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Illustrator: Mel Hunter

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RICH LIVING ***



Rich Living

By **MICHAEL CATHAL**

Illustrated by **MEL HUNTER**

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Curtis Delman was the last to leave the space liner. It was only when the Captain entered that he ceased dictating and put down the microphone. Then, with the clumsy deliberation of the aged, he pressed home the lid of the recorder and turned the key in the lock. There was almost a mile of fine wire in that box—a mile of detailed instruction, compiled over the past four days. For a centenarian, his energy was prodigious.

No other planet in the entire Galaxy was at all like Rejuvenal ... it was the only world worth one's whole fortune for a short visit!

The Captain stood respectfully by the door, waiting to be noticed. Delman beckoned him into the suite.

Hat in hand, the Captain walked over to the desk. "I thought you'd like to know, sir, the rest of the passengers have disembarked." He spoke with deference.

"Good," said Delman. "I shan't delay you more than a few minutes longer."

"Oh, no delay, I assure you, sir," the Captain replied hastily. "Only too happy to be of service. The crew asked me to thank you on their behalf, sir, for your great generosity. It was more than—er—generous." Words seemed to fail him.

"Not at all, Captain," Delman said. "You've all done your best to make the crossing as comfortable as possible and I'm very grateful to you. Perhaps you'd do one more thing for me on your return—deliver this to my representative in London." He pointed to the recording machine.

"Certainly, sir."

"Then that takes care of everything." The great lawyer rose creakily to his feet. Though bent with age, he was still an impressive figure, tall and powerfully built, his white hair spilling out over the massive forehead. "I suppose the press is here?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"Well, one can't dodge them on Jupiter. There's no room to move as it is."

The Captain laughed sympathetically. No one knew better than himself the limitations of the planet. He'd lived here as a child, grown up under that plastic bubble which Man had built to preserve an atmosphere—two thousand acres of habitable land in a wilderness of millions of square miles. It was enough to break the heart of any boy.

Delman stooped to pick up his two heavy canes. The Captain leaped forward and handed them to him. Then lawyer and skipper left the suite and moved slowly toward the gangway. As they reached the steps, the Captain broke the silence.

"It's been a privilege to have you on board, sir, and perhaps we may hope to take you home again on your return from Rejuvenal."

Curtis Delman smiled. "Well, Captain, it's foolhardy for me to plan nearly two years ahead, but I hope so, too."

They shook hands.

With a steward supporting him on either side, the ancient lawyer climbed carefully down the steps.

A spacelines official had thoughtfully provided a chair. He sat down. The usual array of microphones and tele-cameras was grouped around him. Someone appealed for silence. In the hush that followed, only his own persuasive voice was heard.



"I have no prepared statement," he said, "but I assume you gentlemen wish to ask me some questions. In that event, I'd just like to stress that I'm not as young as I used to be—or perhaps I should say, *as I hope to be*—and I'd be obliged if you kept them short and to the point."

There were about thirty reporters present and among them he recognized several faces that he had seen before. A few would belong to the local network, but most of them were probably attached to one of the Universal syndicates. It was a red-headed youngster who got in the first question; the others were quick to follow.

"Is it true, sir, that this will be your fourth visit to Rejuvenal?"

"Yes, perfectly true."

"Has anyone else been there four times?"

"No. To the best of my knowledge, I'm the first person to attempt it. Several others have been at least twice."

"Because no one else could afford it?"

"I didn't say that. Most people tire of life. I don't."

Years of experience had accustomed the lawyer to these interviews. The purring cameras failed to distract him. In fact, he almost relished the buzz of competent confusion around him.

"How long does the trip take?"

"Two hundred and fifty days out, the same back, and ninety days on the planet."

"Don't you find that a tedious journey?"

"Long, yes. Tedious, no. Don't forget, one has expectations. Besides, the early trips from Earth to Jupiter took twice as long."

"Now they take four days."

"No doubt, but that doesn't alter the argument."

"Mr. Delman, what is the speed of change?"

"You mean the rate at which the burden of years drops from one's shoulders?"

"Yes, sir."

"Almost exactly one year for every twenty-four hours spent on the planet."

"So that, in ninety days, you're ninety years younger?"

"Correct."

"How old are you now, sir?"

Delman scratched his head reflectively. The reporters laughed.

"That's a difficult question. So far as natural decay is concerned, I think I'm a hundred and fifteen. Of course, my actual life-span has been nearer three hundred and eighty-seven; but please don't credit me with being a Methuselah. I've a long way to go yet."

"Is it a fact that the round trip costs five million dollars?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that. It's a condition of the contract that passengers refrain from disclosing the price of their tickets."

"It is expensive, though?"

"Oh, naturally. But remember, the overhead is heavy. Three refueling bases on the minor planets, Borenius, Ziar and Algon, require constant maintenance, apart from the initial cost of runways. Then only five—er—patients can be housed on Rejuvenal at any given time. And one also has to consider the constant change of staff. You'd scarcely expect it to be cheap."

There was a sudden pause in the questioning. The lawyer took the opportunity to rise up out of his chair. This provoked an immediate response; all spoke at once in deafening unison. Delman held up his hand for silence, then turned and addressed the red-headed reporter on his left.

"Young man, since you were the first to begin this examination, I'll give you two questions with which to wind up for your side. Only two, mind."

The reporter thought for a moment. "Who are your fellow passengers?" he asked.

"I don't know. I thought *you* might be able to tell me that. And the second question?"

"Well, sir, I suppose I ought to ask whether you have any special message for the Universe."

Curtis Delman chuckled. "No," he said, "nothing of importance. Just that I'd be glad if the law remained substantially unaltered during my absence. It's hard enough to keep abreast as things are. Now if you'll excuse me, gentlemen—"

The tele-cameras swiveled as, cane in each hand, he hobbled toward the Terminal Building. Security officers cleared a path for him. A group of onlookers began to applaud. It was a reception more in keeping with a politician than a lawyer, but Curtis Delman held a unique position.

He had been the acknowledged leader of his profession for over three hundred years—a record no politician could ever hope to equal.

The Vice President of Rejuvenal Enterprises, Inc., had been speaking for the best part of half an hour. He was a dapper little man whose white tunic was fringed with green and purple. He had a slight Venusian accent, very bookish, very precise and very irritating. All five passengers sat in his office and waited with varying degrees of patience for the departure signal.

Curtis Delman had been introduced to each of them in turn. Of the four, only Walter Pellingner, President of Galactic Stores, had made a previous trip. The lawyer knew of him by reputation as a shrewd businessman, but there was little to be said in favor of his disposition, which was rumored to be morose and unfriendly. Certainly his appearance was surly enough to support the rumor.

"Of course," the Vice President was saying, "Mr. Curtis Delman and Mr. Pellingner have heard all this before, but I'm sure they'll both forgive me for repeating it." Walter Pellingner mumbled something uncomplimentary. "And now for a last word about the ship. Most of you will have come here by space liner, and very comfortable it is, too. Unfortunately, we can't look after you that well. Not only would it be uneconomical to employ a liner, it would also be impossible—there just aren't the landing facilities. And if you can't land, there's not much point in going, is there?" The Vice President laughed at his little joke. No one else seemed to find it amusing.

"No," he continued, "the best we can provide is a Stellano-type spaceboat—the very latest model, naturally—but, even so, I'm afraid the men will have to share berths. Of course, there's plenty of room in the lounge. As for the staff, Captain Ross, who is to look after you, is a man of considerable—"

The Vice President rambled on. Curtis Delman ceased listening to him; it was only because he had heard his name mentioned that his interest had been drawn in the first place. He focused his attention on the three remaining passengers.

They were a strangely assorted trio. Of the two men, one was extravagantly attired in dark-blue silk, obviously hand-woven, with large sapphire rings on the fingers of both hands, and a slim, eight-dial chronometer on the left wrist. Despite his advanced age, his face remained lean and swarthy, the eyes set close above a strong hooked nose, the lips taut and cruel.

He'd been introduced as Jason Tarsh. The lawyer seemed to associate the name with a criminal case—something to do with smuggling—but the details eluded him.

The other was ordinary and ill at ease, a plump, red-faced man in a badly cut tweed tunic who looked out of place in the present company. His knuckles rapped nervously on the elbow-rest of his chair. Clearly, Mr. John Bridge had none of that confidence usually acquired by the millionaire. Yet only a wealthy man could afford the trip. Curtis Delman was puzzled.

And then there was the woman.

It was difficult to believe that the third and last of his fellow-passengers was Gillian Murray. She sat by herself in the far corner, a formless, shrunken creature in deep black. He remembered seeing her, eighty years ago, on the stage of the Palladia. She had been shapely and vivacious in those days. Now only a faint sparkle lingered in her eyes. There was nothing to suggest that she had once been the toast of the Universe. Old, withered, gray-haired—time treated beauty harshly, mercilessly. He realized how much this trip must mean to her.

"Unlike Jupiter," the Vice President was saying, "this section of the Galaxy is composed of oxygen planets. In fact, the proportion of oxygen is rather higher than on Earth, so you needn't bother about spacesuits and the like. I remember—"

A green light blinked on the Vice President's desk, stemming the flood of reminiscence. It was the embarkation signal.

The Vice President rose. "It only remains," he said, "to wish you all a very happy and successful journey."

The handshaking over, the five passengers filed out onto the escalator. Below them, by the side of the Terminal Building, lay the spaceboat, a slim, cone-shaped vessel, gleaming in the artificial light. They all tottered on board.

Clearance was granted almost immediately. Slowly, they passed through the main airlock and into the open. It was dark outside and only the change in elevation told them that they were climbing the launching ramp. Behind them, the huge inverted bowl of the city glowed in hermetic splendor. Movement ceased. The warning indicator flashed on: LIE BACK AND FASTEN SAFETY HARNESS. A steward checked their positions.

They lay, tensed and motionless, waiting for the sudden thrust that would hurl them into space.

It was the two-hundred-and-twentieth day.

As Curtis Delman returned to consciousness, his first feeling was of relief. The cumulative strain of one takeoff after another could prove disastrous. It was one of the drawbacks to a spaceboat that the effect of rapid acceleration should be so marked. In a liner, the takeoff was little more than an inconvenience—and, despite exhaustive tests, there was no telling how an old heart would react to a series of blackouts. Now the danger no longer existed, for in thirty days they would arrive at Rejuvenal. As for the journey back, he would make it with the heart of a young man.

He unclipped the safety harness and lowered his legs over the side of the bunk.

He had no wish to remain in his cabin. It was too small for comfort, though, like all Stellano products, superbly designed. Not an inch had been wasted. Personal luggage was stowed under the bunk, cupboards were built in, tables folded back and even the basin was retractable. Every conceivable necessity had been crammed into a few square feet.

When he reached the lounge, he found the others already seated.

There were two vacant chairs, one next to John Bridge, the other between Tarsh and Pellingner. He chose the former.

"So you survived?" said Pellingner. He sounded disappointed.

"Yes, I survived," replied Delman. "And since we appear to be exercising our powers of observation, I hope the same may be said of you?"

Gillian Murray laughed. Walter Pellingner opened his mouth as if to make some retort, then thought better of it, and turned back to the vidar screen.

The screen took up most of the far wall. The image in focus was the scene behind them. In the center, like a giant grapefruit, hung the planet Algon—a world of water with a few islands dotting the surface of an ocean—while anchored in space, some hundreds of miles above, lay a small satellite.

"That's a funny one," said John Bridge.

The lawyer smiled. He'd grown to like Bridge. The mystery of his wealth had been discovered months ago—he'd won a sweepstake fortune. That and his own meager savings had together proved just sufficient to buy him a new lease of life. His family hadn't liked the idea; but, as he'd pointed out to them, it was his money and what use was it to him if he was too old to enjoy it? The simplicity and good nature of the man came as a refreshing change from the sullenness of Pellingner and the cynicism of Jason Tarsh.

"It's a radio-platform," Delman explained.

Sometimes it seemed almost incredible that John Bridge had never left the Earth. He was a Londoner by birth and, before this trip, had traveled no farther than New York. To him, everything they saw and did was a new adventure.

"But we don't have radio-platforms back home," Bridge said. "Why do they need them here?"

"In our own solar system," Delman told him, "there's an interplanetary link-up—an expensive business—but we did have them four hundred years ago. Out here, it's not worth the cost. The platform acts as a go-between. It can intercept messages and pass them down to the spacedrome on Algon, or it can transmit to a spaceship in flight. But direct contact between spaceship and spacedrome is impossible, because the ionized layer of the atmosphere deflects the radio waves."

"I see. Is there one over Rejuvenal, then?"

"I don't think so. At least, there wasn't when I was last there. It doesn't really warrant it. There's only the house and a small landing-ground. And a spaceboat arrives and departs every thirty days, so nothing can happen."

"What about boots? Do we have to wear them?"

"You mean gravity-boots?" Delman asked.

Walter Pellingner scowled irritably and shifted his position. "Yes, I suppose so—those heavy things we wore on Borenius and Ziar."

Delman shook his head. "No, curiously enough, we don't. It's only a tertiary planet—less than one-eighth of Earth's volume—but its specific gravity is enormous. Rejuvenite, the rock it's composed of, is one of the heaviest minerals ever discovered. They say—"

"Look, Delman," Walter Pellingner interrupted, "let that blasted man wear his boots, if he wants to. I'm sure I don't care. But for heaven's sake, stop this geological survey! It's bad enough being cooped up in this tub without having to listen to a lot of nursery small-talk."

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Mr. Pellingner—" John Bridge began.

"I wasn't talking to you," said Pellingner curtly, "but, since you've chosen to butt in, I'll say this—"

you don't belong here. You're a stupid, ignorant lout, and if you worked in any of my stores, which could never happen in the first place, I'd fire you on the spot and the idiot who hired you, too."

"Aren't you being a little unjust?" Curtis Delman spoke softly, but there was an edge of underlying menace in his voice.

This was the first time Walter Pelling had overstepped the boundaries of acceptable behavior. That he despised John Bridge, he had made clear from the beginning. Now he had come into the open. They all looked at him. Tarsh, who was nearest, seemed to find it amusing.

"I've got nothing against you, Delman." Pelling picked his words carefully. "You worked your passage like the rest of us, but *that* fellow—" he pointed toward John Bridge—"has no right to be here at all. He's a nitwit and a nobody. You're a success and I'm a success. It's not luck, Delman; we both have ability. Call it natural selection, if you like.

"Darwin did. We've fought for the chance to prolong our lives and, by doing so, we're able to marry again and have children and pass that ability down to them. Why, our lives are *essential* to the human race!"

"I should have thought there were sufficient chain-store magnates," said Tarsh.

Walter Pelling turned on him. "Don't tempt me, Jason. Your activities on Neptune and Arcturus won't bear close investigation."

Jason Tarsh smiled and remained silent. There was little humor in his smile. That last remark had done much to heighten his opinion of Walter Pelling.

"To return to my point," Pelling continued, "that man won a sweepstake. He's here not because he's intelligent, but because he's lucky, the something-for-nothing principle. A fat lot of use that is to the Universe. Why, his descendants will be as stupid as himself and there's no room for the manual laborer in this Age. It's an intolerable waste."

"If I thought you believed any of that," said Delman, "I should be the first to respect your feelings. But we've been 'cooped up' together, to use your expression, for seven months and I know you better than your shareholders do. Oh, yes, you can put it across at a Board Meeting, this lofty idea of self-sacrifice and the sum of human good; but it isn't true and you know it. You're here for the same reason I'm here—because you're afraid to die. And that goes for all of us." He looked at each of them in turn, as if daring them to contradict him. "Yes, we've got ability, all right, and self-confidence. But what do we do with these fancied qualities? We use them to make money with which to buy back our youth."

Delman got to his feet and hobbled over toward the vidar screen. He stood with his back to the screen, looking down on them.

"And what do we do with our youth?" he asked. "We use *that* to make money for our old age. We have no choice. Not only is the price of rejuvenation extortionate in itself, but also, by a whim of the legislature, we are declared dead and the burden of 'death duty' falls on our estates. When we return, we return poor. And so the cycle continues—the endless quest for money, the means of perpetual preservation.

"We are careers, not men and women!" the lawyer went on vehemently. "We don't enjoy life. We have neither the time nor the courage to enjoy it. Our children are few and we ignore them, for should they inherit this terrible urge, they would be our competitors. No, Mr. Pelling, there is only one real man among us and that is John Bridge. He alone has enjoyed life and he goes back determined to enjoy it for a second and last time. But we, by dint of work and learning and sharp-practice, may prolong the agony once again. Ours are the wasted lives."

"Oh, Mr. Delman! Surely, that's overstating the case?" Gillian Murray had the reedy voice common to so many elderly spinsters. "What about all those difficult problems you've solved? Many of them are of great importance. Everybody says so."

"Then I don't agree with everybody, Miss Murray," Delman replied. "Complications are the bread and butter of my trade. We make them for money and we unravel them for more money. One day, you draft a will; the next, you break a Trust deed—the balance remains even. It's true you perform a function, but it's questionable whether that function is of any real value."

John Bridge got up from his chair. His rubicund features were creased in bewilderment.

"This is beyond me," he said. "I'm sorry if I annoyed Mr. Pelling. I didn't mean to. I think I'll take a nap."

He walked thoughtfully out into the corridor, a book in his left hand, his right arm stretched out to the handrail overhead.

"There's something about Mr. Bridge," Gillian Murray said reflectively, "that reminds me of the

Statue of Liberty."

"Probably the hollow head," said Jason Tarsh.

It was ninety years since the lawyer had last seen Rejuvenal. And now, after all those decades of unremitting toil, he saw it again—a small purple blob on the vidar screen, a hundred thousand miles away—a blob that would grow and grow until it filled the entire screen. Soon the distant harmony of light and shade would break up, throwing into relief the jagged peaks and plunging crevices that formed the surface of the planet.

He watched it, fascinated, wondering whether this approach was to be his last, or whether he would be asking himself the same questions a thousand years to come. Perhaps it was this moment above all others that made the endless months of scraping and self-sacrifice suddenly worthwhile.

"It won't run away," said a voice beside him. He turned his head. Gillian Murray stood there, wrinkled and benign, her keen blue eyes regarding him with quizzical humor.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I didn't know you were here."

"Oh, don't apologize, Mr. Delman. It's just that you've seen it all before, so I'm the one who should be excited."

The lawyer nodded. "Yes," he admitted, "you've got something to be excited about. Years ago, longer than either of us would want to remember, I saw you on the stage. It was one of the important moments in my life. You see, before then, I'd always regarded 'beauty' and 'perfection' as abstract qualities. I was wrong. Are you going back to the theatre?"

Gillian Murray paused for a moment. "No," she replied finally. "I did intend to and, after your flattery, I almost feel I should, but I've been thinking over what you said a few weeks back—you know, about us being careers rather than flesh and blood. Mind you, I don't agree completely; we're not as bad as all that. No, it's more the feeling that I've lived one sort of life and it would be stupid to repeat the same thing over again. This time, I'd like to marry and have a family and settle down—all the ordinary things. Does that sound sensible?"

"Very sensible," said Curtis Delman.

Their eyes strayed back to the vidar screen. The planet had grown larger. Already it was possible to make out the rippling serrulation of contours. Another hour and the spaceboat would rest motionless on the purple rock.

"Somehow it's frightening—" Gillian Murray shivered—"the idea that Nature can work back to front, reverse the aging process."

"It's not an idea," he said. "It's a fact."

"Yes, I know," she replied, "but it's still uncanny. I've so many doubts. I mean will I really look the same? And my mind? Oh, they've told me there's no change—but there *must* be!" She buried her head in her hands.

Delman looked at her with compassion. "You needn't worry," he said. "Nothing can go wrong. The memory remains unimpaired; it's only the ability to make use of it that suffers—the knowledge is at your disposal. You'll be just like other young people, heedless and disinclined to profit from experience. You see, the mind is like a machine; you press the right buttons and it draws the right conclusion. The buttons are the facts to be considered and their selection is a matter of judgment. When we're young, our judgment is often at fault. When we're very young, we can't reason at all. There's nothing to fear—only youthful exuberance."

Before she could answer, the loudspeaker buzzed twice. There was a moment of silence, broken by the voice of Captain Ross.

"Attention, please! Attention, please! Will all passengers kindly retire to their cabins. The forward jets will be fired in exactly five minutes. I repeat, will all passengers—"

It was cool on the veranda, though outside, an alien sun beat down on the smooth expanse of runway, a narrow platform, less than a mile in length—the only flat stretch of land on the planet. Along the far edge, mountains, bathed in sunlight, rose in barren splendor, their sharp peaks reaching for the sky, while, on each remaining side, the ground dropped sheer away, to reform itself in twisting valleys thousands of feet below.

The house, two stories of prefabricated metal, stood perched on one of the outer corners. Opposite, packed tightly against the rock face, the emergency hangar rose in a gentle curve—a sheen of aluminum in contrast with the purple background of rejuvenite. Between them, the

launching ramp stretched lengthwise down the runway, inclining steeply for the first fifty feet, then leveling out so that the cruel blast of the takeoff would be dispersed harmlessly over the edge of the precipice.

A few small store sheds were the only other signs of habitation.

It was too hot to do anything constructive. They relaxed in their deck-chairs, grateful for the way in which the fans moved the monotonous heat into unexpected currents of warm air.

Walter Pellingier looked upward expectantly, a sudden movement that caused the little beads of perspiration on his head to run together and course down his neck in a steady stream. He ran a handkerchief around the inside of his collar. "What's the time?" he asked.

"Quarter past ten," said Tarsh.

"All right, Jason, you've had your fun. Now perhaps you'll consult the right dial. We'd all like to know."

"I can never get used to these five-hour days," said Gillian Murray. "It makes one feel so restless."

Curtis Delman frowned in mock reproof. The lawyer was in his prime, the natural strength of his features enhanced by the iron-gray hair and powerful physique.

"Really, Gillian," he said, "you ought to be thankful it's summer. At least, you've got three hours of daylight."

"Well, I can't understand it," said John Bridge. "We've been here sixty Earth days and the sun always sets at the same time."

"Nonsense," Delman replied. "It's been later each day. Though not much, I grant you. Remember, summer still has nine years to run."

"Will someone please tell me the time?" said Walter Pellingier.

Jason Tarsh regarded him with approval. "That's much better. It's two o'clock."

Of the five of them, John Bridge and Jason Tarsh were the least changed. True, that 'lucky fool,' as Walter Pellingier called Bridge, had lost a good deal of weight and his face was not quite so full as it had been, but it was the same John Bridge who had climbed on board at Jupiter. The change in Jason Tarsh was even less marked. Time had ironed out a few creases here and there, and his back was straighter. But, apart from that, he looked the same at fifty as he had at a hundred—gaunt, resilient and merciless.

"It's due anytime now," said Walter Pellingier, his eyes still fixed on the empty segment of horizon above the near end of the runway.

The others remained silent. The lawyer imagined that they were all thinking of the incoming spaceboat. The landing today was something like a dress-rehearsal for their own departure in thirty days. It broke the tedium of their existence and with it would come a change of staff, the unloading of supplies and the news from home. But when the next landing took place, they themselves would be waiting, young and eager, to go back and start life afresh.

Gillian Murray was looking toward the door behind them, her lovely profile turned in his direction. He followed the line of her gaze. There, in the hallway, stood the two house servants, man and wife. They had both arrived on the relief spaceboat a month ago, a comfortable, middle-aged couple. Now they were almost like children, leaping up and down with impatience, counting every second which brought Captain Ross nearer—young, graceful creatures, hand in hand, reunited in their youth.

Delman found himself smiling in sympathy. "Yes," he said, "those are the vital years."

"I was just thinking the same thing." She turned to him. There were tears of happiness in her eyes. At that moment, he caught a glimpse of her real beauty, something deeper than the merely physical—a purity of expression mirrored from within, clear and composed, like a reflection of the soul.

"There it is!" Walter Pellingier announced excitedly. He pointed.

Out in the distance, a small speck hurtled toward them. Soon it would streak low overhead, until a final burst from the jets brought it to a halt at the far end of the runway.

The two young servants could restrain themselves no longer. Oblivious to danger, they began to run down the side of the landing-strip, racing toward a spot parallel to where they knew the spaceboat would draw to a standstill.

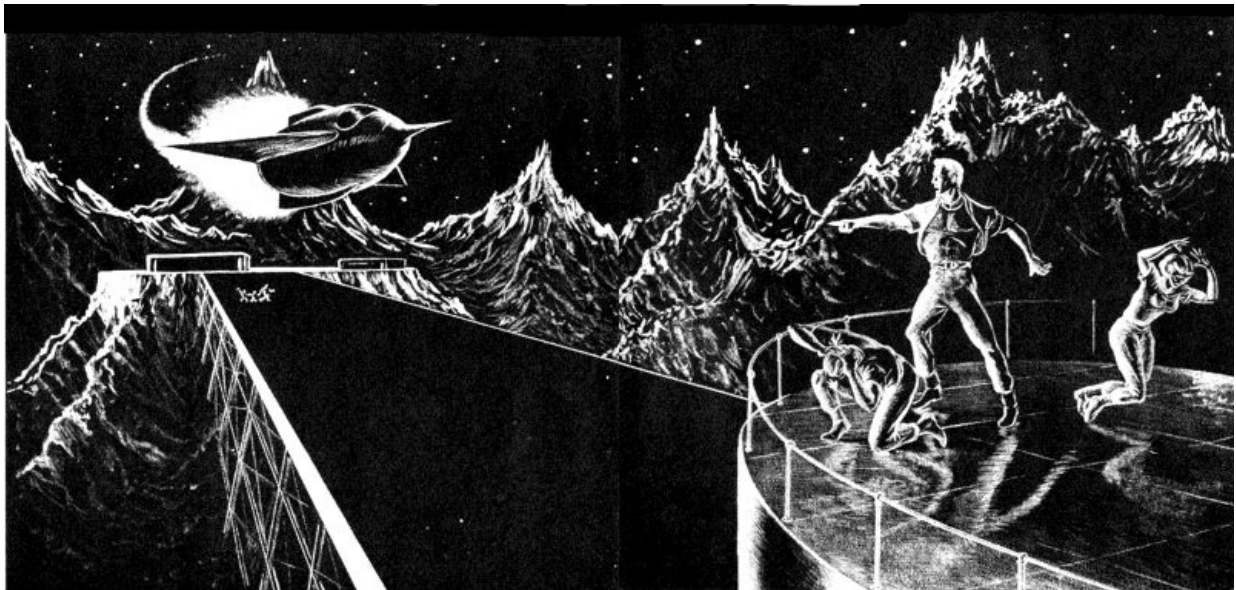
It was John Bridge who noticed them. The others were all looking in the opposite direction. He leaped to his feet and dashed outside.

"Come back!" he yelled. "For God's sake, come back! You'll get caught by the blast!"

They were so intent that they paid no heed to him. He ran on after them, trying to make himself heard, forgetful of his own peril.

"Look!" The strong fingers of Jason Tarsh dug deep into the lawyer's arm. Delman turned instinctively. Nearly four hundred yards away, three figures stumbled back toward the house.

"It's too late," Delman said. "Get down, all of you! If Ross sees them, he may try to overshoot. If he's going too slowly, he'll have to use the rear jets and they might splash us. Get down!"



They flattened themselves out on the floor of the veranda.

Above them, the thin whine of the approaching craft switched into a deep roar, then cut out almost instantly.

Delman saw the flash of silver overhead as the spaceboat fought to recover altitude. One moment, it was climbing; the next, it veered sharply to the left and hit the cliff.

Sound and light combined, deafening and dazzling, as the force of the explosion thrust outward, tearing at the foundations of the house itself.

When the hail of falling rock had died away, they got up and looked around them. It was difficult to determine the extent of the damage, for dust swirled and eddied in all directions. Only gradually did the details emerge from the surrounding mist.

The crash had caused a small avalanche. Rubble littered the smooth width of the runway. Of the spaceboat, there was nothing to be seen but a scar on the mountainside.

John Bridge and the two servants had vanished.

"That crazy old fool," said Walter Pelling. "I might have known he'd mess things up."

"It wasn't him," Gillian Murray replied. "I think it was the servants. I'm sure I heard him shout a warning at them."

"You think! *You think!*" Walter Pelling shook his head vigorously from side to side. His ears were still ringing from the blast. "He's dead, Miss Murray. You hear me? He's dead! He doesn't need a champion now!"

Gillian Murray flushed. "Why, you ungrateful—"

"Shut up, both of you!" said Jason Tarsh angrily. "Can't you see there's work to be done? We've got to clear the runway."

Curtis Delman left the veranda rail and came toward them. "And just how do you propose to do that, Mr. Tarsh?" he asked quietly.

All of them looked at the lawyer in amazement. Jason Tarsh laughed derisively.

"Listen to him!" he exclaimed. "The Great Man! Wants to know how you remove a few small stones!"

"You damned idiot!" said Delman savagely. "Use your eyes! Why were this house and the storage sheds prefabricated? Just for the hell of it? Dozens of useless trips when you could build what you wanted from rock? Until today, there wasn't a loose pebble in this godforsaken place! Didn't that strike you as odd? Well, didn't it?"

Tarsh made no reply.

The lawyer moved back to the veranda rail. "There!" he said, pointing at a near-lying stone the size of a tennis ball. "Go ahead, try your strength. Throw it over the side!"

Uncertainly, Jason Tarsh walked into the open. They watched him as he bent down to pick up the small purple lump. For nearly a minute, he strained and tugged at the dead, unyielding weight in front of him. Then, slowly, he straightened up and returned to the veranda.

"You're right," he said grudgingly. "I couldn't lift it."

Delman nodded. "Considering it's more than ten times the weight of lead, that's not surprising."

"Anyhow, there's one consolation," said Jason Tarsh. "We weren't on that spaceboat."

The lawyer regarded him with pity. "No, we weren't," he said, "but whether it's a consolation remains to be seen."

"What are you driving at?" demanded Walter Pelling. "They'll send a rescue party. They must know there's something wrong."

"Oh, yes," Delman agreed. "But they don't know what and we can't tell them. And, even if they did know, what could they do?" He began to stroll up and down the veranda. "As far as they're concerned, Ross hasn't reported to Algon. Perhaps his transmitter failed. Perhaps he blew up in space. There are plenty of possibilities. If they treat the matter as an emergency, the relief boat may get here in twenty-eight days instead of thirty. But it can't land and it can't hover, so what good is it to us?"

"Now wait, Delman. You know the reputation of Rejuvenal Enterprises. A company like that can't afford to take a risk. They'll send for a patrol ship—"

"And those patrol ships are equipped with heli-cars," Tarsh interjected. "They can launch a couple and pick us up in no time. It's not difficult."

Pelling nodded in agreement. "There you are. And Jason ought to know; he's spent most of his life dodging them."

Delman looked at Tarsh with distaste. "I remember now. You were the man who shipped girls to Mercury and got run in under Section 7 of the White Slavery Act. Ten years, wasn't it?"

"That's right," Jason Tarsh answered, "but there's no need to be nasty about it. Just fulfilling the old commercial custom of supply and demand." His thin lips broke into a smile. "Know what they used to call me in the camps? 'The Miner's Best Friend.' Nice of them, eh?"

"Was it? They gave the same name to their canaries in the old days—and most of those were killed by fire-damp. But to get back to your mythical patrol ship—where do you expect it to come from? You know as well as I do, they keep to the main spaceways. We're tucked away in a remote corner of the Galaxy. There's one chance in a thousand that a patrol ship is within forty-five days of here."

The color drained from Walter Pelling's face. "Why forty-five?" he whispered.

The lawyer paused before replying. They were grouped around him in a half-circle, three frightened people waiting for an answer, yet knowing in their hearts what that answer would be.

He shrugged. "I should have thought it was obvious," he said. "Of course, I've no wish to alarm you and there is a method that might get us out of here, but we've got to face the facts. I was the only one among you whose legs had already begun to fail, so it's safe to assume I'm the oldest inhabitant. In forty-five days, I shall be ten—the rest of you will be less—and I can't guarantee to look after you any longer than that." He fell silent, allowing the implication to sink in.

"Seven million dollars!" cried Walter Pelling. "I've paid seven million dollars just to die!" He began to laugh hysterically.

"Stop it, you fool!" Jason Tarsh caught him by the shoulders and began to shake him violently. "You've paid seven million dollars to die young. Why, you ought to be tickled pink. Remember the slogan of Galactic Stores—'Originality is the Test of Taste!'"

Gillian Murray seized the lawyer's hand. "Curtis, you said something about a method."

He pointed at the emergency hangar over on the far side. "There's a lifeboat in there. It may have been damaged by the blast, so don't pin your hopes on it. But if we can shift the loose stones and get the doors open, we'll soon know."

Arm in arm, they walked across the landing strip.

Twice the relief boat shot low over the runway, sweeping round in a gigantic circle. Then it

changed course and climbed steeply into the stratosphere. They watched it disappear out of sight—the last link with the world they knew.

In the center of the landing strip, a dense column of smoke billowed up from a pile of smoldering moss—a warning that no pilot could fail to observe. In the stillness, it rose in a tall spiral, twisting and turning, signaling to the winds.

"You should've let it land." Walter Pellingier was almost in tears; he blinked miserably.

Delman had never pictured him like this, small, myopic, with fair hair and sloping shoulders. The structure of his eyes had changed during the intervening weeks and the contact lenses he'd worn until recently were quite useless to him. Now, at twenty-one, he was half-blind and of little practical help to them.

"They didn't stand a chance," the lawyer replied.

"Oh, but they did! On the Law of Probability, they had one in sixty-seven—and our lives are worth a thousand of theirs."

"Yes, I know. Our lives are essential to humanity. You've said it all before and I still disagree with you."

"Have I? I don't remember."

"You have. But it doesn't matter. Come on back. We've got to clear those stones. There aren't many left."

As he strode toward the hangar, the lawyer knew that the days were running short. True, the launching ramp was intact and one door of the hangar was already open; but it would take at least a week to remove the chunks of rejuvenite blocking the remaining door. Tarsh and himself had done most of the heavy work. Yet even Tarsh, with all his feline strength, was beginning to tire. The constant effort to make use of every scrap of daylight was proving too much for them.

According to Gillian, the lifeboat was unharmed. Delman hadn't the time to inspect it properly. But the very position of the hangar, squeezed tight against the cliffside, had given it the best protection possible. No, if only they could remove those stones!

Delman exhaustedly picked up his discarded crowbar. He inserted the point under a slab of rejuvenite, thrust down and pried with all his strength. As it tilted, Gillian Murray forced chocks of metal underneath to hold it in place. The teamwork was repeated time after time, until at last the slab toppled over, gaining them another twelve inches. They rested for a moment. Then the whole endless process started once again.

By dusk, they had removed five stones.

Finished eating, they relaxed in the living room, lying back in the padded comfort of the armchairs. Only Jason Tarsh remained standing—slim and compact, like a young Oriental despot—his eyes fixed on Walter Pellingier.

Pellingier squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. "I think I'll try and get some sleep," he said.

"Just a moment, Walter," Tarsh lifted a restraining hand. "You're a businessman and I want your advice. It's quite a simple problem. Imagine that four of your employees are stranded on a desert island with very little food. And suppose they all agree to build a raft on which to escape and get back to the head office—what you might call a 'joint venture.' Now let us also suppose that three of those people work hard, cut down trees and fashion them into planks, gather creepers and braid them into ropes, and generally do all they can to further the common purpose. But the fourth, Walter—and this is the point—the fourth does nothing. He eats the food—Company food, mind you!—so urgently needed to keep up the strength of the—"

"Why do you keep picking on me? I do all I can." Walter Pellingier got out of his chair.

"*You?*" said Jason Tarsh, affecting amazement. "Who said anything about *you*? Why, you're the last person I'd criticize. But I see you wish to leave the lovebirds to themselves, so let's finish our little chat outside. It's a fine night." He steered the unwilling Pellingier out onto the veranda.

"Well, shall we take a hint and move over to the settee?" Gillian Murray suggested.

Delman watched with admiration as she crossed the room, clean-limbed and graceful, her long red hair falling from the crown of her head in a soft cascade.

"Never be discourteous to the cook," he replied. "That was one of my earliest lessons. And, heaven knows, you're an unusually attractive cook. It gives one an appetite just to look at you." He got up to join her—a bearded giant, tall and deep-chested, like the heroes of the Viking sagas.

"What will you do when we get back?" she asked.

"Marry and get some job that won't take me away from you. Does that meet with your approval?"

"Yes," she said. "If that's a proposal, it will do nicely."

They kissed with all the intensity of young love, losing in their embrace the dread of time which swept them toward their childhood.

"Curtis," she said quietly, "have we any hope? Please be honest!"

His fingers brushed the back of her neck lightly, up and down, not altering their tender rhythm.

"Not much," he said without emotion.

"Jason was right about the food. There's very little left; the supplies were on the lifeboat. You're all hungry. I know you are."

"It's not only that, darling. Sleep is just as important. But we can't spare the time. Every day now, we'll be growing physically weaker and the same job will soon take us twice as long. There's so much to do. And we've got to plan all of it in advance, while our minds are still adult."

"Is that why you've got the recording machine down here?"

"It may sound idiotic," he said, "but I can't remember my boyhood—it was four hundred years ago. Today, I'm twenty-five, you're twenty, and Walter is somewhere between the two of us. Jason, I'm sure, is less—how much, I don't know. The fact is that we'll be children before we leave—that is, *if* we leave—and we'll only be able to understand the simple things. So it seemed essential to clarify the lifeboat instructions; the manual would be complete nonsense to a child. Of course, I've added some general advice as it occurred to me."

Gillian sighed. "I don't think I'll like being married to you," she said. "You think of everything. May I switch on the recording machine?"

"Go ahead," he replied. "It will take a few seconds to warm up, though."

She kissed him lightly, then uncurled herself and went over to the recorder. The purr of the machine gradually increased in pitch until it passed from the range of human hearing. The silence was broken by his own voice.

"Curtis!" it said, "Curtis! Do not touch the controls until you are sure that Gillian and Walter and Jason are all in the cabin. Are they all there? Good. Then pull the big lever toward you. Now—"

Jason Tarsh entered the room and switched off the machine. "You can delete Walter," he said. He began to tape the slow, earnest delivery of the recorder. "For he is a silly boy and fell over the edge of the cliff." He smiled and continued in normal tones, "Very unfortunate. Should never have left him alone, poor guy. Blind as a bat. Oh, well, bigger breakfasts tomorrow. Good night."

It was noon. The whole ledge shimmered in the sun, hazy and indistinct, as the rising currents of air dispersed the light in a jumble of refracted motion.

On the runway, between the hangar and the house, stood a nine-year-old boy. A small, motionless figure, with a towel around his waist and his feet bandaged for protection against the blistering heat of the rock, he gazed up in triumph at the launching ramp.

There, perched on the summit of the ramp, lay the squat, powerful bulk of the lifeboat.

He turned and ran joyfully back to the house. "Jill!" he called. "Jill, come and play! And bring Jason with you."

A little girl, her red hair unbrushed, stepped out onto the veranda. "Don't want to bring Jason," she said, "He's mean."

"You must bring Jason," he insisted, "or you can't play."

"What we going to play?"

"Ships," he said. He pointed to the top of the launching ramp.

Silently, the two children trudged across the rock-face and began to climb the steep slope of the ramp, leaning forward to retain their balance. Tucked up in a blanket in Gillian Murray's arms, Jason Tarsh bawled hungrily. Higher and higher they climbed, the only living creatures in a purple world, striving toward their goal. Curtis Delman, hampered by the weight of the recording machine, kept urging her to keep up with him. Suddenly, she stopped.

"Don't want to play," she said. "I'm tired." She sat down on the hot metal of the ramp, placing the baby beside her.

He let her rest for a few minutes, then tried to coax her to carry on. "You're a sissy," he said. "You're afraid!"

Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I'm not a sissy," she cried. "I'm not! I'm not! I'm *not!*"

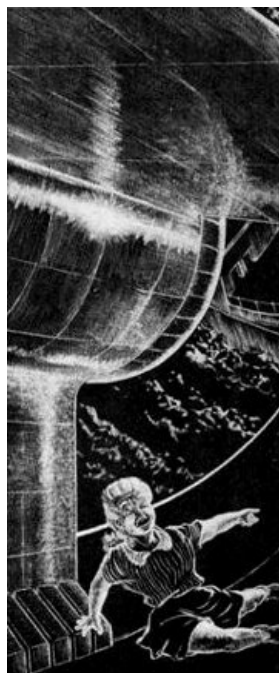
Delman turned and continued climbing purposefully. "Gillian's a sissy! Gillian's a sissy!" he chanted over and over again.

Panting with weariness and indignation, she struggled after him.

They had covered more than half the distance before he looked back. He saw her following and prepared to go on again. Then he realized something was wrong and swung around, startled. Her hands were empty!

"Where's Jason?" he cried out.

She was too exhausted to reply and stared at him blankly. Putting down the recording machine, he ran past her. Some twenty yards away, the bundle of blanket that was Jason Tarsh began to roll gently down the slope.



He raced after it, his swift young legs moving as easily and painlessly as pistons. He reached the bundle just before the change in gradient which marked the first half of the ramp. Horrified, he increased his speed. Propelled by the sharp incline, the bundle branched off at a tangent. He caught it just as it was about to plunge over the side. When he picked up the blanket, it was curiously light.

There was nothing inside it.

Very slowly, he clambered back up the slope.

As he came level with Gillian, he put his arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry," he said. "Jason was too small to play." Taking her by the hand, he led her to the short, vertical ladder which led into the lifeboat.

After the harsh glare of the sun, the cabin seemed dark and strange. What light there was was filtered through six small port-holes—three on either side—in which the glass was tinted a deep blue.

It took him nearly ten minutes to strap Gillian into the safety harness, and by the time he had adjusted his own, she was asleep. He stretched out his right hand and switched on the recorder.

"Curtis!" it began.

Calmly, he carried out the instructions. The deep, commanding voice left nothing to chance.

A pull on the master lever drew up the ladder and closed the hatch in hydraulic silence. The soft whistle of oxygen escaped from pressurized cylinders. An automatic transmitter broadcast an endless S.O.S. Deep in the heart of the lifeboat, dynamos pulsed with the throb of power.

"Now, Curtis," said the voice from the past, "turn the red switch in front of you to 'Fixed Control.' Have you turned the red switch to 'Fixed Control'? Then lie back and fasten your safety harness as tight as you can. Have you done that?"

"Yeah," Curtis said, lying back.

"You've done everything you had to do," the voice continued. "Now shut your eyes and don't move! Everything will be all right. The two of you will reach Earth. You don't doubt that, do you?"

"No," said Curtis, closing his eyes and relaxing, reassured by the voice from the past. "I know we'll get there."

"And the two of you will get married when you're old enough. To each other, of course."

"Of course," Curtis agreed.

"Good luck!" said the voice. "Good luck to you both!"

It clicked off then and the lifeboat sped Earthward.

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