administration buildings and in past a lot of glass doors and startled secretaries and vice-presidents till I blew into a big room filled with reporters, television-men, and officials.

There was only one man I wanted to see—J. C. Gayley, the director—the man who held the administration of STC in his well-manicured hands. He was standing beside his big desk, chewing a cigar, face stern and angry. I liked his frown better than his smile—the frown looked real, anyway.

He turned and saw me. "Harrigan! What's the matter? I'm busy—can't see you now."

"Just wanted to give you notice, Gayley," I said. "I'm quitting."

I saw his eyes flicker to the reporters. "Er—you're under contract, Harrigan. You can't resign. I'll discuss this with you

later.”

“You won’t release me?” I asked.

He waved an impatient hand. “No, no! Don’t bother me now. I’ve enough trouble on my hands with the *Caribee* and Sloane—”

“Trying to think up a good alibi?” I interrupted.

Gayley’s plump face turned a mottled yellow. He glared at me.

“That’s enough!” he shouted. “Get out!”

“Gayley,” I said, “you may be the boss of STC, but you’re still a dirty, cheap doublecrosser. And this’ll show you I mean it.”

I let him have one. My knuckles cracked under the impact, and I felt his jaw give. He went crashing back against the wall, blood spurting from his mouth, knocked out cold as an iceberg. Flashbulbs blazed and popped. Somebody yelled for the police.

And a reporter jumped past me, grabbed the phone, and dialed his copy-desk. He kept looking at me and saying over and over:

“What a story! What a story!”

I didn’t bother with the autogyro; it was a rented one anyhow. The taxi-rank was full when I blew out on the boulevard, and I hailed a supercharged, streamlined job.

“Times Square,” I said loudly, for the benefit of the loungers who were watching me. But after we’d gone a block I gave the driver another address and told him to take the middle lane on the Skyway. There’s no speed limit there, and we whizzed across the bridge and blazed down the Hudson at more than a hundred.

Fifteen minutes later I stepped out of the elevator, hurried along the hall, and went into Jim Sloane’s apartment without knocking. The kid was talking to a short, fat little guy with a bald dome and spectacles.

I caught the tail end of a sentence. “—won’t take long. I’ll board her tonight.”

Then Jim looked up, saw me. His lips tightened. He still wore his olive-drab uniform, and his face was pale and strained. He had the same gray, cool eyes as his brother, but Jim’s hair was a tousled taffy color, instead of blue-black. He didn’t have Andy’s husky build, either, but he was rangy and tough as a greyhound.

“Hi, fella,” I said. “Busy?”

Jim looked sidewise at the short guy.

“Fix yourself a drink,” he said, jerking his thumb at the sideboard. “Come on in, Mike.” He led me into the kitchen.

“Well,” I said, “what’s the low-down?”

“You’ve seen Andy?” he asked. “Yeah, then you got the whole story.”

“Fell asleep on the job, eh?”

“Right. Thanks for coming, Mike, but it’s—just one of those things.” He looked meaningly at the door.

I didn’t take the hint. “So you fell asleep,” I said. “Jim, you’re a cockeyed liar. I knew that when Andy told me about it. You must have put it over swell to make him believe you.”

Jim went white. “What the devil are you talking about?”

I lit a cigarette, watching the kid under my lashes.

“You didn’t fall asleep. The Detectors went out, didn’t they?” I read the answer in his face.

“Yeah. The usual lousy equipment of STC ships. If you’d seen the red lights, you’d have rocketed out of the meteor’s orbit, but the danger signals didn’t flash, did they?”

“You didn’t—”

“I didn’t tell Andy—no. I guessed what you were up to. If Andy knew the truth, he’d have raised merry hell, and his career would have eclipsed with yours. It’s your business, kid.”

“Thanks, Mike,” Jim said. “I owe plenty to Andy. More than—well!” He shrugged. “There was Bette, too.”

Sure—there was Bette, and a swell girl, at that. Jim and Andy had both fallen for her, but Andy had won out, and they were to be married in a few months. Just another reason why Jim had taken it on the chin without dodging.

“What are you figuring on now?” I said.

He didn’t meet my eyes.

“I dunno—”

“Who’s the fatty in the other room?”

Jim looked right at me, daring me to raise an objection.

“I’m joining the Suicide Squad,” he said.

CHAPTER II
The Suicide Squad

My stomach jumped up and came down with a thud. Because, right there in front of me, Jimmy Sloane was lifting a loaded revolver to his forehead and squeezing the trigger. He was jumping out a spaceport—running in front of a rocket-pet. In other words, the kid brother of my best friend was telling me, in so many words, that he was going to kill himself.

Nobody ever comes out of the Suicide Squad alive, you see.

I'll explain. 'Way back in the thirties, when Oberth and Goddard were fooling around with rocket fuels, they were making motion pictures and using airplanes in them. And, to give the audience a thrill, the studios hired stunt flyers to perform aerial gymnastics.

Ever so often one of the stunt men would wash up, because airplanes had a habit of hitting the ground unexpectedly—and hard.

The old-style planes, with their rudders, ailerons, and props, went out when practicable rocket fuels were discovered. But the motion pictures went on. Audiences still wanted thrills, and the studios began to use rockets instead of planes in their air and interplanetary stuff.

At first they stuck to models. That had worked well enough with the old-type planes, with montage, double exposures, and stereoscopic effects; but you can't make model rockets convincing. Not with the tremendous drive they've got in their jets. All hell is bottled up in those reinforced liquid-fuel tanks, and you can do things with rockets you never could have done with a plane.

I've seen films that would lift the hair right off your head. Nerve-cracking shots of space-stunting that made me shudder when I thought of the poor devils in the piloting seats. Men are only flesh and blood—even the desperate, tough babies who are the only ones who'll join the Suicide Squad—the space-stunters. And it's flesh and blood pitted against—

Power!

Brother, you don't know the meaning of the word! The commercial rockets build up acceleration slowly; they have to, or passengers and crew alike would be killed. But the movie ships unleash the tremendous inferno of energy bottled up in their fuel tanks, and the heart-wrenching strain of that super-dynamite can split your eyeballs, collapse your lungs, and pull your insides right through your skin. Power! My God!

I grabbed Jim's shoulders. "You crazy fool," I snapped. "You can't—"

"My business, Mike," he said coldly. "Not yours."

If he got mad I might have handled him. But in the face of that icy determination I knew I was licked. So I grinned crookedly, let him go, and went into the other room. Fatty blinked at me over the rim of a glass.

"Listen, fella," I said. "I hear you need rocket-fodder for the Squad. How's chances?"

"Who did you kill?" he asked.

Before I could answer Jim grabbed me and swung me around.

"Don't try it, Mike," he warned. "I said keep out and I meant it."

I laughed. "I'm doing you no favor," I told him. "I just broke J. C.'s jaw. The Squad'll be a rest cure compared to what'd happen if I stayed on Earth."

And that's how Mike Harrigan joined the Suicide Squad.

A passenger ship took us out to Callisto, passage paid and contracts signed. Not that the contracts meant anything. No court of law would force a man to stay in the Squad if he didn't want to stay. But, somehow, few of the stunters quit. The pay wasn't much, but occasionally there'd be some extremely risky job with a high price tagged on it. There was always some sucker who'd take it on, and usually he got a swell funeral as a reward.

The studios had their space headquarters on a sparsely-settled equatorial island on Callisto. Thaler Island, it was called, after a Dutchman who had cracked up his rocket on it in the old days. Thaler was a roaring border-town, without any law but the studios'. And they didn't give a damn what the men did, as long as they could take up the rockets when a picture had to be canned. Quite a little city!

Jim and I found our passage booked on one of the ocean liners, and it wasn't long before a taxi let us out at the studio offices. I showed a guard our credentials, and we were ushered into a big-chromium room where a bull-necked, gray-haired man sat behind a desk, running strips of film through his fingers. He looked like an army sergeant. His blue-jowled face was the color of raw beef.

"Harrigan and Sloane," he said without looking up. "Right. I'll get a man to show you around. My name's Dancey."

He pressed a button and then gave us the full battery of a pair of curiously vivid pale blue eyes.

"You're transport men, I think. Well—just forget that. You won't have any passengers to pamper here. You'll have your jobs, and they've got to be done right. Retakes are too damn expensive. We tell you just what to do, and it's up to you to do it. No excuses. If you get an order to blast off full power from a dead stop, don't tell me it's dangerous. I know it is. Yeah."

The pale eyes watched us keenly.

"You knew what you were getting into before you signed up. If you want to back out now, okay. I won't stop you. If you don't like the idea of seeing your insides splashed around the control room, say so and get the hell out. Well?"

"It sounds swell," I said. "Anyway, my insides are tied down pretty tight."

Jimmy grinned. "I'm staying," he chimed in, "I want to show you shave-tails some real stunting."

Dancey grunted, his red face impassive. The door opened and a short, heavy-set man came in briskly. He had a face like a bulldog and his head was bald as an asteroid.

"Teague, some new men," Dancey said. "Take 'em over."

Teague jerked his thumb at us and we followed him out.

"We're canning that transport crack-up tomorrow, Teague," Dancey called after us. "Line up your pilots for it."

Our guide stopped short.

"Tomorrow!" he said angrily. "We need another week of rehearsals!"

Dancey made an impatient gesture. "Can't do it. Got to shoot it before we're scooped. Apex is rushing through their space-mutiny flicker, and if they release it first it'll hit our box-office hard."

Teague's jaw jutted out stubbornly.

"It's too risky," he said. "Give me two more days."

Dancey stood up, his hard mouth twisting in a sneer.

"Sure! Take a month while you're at it. I'll send somebody in to serve tea while you play with your charts. Take all the time you want. Then we'll shoot it with models." The pale blue eyes were cold as death. "We're canning that scene tomorrow, Teague. If you don't like it—"

"Okay!" Teague barked. "You'll get your scene—tomorrow. And you'd better order a couple of nice big funerals for the day after!"

There were two factors that were to affect us a great deal during our apprenticeship in the Suicide Squad. One was the nerve-taut tension of the flyers, a carefully-concealed, but terrific nervous strain that gave a curiously distinctive look to men's eyes. The other factor was Morgan Daly.

If Teague was the unofficial captain of the Squad, Daly was his lieutenant. The two men were opposite as the poles. We found Teague to be hard-boiled, hot-tempered—and a man we could like and trust. We never liked Daly; we distrusted him.

He was built like a steer, with the biggest shoulder-span I've ever seen, and, perched atop that great body, an incongruously small head. His eyes, cold and black, had the same strained appearance of the other men's; under high cheekbones there were cadaverous hollows, and his lips, usually retracted in a mirthless smile, showed broken, discolored teeth.

Daly was a victim of space shock and it was slowly breaking him down in body and mind. So far his only symptom, aside from his appearance, was a certain absent-mindedness which would later develop to dangerous proportions.

If Teague had lived, matters would have been different, I think. But he died—washed up out there in space, piloting the big transport liner that he wouldn't let anyone else handle. Daly, actually, was scheduled for the job, but for some reason we didn't know till later Teague shunted him on to a minor job and took his place.

The truth was, Daly was full of his drug—doped to the eyes, his reactions slowed down, his synapses blocked by the poisonous neural inhibitions of the alkaloid.

Teague died. Daly took charge. And from the start a bitter rivalry sprang up between Jimmy and our new captain.

Daly had been in the Squad a long time, as such things go. Once a noted pilot, he still felt that his reputation was tops, and he looked on new recruits as intruders trying to oust him from his job.

Subconsciously he knew that he couldn't last much longer, with his weakened body and brain, and he was determined to hang on as long as he could.

That he did this at the expense of the other men didn't worry him. When a pilot showed too much promise, he'd be assigned to a job that might kill or cripple him, or, worse, cause space-shock—something fifty times worse than shellshock.

I saw the feeling steadily growing between the two men. There wasn't anything I could do about it. Jimmy and I were kept busy learning the business—all strange, all new to me.

Stunting wasn't as I had vaguely thought, a matter of going out into space and piloting haphazard. Every move was planned in advance, as far as possible. There were expert calculators who spent days and weeks over their charts, plotting courses, estimating reaction and recoil, testing with their model Tiling and super-Mirak rockets. Then the pilots' work would begin.

I remember the first time I tried what they called a ground-flight. Daly took me along a corridor and into a room which was an exact replica of a space-ship's control chamber. It was complete with instruments, guide-panels, vision-screens, and all. Tacked up before the pilot's seat, I saw as I slid into it, was a typewritten sheet of instructions.

"Just follow that," Daly said briefly. "And use your head."

He waited till I'd scanned the paper, and then shoved over a lever.

The screen before me paled and then showed the star-brilliant ebony of space.

"Visual reception isn't so good on a real flight, you know," Daly grunted. "You can't go by the screens alone."

The first instruction said, "Speed 350. Transection 6-14-901. Check for silver ship in tsn. 7-13-880. When it rockets, release starboard tubes 4, 5, 8; stern tubes 9 and 5."

I waited. My instruments checked; a silver craft slid into view on the screen. I saw its rockets jet rosily against the black. I played the switchboard, felt a sickening jar as the room seemed to jerk against the recoil.

"You'll be bandaged up on the flight, of course," Daly said. "And strapped in. Necessary."

Necessary—sure! I'd seen the pilots go out, wrapped and padded until they looked like nothing human, their eyes set and strained; men who knew that such precautions were useless against the terrific shock, the tearing agony and strain, of the mighty rockets. Flesh and blood against pure power—and the dice were loaded.

I followed the typewritten instructions before me, playing the ground-ship delicately among the tangled chess-game of space-craft the vision-screens showed, until there came a time when I realized that one of the vessels was off its course.

I was due to jet past a liner in a few seconds, but, estimating swiftly, I saw that if I attempted it, I would stand a good chance of being crushed between it and the off-course ship. I readjusted the course, sent my ground-ship apparently flashing on the liner's starboard instead of the port side.

A big hand smashed down on mine, crushing it against the guide-panel.

"Can't you read!" Daly snarled. "It says port—*port*, not starboard!"

I pulled my hand away. "Port meant crack-up."

"Yeah? Listen, Mister Harrigan, that shot was faked purposely. There was room enough left between the ships for you to squeeze through. That was your course, and—you've got to follow your course! If there's any chance at all of doing it without a crack-up, take that chance!

"All the cameras are set up, all of 'em focused, all of 'em grinding. You get out of the picture and it means a retake. That costs money."

It also means a call-down for Daly, I thought, but I didn't say anything.

"Just remember that, Mister. It may be tough for a transport man to remember, but try and remember it anyway. If there's a chance, take it! And if there isn't—" He looked at me keenly—"then make one!"

CHAPTER III

Space Stunter

So the training went on, at high tension always. Eventually Jimmy and I went out in space and learned the ropes there. It was queer for me, a master pilot, to be going to school again. But I had plenty to learn. I realized that. This was far different from the careful, painstaking handling of transport liners.

I kept thinking of Andy Sloane, and knowing that he could probably master this racket in no time at all. For Andy was a born pilot—like his brother—only Jimmy hadn't the older man's experience as yet. But the kid had a daredevil recklessness that made up for it, and that worried me plenty at times.

He threw himself into the heady excitement of Thaler Island without restraint. He lived as he worked, at high tension, and it wasn't long before I began to notice that hard, strained expression around his eyes. Dancey, the big boss, was beginning to notice the kid. I felt Jimmy was in line for a promotion.

But there was only one better-paying job, and that was Daly's. The big man got surlier, and assigned Jimmy to harder and more dangerous jobs. The kid didn't kick; he came through, but he began to return Daly's dislike with interest. It wasn't long before the two were hating one another poisonously.

Then, one day, we got a fairly routine assignment, a high-speed space drive that called for quick thinking, but wasn't especially dangerous. The calculators—paper crew, we called them—worked it out in detail. Daly was in charge, with Jimmy, me, and two other pilots assigned to the job. We did ground-flights for a week. Then, on the night before the take-off, trouble came.

I was in Jimmy's room, smoking and reading, and the kid was at his desk, his yellow hair ruffled, working out some calculations that had already covered a dozen sheets of paper.

Once I strolled over and glanced at the stuff, but aside from a few sketches having something to do with rocket-release coordination, apparently, I could make nothing of it.

Daly came in without knocking. His black eyes were wide, with distended pupils and a curiously luminous sheen. I noticed his movements were very quick, but he didn't always finish a gesture. He started to shut the door, glanced up, met my gaze, and stood silent, forgetting to complete the motion.

"Hello," I said, "what's up?"

"Nothing." He looked around absently, went over to a bookcase and pulled out a volume. "Something to read."

It wasn't that, I knew. Daly was jittery as the devil.

Jimmy, after a quick glance, had gone back to his work, ignoring the visitor.

Daly opened the book, thumbed through it rapidly. Something fluttered to the floor. A photograph, I saw. He picked it up.

"Well!" he said, and I didn't like his tone. "Quite a girl!"

Jimmy turned around and watched Daly. The latter grinned.

"Friend of yours, Sloane?" he asked.

"Let's have it," the kid said.

But, instead, Daly started to praise the photograph. And he did it in a nasty way—one that made the muscles tighten in my jaw, even though I didn't know who the girl was. But I had a pretty good idea.

It kept on that way for a while, until Jimmy stood up suddenly and tried to take the picture from Daly's hand. There was a brief struggle, and the photograph tore in half. Right then, seeing Jimmy's face, I knew I should have stepped in and stopped it, but I didn't. There wasn't time.

The kid put out his hand and shoved Daly back. Daly grinned unpleasantly and brought around his fist in a wild haymaker. It didn't connect. Jimmy weaved sidewise, and swung a short, vicious jab that crashed against Daly's jaw and sent him back on the couch, knocked out cold.

I stood up, sighing. "More trouble," I said resignedly. "Well, I'd better put him to bed." But Jimmy shoved me aside. He hoisted Daly to his shoulder, gave me a quick one-sided smile, and went out into the corridor. I heard his footsteps retreating and dying.

The tom halves of the picture still lay on the floor. I picked them up, pieced them together.

Sure—it was Bette. Andy Sloane’s fiancée. The girl Jimmy had lost—or had given up. Oh, he’d hidden his real feelings well, but I knew, now, that the kid had sacrificed more than I’d realized when he took the rap on that STC mess.

I put the picture back on the floor and went back to my book. But I couldn’t read.

I was afraid. For the kid.

The next morning we took off from Thaler Island. The camera-ships, their positions and courses carefully charted, had preceded us. I felt like a mummy, wrapped in bandages from head to foot, my eyes protected by strong glass shells, my hands coated with a rubbery substance that would protect them against the acceleration and at the same time allow freedom of movement.

As I took my place in the control room of my ship I got a glimpse of Daly on the vision-screen. His eyes were huge pools of shining blackness. There was a blue welt on his jaw.

The fool! Going into space in a condition like that.

It was none of my business. I jettied the rockets and blasted up in his wake. In half an hour we had reached our goal. The camera-ships hung in space, telephoto lenses visible in their turret tops. I glanced at my instruction sheet. Everything was ready to go. Transection 18-85-100. Starboard tubes....

As always, I felt an unpleasant little chill as my fingers hovered over the switchboard. Under my hand lay a sleeping titan. A titan that could rip my body apart effortlessly.

Jimmy’s face flashed on the screen. He was grinning.

“Happy landing, mug,” he said.

I waved a casual hand, though my insides tightened up. “Last man in port buys the drinks,” I told him. He nodded, and the screen went blank.

Transection 19-85-157. Check for blue ship.

There it was, gliding across the visiplate. A tube flamed. My fingers moved swiftly.

Blast!

I’d hardened my stomach muscles, but as the ship shot forward I could feel a jolting punch in my middle, feel a sick nausea shaking me. So what? *Transection 21-90-157—port rockets 9, 7, 4...*

The dead silence only made it worse. The silent, deadly giants of energy hammered at me, squeezed me, pushed my eyes out of shape till the control room looked like a nightmare. But I’d memorized the instructions, even if I couldn’t read them now. My fingers knew the right buttons.

Transection 25-108-156.

On the vision screen hazy streaks raced. I could feel my heart jumping, hammering, laboring against the grinding strain of the acceleration. It was agony to breathe, to pull air into lungs that wanted to collapse.

Then I saw Daly’s ship. He was off his course. He was trailing Jimmy, and at first I couldn’t guess why. I swung the vision-screen on him, got a flash of Daly’s strained, twitching face—

His brain had cracked. His reactions slowed down by Martian drug, not daring to follow the plotted course, he was trailing Jimmy’s ship, following the other man’s trail.

I flicked on the audiophone to a narrow beat that wouldn’t permit listening-in.

“Daly,” I said—or, rather, gasped as I struggled to breathe. “Better drop out! You’ll—”

“Mind your own damn business,” he yelled. His face flicked off the screen.

Transection 25-120-157—starboard rockets 9 and 8.

Quite suddenly I saw the meteor.

It rushed out of blackness, a whirling, jagged spheroid thundering down on us with frightful velocity. We were meeting it head-on. Even in that split-second before I acted I noted the queer silvery radiance of the thing, the sharp contrast of the ebony pits and cracks in it. It wasn’t an especially large meteor, but—it was death!

“*Meteor! Blast off!*” I shouted into the audiophone.

I let go with my port rockets. The shock knocked me cold for a second. Then I woke up, found to my surprise that I wasn’t dead, though my chest and stomach were throbbing and aching with agony. Nausea shook me. I looked at the

vision screen, trying to focus my strained eyes.

I saw Jimmy rocketing aside, safe enough. And Daly, not quick enough to follow suit, kept on going at the meteor. On my vision screen Daly's twisted, contorted face flashed, his mouth open in a soundless scream. The man saw annihilation rushing at him, and he was paralyzed.

I saw him break loose from his stupor, send both fists smashing down on the instrument panel.

His ship blossomed into flame. It fell away and was gone from my range of vision. The meteor drove past, on its eternal journey through space. It had come silently out of the void to bring about a crisis that was later to result in a grim tragedy, and, having kept its trust, vanished forever from our eyes.

A siren screamed through the audiophone, warning us to hold our courses while the ambulance ship drove down. Presently we were ordered to return to Thaler Island. Shooting was over for the day.

And, later, we learned of Daly's fate. Dancey, the big boss, entered the room where the pilots sat waiting for the verdict, and his pale eyes were narrowed.

"Sloane," he said abruptly, "you're taking charge. We're not sure yet whether Daly will pull through, and in the meantime you take over."

"Okay," the kid said. "How is he?"

Dancey's voice was grim. "Physically he's unharmed. But—" he shrugged—"it's more space-shock."

He turned and went out. One of the pilots let out a long whistle. None of them liked Daly, but they knew that eventually the man's fate might be their own. As for Daly, he was washed up. He was one of the damned.

A page came in. "Visitor for Sloane and Harrigan," he said. Jimmy and I followed him to an office where a man waited.

It was Andy Sloane. I noticed a restraint in his manner, the attitude of a man having to do a distasteful job and wanting to get it over quickly. But he gave me the old friendly grin.

"Hello, there! I heard you'd joined, Mike, but—" He hesitated, looked at Jimmy. "How are you, kid?"

"Okay," Jimmy said curtly.

"I've got something to tell you," Andy went on. He stopped me as I turned to the door. "Stick around, Mike. You're in on this. It's about Bette."

Jimmy's lips parted slightly, otherwise he made no sign.

"We're finished," Andy said. His gray eyes were suddenly very hard. "I thought I'd won out, but I guess I haven't. Bette won't marry me. She's in love with you. She knows that now. So I'm—" he grinned wryly. "I'm playing John Alden. Come on back to Earth and I'll see you get jobs somewhere."

"Bette sent you out here?" Jimmy said.

"Yeah. Told me to bring you back to her. So—"

The kid picked up a vase from the table. He gazed at it for a minute, set it down, and faced Andy again.

"No," he said, "I'm not coming back."

Andy didn't get it for a minute.

"She means it—" he started and then stopped.

"That's tough," the kid said softly. "I'm having a good time here. Why should I pull up stakes now?"

"She's in love with you," Andy said. His face was getting hard and angry.

"She'll get over it. I didn't promise her anything. Marry her yourself—"

I couldn't move quickly enough to prevent it. Andy jumped forward, his eyes blazing, and smashed a vicious blow at Jimmy's face.

The kid went down, but bounded up again immediately, blood trickling from cut lips. He took a step forward, his fists balled.

Then, without a word, he swung around, went out of the room, and I heard his footsteps dying away in the corridor.

"You crazy fool," I said to Andy. "You never could see the nose in front of your face."

"Mind your own business," he growled, breathing harshly.

“I’m making it my business,” I said. “There’s a few things you’re going to find out right now. Sit down!”

I pushed him into a chair, found another for myself, and started in. I told him all I knew. And gradually Andy’s face got whiter, and his eyes turned into gray glacial ice. When I’d finished he stood up, an indecision that I had never seen before in his attitude.

“I didn’t know,” he said heavily. “Where’s Jimmy, Mike?”

I rang for a page, found out that the kid had taken off in his cruiser ten minutes before. He hadn’t said when he’d be back.

Andy nodded. “Okay. Keep an eye on him, Mike. I’m going back to Earth. I’ve got a job to do!” His lips were a hard pale line. “And then I’m coming back, with Bette, to get Jim. And when I do come back, his name will be cleared. So will yours.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“Bust the STC wide open,” he snarled. “Get the low-down on their rotten equipment and get proof. The pilots will back me up. I’m going to Washington, and I’m going to plaster the truth over every scandal sheet on Earth. And I’m going to give Gayley just about the damndest beating of his life!”

I gripped Andy’s hand.

“Give him a couple for me,” I said, through a queer tight obstruction in my throat. “Good luck, fella. And—happy landings!”

CHAPTER IV

Spacespin

The impossible happened. Daly came out of the hospital a human being, not the shattered, ruined wreck we expected. At least he seemed superficially okay; only the hollows in his cheeks were deeper, his eyes were dull and glazed, and his lips twitched continually in a mirthless smile. One of the other pilots gave me his opinion with lifted eyebrows.

“He looks all right. But get him in space, up against trouble, and he’ll go to pieces. You can’t pull out of space-shock, Harrigan.”

By tacit agreement Jimmy remained in charge, temporarily at least. He did all he could to make things easy for Daly, but a dull, burning hatred smouldered within the ex-captain. He blamed Jimmy for his crack-up, though, actually, if Daly had kept to his course he wouldn’t have been near the meteor.

Suddenly we got a new assignment. When I read it my stomach tightened up, and I hurried to Jimmy’s room. He wasn’t there. I found him in Dancey’s office, going over some calculations with the big boss.

I threw the instruction-sheet on the desk. Dancey looked at it.

“Well?” he said.

“You crazy fool!” I said to Jimmy. “You’re not going to tackle a spacespin!”

He shrugged. “Sure—why not, I—”

“Sloane and I have talked it over completely, Harrigan,” Dancey broke in. “There’s no—no very great danger. And it’ll make a beautiful scene.”

“No great danger?” I met his gaze squarely. “Dancey, you know well enough nobody’s ever come out of a spacespin alive.”

Jimmy got up, gripped my arm. “Hold on, Mike. I’ve worked this all out. I’ve allowed for stress and strain and acceleration. There’ll be danger, sure, but—” He grinned at me. “There’ll be a plenty big kick in it. Jim Sloane, the first guy to come out of a spacespin alive.”

He was talking through his hat. I knew it, and he knew it. All the calculations in the world wouldn’t help when a man goes into a spacespin. That’s the deadliest danger of the spacelanes, because no human being can possibly stand up under the incredible shocks of it.

Not a single shock—no. A series of them, ripping, tearing at your bones and muscles and heart as tube after tube blasts off, sending your ship into an insane maelstrom of whirling fire.

Once in a while there’s a leak in the rocket-feed system, and a spark ignites all the tanks at once. Not simultaneously, because that would smash the ship flat with the recoil.

But rocket after rocket jets off, you have no chance to brace yourself against the shocks, and pretty soon there’s a hunk of raw meat plastered against the pilot’s seat. Your eyes are gone; your brain is full of burst blood-vessels; your heart is paralyzed; your lungs are flattened; you’re not even a decent corpse.

You’re just meat, that’s all.

I argued with Jimmy then, and later, when I’d got him alone. It was no use. He was to go into space that night to make preliminary tests, and the rest of us were to follow in the morning. I put through a call for Andy Sloane on Earth, but knew I couldn’t expect an answer until too late.

Jimmy went off without saying goodbye. I spent a sleepless night. In the morning I was up before dawn, drinking black coffee and pacing worriedly about my room.

I turned as a knock came on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

It was Andy. He hadn’t got my message. He was already on his way to Callisto when I’d sent it. But he came in grinning, eyes dancing with the old joy of battle I’d known when we’d flown and fought together years before.

“It’s finished, Mike,” he said. “I’ve broken ‘em. STC’s washed up. I showed my proofs at Washington and the government cracked down. Gayley’s—out!” He glanced down at a raw cut on his knuckle.

Before I could speak he went on. “Your name’s cleared, Mike, and Jimmy’s, too. I’m taking you both back to Earth with me. Bette’s waiting—I told her—”

“The kid’s taking a spacespin today,” I said.

Andy went chalk-white. He just stared, unable to find words.

“My God!” he finally jerked out.

Then swung back to the door. He tried the handle, then tugged at it viciously.

It was locked.

I tried it myself, to make sure. There was no chance of breaking through that metal panel. I went to the phone, but the sight of cut wires, dangling, told me the instrument was useless.

I was wondering who had locked us in. Not Jimmy. He was out in space, readying for his suicidal act.

It took ten minutes of pounding on the door to bring help, and five minutes more to find a master key. Twenty minutes had passed when we raced onto the spaceport platform and I collared a greasemonkey.

“Where are they?” I snapped. “Not gone yet?”

“Sure,” he gasped, wriggling free. “Gosh, what’s up? Daly told me he was taking over for you—”

Daly! I cursed viciously.

“I thought it was funny, too, ‘cause he was hopped up so he could hardly talk.”

“Two racers,” I barked. “Quick!”

The speedy racers would hold no more than one man apiece. While we waited I explained the situation to Andy. What was behind Daly’s actions we couldn’t know, but I knew the dynamite that was packed in the man’s drugged, hatred-crazed brain.

We wasted more time while the ships were floated out. Without waiting to don protective bandages I dived into one, Andy into the other. We shot up side by side, then Andy trailed me as I led the way at breakneck speed.

I flicked on the audiophone, tried to get in touch with Jimmy. But reception was bad, especially at this pace. I didn’t dare slow down.

I was sweating and gasping for breath when the cluster of camera and stunt-ships loomed up before me, tiny against the vast immensity of space. I saw my own ship, called Andy on the ‘phone and pointed it out to him. On the screen I saw his jaw tighten grimly.

“I’ll cut around—” he said.

The rest was lost as his tubes jetted and he curved away from me in an arc that would intersect Daly’s craft.

Then another figure came on the screen. It was Jimmy’s. He was bandaged from head to foot, a huge, disproportioned monster with triple lenses magnifying his eyes, his face completely hidden otherwise. Only his voice, muffled and thick, told me of his identity.

“Watch the show, Mike,” he said. “This is going to be good!”

“Jimmy!” I yelled. “Hold it—”

“Happy landings, fella,” he said, and his hand touched a lever and swung it over.

The screen for a moment showed only a starlit space. Then a ship came into view, and a rocket blasted from it. That was the beginning. I saw the vessel jerk, recoil as another tube jetted; then the whole hull seemed to explode in a roaring, raving hell of fire.

I realized that the audiophone was still connected by beam to Jimmy’s ship. I heard him grunt, heard his breath go out with a rush; heard him fighting for air. The choking, rattling noises that came to me were almost unheard amid the grinding and screaming of metal. The spacespin was tearing the guts out of the ship, and I gritted my teeth to keep from yelling.

Power—power that would strain solid, toughened steel—blasting with unimaginable force at the flesh and bone of a man!

I heard Andy’s voice, hoarse, scarcely human.

“Jimmy!” he cried, “Jimmy!”

And in answer the spaceship sent up a scream of tortured metal. I could no longer hear a sound from Jimmy amid the

uproar. I saw a camera-ship flash down, caught a glimpse on the vision screen of Dancey's face, alight with an infernal mixture of delight and horror. The big boss himself had come out to screen this scene.

I could see his lips frame the words, "What a shot! God, what a shot!"

The titans bottled up in the rockets were bursting free and leaping redly to the stars in mad exultation. The ship spun madly, jolting, rocking, a flame of supernal brilliance against eternal night.

Then, quite suddenly, it was over. The rockets died. One tube jettied a last spark; then the ship hung silent and quiescent. My screen went blank, abruptly lit up to show the control room of Jimmy's ship, and a slumped, motionless figure strapped to the pilot's seat. Blood stained the bandages.

"Harrigan!" Dancey's voice called.

And I heard Andy shouting, "Jimmy!"

I couldn't speak; my lips were bitten through and bleeding.

The kid stirred; a bandaged hand groped out vaguely.

"Yeah—I'm okay—" a voice croaked.

The sound of hoarse breathing came.

"The drinks—are on you, Mike!" Jimmy gasped.

I felt a surge of reaction that left me limp and dizzy. Cutting through the haze that surrounded me came a new voice, shrill with hysteria, knife-edged with bitter hatred. Daly's voice!

"Damn you, Sloane!" he screamed. "You're not coming out alive! Not if I can help it!"

The screen was a shifting mirage. I got a glimpse of Daly's contorted face, drug-maddened, eyes red with insanity. I saw his fingers stab at the controls.

I saw Jimmy jerk erect, reach forward—and fall back limply, to hang motionless against the straps.

And, bright against the stars, I saw Daly's cruiser racing straight for the ship where Jimmy lay unconscious!

Quicker than thought were my actions as I jerked at the controls, blasted my rockets, shot down toward the killer. But swift as I was, Andy was before me. I saw his lean, silver racer leap past me, and his face appeared on the screen, lips set in a mirthless grin, eyes alight with the old battle lust. I could never have reached Daly in time. No pilot in the system could—but one.

It meant death.

It meant acceleration that would kill a man unprotected by bandages and other safeguards. For a second Andy's stare flickered aside and met mine. I saw him nod a little—and I don't like to remember what happened after that.

He let go all his stern rockets at once. It took split-second calculation, unbelievably perfect piloting. And it took valor, too—the valor of a hero.

I saw Andy's face go. The acceleration smashed down on him; the devil in the rockets took him by the throat and strangled him; it crushed his eyes and left red hollows; it tore his lips to ribbons and clawed the flesh from his cheeks. The rocket titan killed Andy in a pulse-beat, right there before me.

Then there was a white flare; lightnings raved across the screen; and when the beam shifted I saw two shattered hulks drifting in space.

I saw Jimmy's bandaged figure on the screen, and he stirred and tried to sit up.

I heard the warning siren shrieking through the audiophone.

And I heard Dancey's voice, breathless, tight with strain, gasping over and over, "God, what a shot! What a shot!"

Then, later, when I stood by Jimmy's hospital bed in Thaler Island, knowing that his injuries were not fatal, the old tightness came back into my throat as I noticed how much his grin, twisted and painful as it was, resembled Andy's. I hadn't told him about his brother yet. I'd wait a while.

But I told him enough to make a light come into his bloodshot eyes.

"Then we can go home, Mike? Back to—to Earth?"

I nodded. "Back to Earth. And Bette. As soon as you mend a few broken bones."

“And you say Andy fixed it up,” the kid said softly. “He—he’s a swell guy, Mike. A gentleman and a scholar.”

“Yeah,” I said, and my voice wasn’t quite steady. “A gentleman. A gentleman—and a pilot.”

[The end of *Suicide Squad* by Henry Kuttner]