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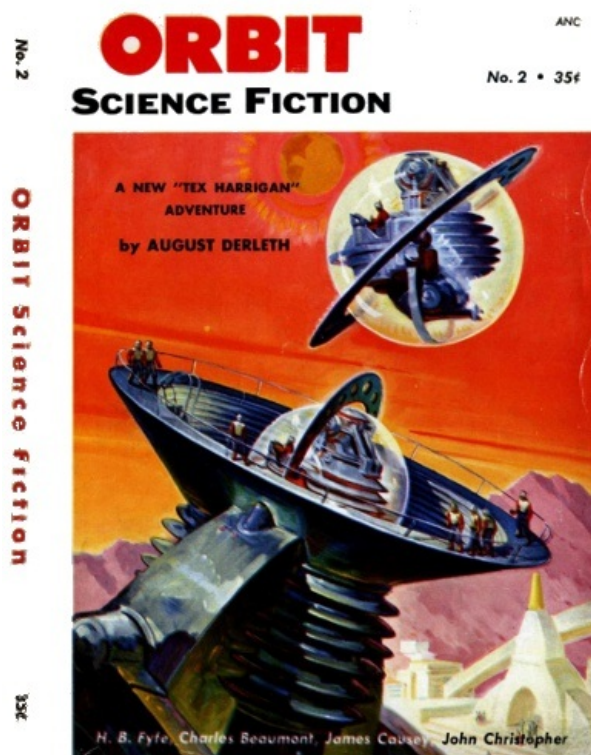
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LUNA ESCAPADE ***



Luna Escapade

by H. B. Fyfe

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With over an hour to go before he needed to start braking for his landing on Luna, Pete Dudley sat at the controls of the rocket freighter and tried to think of anything else that needed checking after his spinning the ship. He drummed absently with the fingers of his right hand upon the buckle of the seat strap which restrained him from floating out of the padded acceleration seat.

*SHE WAS JUST A
CRAZY BRAT—OR WAS
SHE?*

"Let's see, tail's right out there in front. I got the angle perfect. Guess everything's okay."

He noticed his fingers drumming, and stopped.

"Cut that out!" he told himself. "Get nervous now and Jack'll be sending some other vacuum on the next Mars run."



There's Ericsson dead center in the screen, waiting for you to plop down beside the domes. You couldn't miss a crater that size if you tried."

He leaned back and stared speculatively at the curving tip of the Lunar Rockies that ended in one of the largest craters on the far side of Luna. His eyes squinted slightly and there was a crease between them, as if he spent much time peering into instruments. There were deeper lines beside his

mouth, but the thin lips and pointed chin neutralized that evidence of frequent smiling.

"Are we nearly there?"

Dudley's brown eyes opened so wide that the whites gleamed in the dim light from his instruments. Then he shut them tightly and shook his head quickly.

He had thought he heard a woman's voice, and of course he couldn't have. Freight rockets were checked out of Terran spaceports with only a pilot aboard. A lonely job for a man, but it was really only a way of keeping in practice. He made six round trips to Luna a year, but the big one was the three-month kick to Mars.

Then he smelled the perfume, so out of place in the machine-crowded compartment. He turned around slowly.

She stood with one hand gripping the lead of a computing machine to keep her feet on the deck. Dudley stared her up and down two or three times before he realized his mouth hung open.

Slim and about five-feet-four, she looked like a nice little girl making her first disastrous experiments with adult make-up. The slack suit of deep blue, revealing a soft white blouse at the neck of the jacket, was in the best of taste, but her heavy application of lipstick was crude.

And her hair isn't naturally ash-blonde, Dudley thought. Yet she looks like such a kid. Not pretty, but she might be in a few years.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded harshly.

For a second, her eyes were scared. Then the expression was supplanted by a hard, make-believe confidence, leaving him merely with a fading sense of shame at his tone.

"Same as you," she said boldly. "Going to Luna."

Dudley snorted. "Then relax," he growled, "because I can't stop you now. Where the devil did you spend the last thirty-six hours?"

She tried a grin. "In the little room where the things are that pump the air. I sneaked in the galley once, when you were asleep. Did you miss anything?"

"No," he admitted, thinking back.

"See? I'm not enough trouble to be noticed!"

Dudley eyed her sourly. There was trouble behind this somewhere, he was willing to bet, or else why had she stowed away? Running from a family fight? When the port checkers at Ericsson saw her—!

"How old are you, kid?" he asked.

"Twenty-one."

The answer was too pat and quickly given. Even the girl seemed to realize that, and she continued talking. "My name's Kathi Foster. You're the next Mars pilot, according to the schedule, aren't you?"

"What about it?"

She let go of the cable and pushed her weightless body across the control room to his chair.

"What's it like on Mars?" she asked breathlessly.

What does she expect me to tell her? Dudley wondered cynically. *That the whole population of the colony is only about four thousand? That they still live mostly on hope, dreams, and regular rocket service? That every one of them represents such a fantastic transportation expense that the Commission only sends top-notch people?*

"It's pretty tough," he said.

She hesitated over his unhelpful reply, then plunged ahead.

"How about taking me along to see for myself?"

Dudley smiled with one corner of his mouth.

"You're not going anywhere except back to Terra on the next rocket," he predicted flatly. "And I hope your father still has enough hair on his head to own a hair-brush!"

"My father is dead."

"Then your—." He paused as she shook her head. "Well, don't you have any family? Jobs on Luna are ... limited. The settlements just aren't very big. You're better off down home."

Kathi's half-defiant, half-wheedling mask cracked. Her over-painted lips twitched.

"What do you know about where I'm better off? If you knew the kind of family I have—."

"Oh, calm down!" grunted Dudley, somewhat discomforted by the sight of tears spilling from her blue eyes. "Things are never as bad as you think when you're just a ... when you're young. When we land, we can say you got left aboard by mistake. They'll just send you back without any trouble."

"Like hell they will! I won't go!"

Dudley stared hard at her, until she dropped her gaze.

"You don't understand," she said more quietly. "I ... my family has been kicking me around the law courts all my life just because my grandfather left me his money. They're all trying to get their hands on it, or on me to back up their claims. Do you realize I'm eight—I'm twenty-one and I never lived a happy day in my life? I'd rather *die* than go back!"

"Yeah, sure," said Dudley. "What did you really do to make you so scared of going back? Smack up grandpop's helicopter, maybe, or flunk out of school?"

"No, I got sick and tired of being shoved around. I wanted to get away someplace where I could be myself."

"Why didn't you buy a ticket on a passenger rocket, if you had such an urge to visit Luna?"

"My aunts and uncles and cousins have all my money tied up in suits."

He leaned back by pushing the edge of the control desk.

"Pretty fast with the answers, aren't you?" he grinned. "I wonder what you'll think up for the spaceport police when *they* ask you?"

"You don't believe—," she began.

He shook his head and to avoid further argument he picked up his sliderule, muttering something about checking his landing curve. Actually, he was not as convinced as he pretended that her story was all lies.

But what the hell? he thought. *I have my own troubles without worrying because some blonde little spiral thinks she can go dramatic over a family spat. She'd better learn that life is full of give and take.*

"You better get attached to something around here," he warned her when the time came for serious deceleration.

"I ... I could go back where I was," she stammered. He suddenly realized that for the past hour she had silently accepted his ignoring her. She asked now, "What happens next?"

"We cut our speed and come down on the tail as near to the domes of the Ericsson settlement as possible without taking too much of a chance. Then I secure everything for the towing."

"Towing? I'm sorry; I never read much about the moon rockets."

"Natural enough," Dudley retorted dryly. "Anyway, they send out big cranes to lower the rocket to horizontal so they can tow it on wheels under one of the loading domes. Handling cargo goes a lot faster and safer that way. Most of the town itself is underground."

He began warming up his tele-screen prior to asking the spaceport for observation of his approach. Kathi grabbed his elbow.

"Of course I'm going to talk with them," he answered her startled question.

"Can they see me here behind you?"

"I guess so. Maybe not too clear, but they'll see somebody's with me. What's the difference? It'll just save them a shock later."

"Why should they see me at all? I can hide till after you leave the ship, and—."

"Fat chance!" grunted Dudley. "Forget it."

"Please, Dudley! I—I don't want to get you in any trouble, for one thing. At least, let me get out of sight now. Maybe you'll change your mind before we land."

He looked at her, and the anxiety seemed real enough. Knowing he was only letting her postpone the unpleasantness but reluctant to make her face it, he shrugged.

"All right, then! Go somewhere and wipe that stuff off your face. But stop dreaming!"

He waited until she had disappeared into one or another of the tiny compartments behind the control room, then sent out his call to the Lunar settlement.

The problem did not affect his landing; in fact, he did better than usual. His stubby but deft fingers lacked their ordinary tendency to tighten up, now that part of his mind was rehearsing the best way to explain the presence of an unauthorized passenger.

In the end, when he had the rocket parked neatly on the extremities of its fins less than a quarter of a mile from one of the port domes, he had not yet made up his mind.

"Nice landing, Pete," the ground observer told him. "Buy you a drink later?"

"Uh ... yeah, sure!" Dudley answered. "Say, is Jack Fisher anywhere around?"

"Jack? No, I guess he's gone bottom level. We're having 'night' just now, you know. Why? What do you want a cop for?"

Suddenly, it was too difficult.

If she could hide as long as she did, she could have done it all the way, he told himself.

"Oh, don't wake him up if he's asleep," he said hastily. "I just thought I'd have dinner with him sometime before I leave."

He waited sullenly while the great self-propelled machines glided out over the smooth floor of the crater toward the ship, despising himself for giving in.

Well, I just won't know anything about her, he decided. Let her have her little fling on Luna! It won't last long.

He closed the key that would guard against accidental activation of the controls and, enjoying the ability to walk even at one-sixth his normal weight, went about securing loose objects. When the space-suited figures outside signaled, he was ready for the tilt.

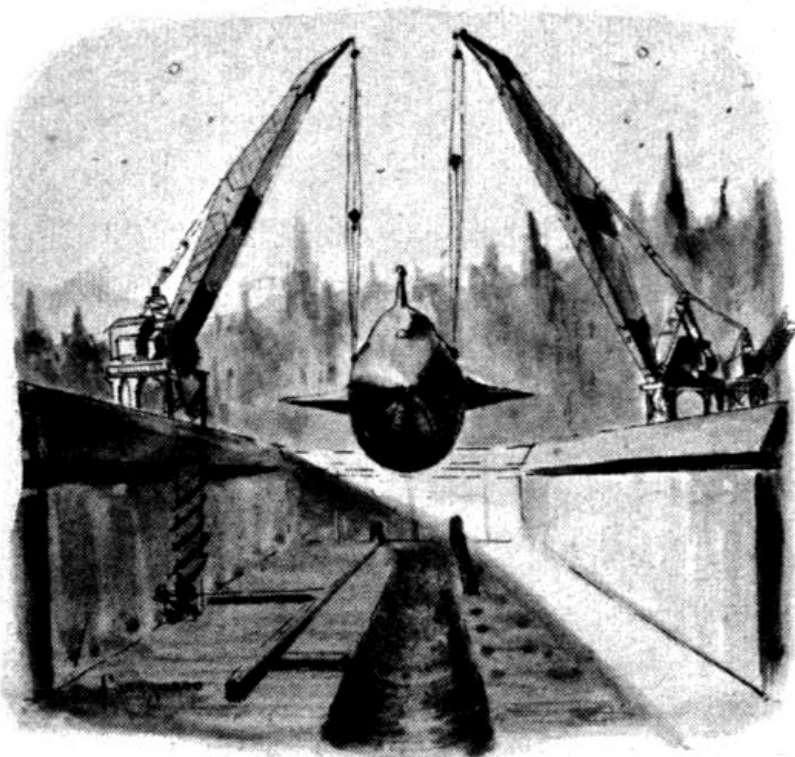
Once under the dome, he strode out through the airlock as if innocent of any thought but getting breakfast. He exchanged greetings with some of the tow crew, turned over his manifesto to the yawning checker who met him, and headed for the entrance of the tunnel to the main part of the settlement.

Only when he had chosen a monorail car and started off along the tunnel toward the underground city a mile away did he let himself wonder about Kathi Foster.

"Her problem now," he muttered, but he felt a little sorry for her despite his view that she needed to grow up.

Later in the "day," he reported to transportation headquarters.

"Hiya, Pete!" grinned Les Snowdon, chief of the section. "All set for the Ruby Planet?"



Dudley grimaced. "I suppose so," he said. "Left my locker mostly packed, except for what I'll need for a couple of days. When do we go out and who's the crew?"

"Jarkowski, Campiglia, and Wells. You have three days to make merry and one to sober up."

"I sober fast," said Dudley.

Snowdon shook his head in mock admiration. "Nevertheless," he said, "the physical will be on the fourth morning from now. Don't get in any fights over on Level C—or if you do, let the girl do the punching for you! A broken finger, my boy, and you'll ruin the whole Martian schedule!"

"Ah, go on!" Dudley grinned, moving toward the door. "They can always stick you in there, and make you earn your pay again."

"They're still paying me for the things I did in the old days," retorted Snowdon. "Until I get caught up, I'm satisfied to keep a little gravity under my butt. Oh ... by the way, your pal Jack Fisher left a call for you. Something about dinner tonight."

Dudley thanked him and went off to contact Fisher. Then he returned to the pilots' quarters for a shower and strolled along the corridors of the underground city to a lunch-room. Food and water were rationed on Luna, but not nearly as tightly as they would be for him during the next three months.

That night, he joined Fisher and his wife for dinner at The View, Ericsson's chief center of escape from the drabness of Lunar life. It was the only restaurant, according to the boast of its staff, where one could actually dine under the stars.

"Sometimes I wish that dome wasn't so transparent," said Fisher. "Sit down, the girls will be back in a minute."

Dudley eyed him affectionately. Fisher was head of the settlement's small police force, but managed to look more like the proprietor of one of the several bars that flourished in the levels of the city just under the restaurant. He was heavy enough to look less than his six feet, and his face was as square as the rest of him. Dark hair retreated reluctantly from his forehead, and the blue eyes set peering above his pudgy cheeks were shrewd.

"Girls?" asked Dudley.

"We brought along a new arrival to keep you company," said Fisher. "She works in one of the film libraries or something like that."

Which means that's as good an excuse as any for having her at Ericsson, thought Dudley. Anyway, I'm glad Jack is the sort to be realistic about things like bars and other ... recreation. There'd be more guys turning a little variable from too much time in space without some outlet.

"Here she comes with Myra," said his host. "Name's Eileen."

Dudley smiled at Mrs. Fisher and was introduced to the red-haired girl with her. Eileen eyed him speculatively, then donned her best air of friendliness. The evening passed rapidly.

For the next few days, besides seeing the Fishers and looking up the men who were to be his crew, Dudley spent a lot of time with Eileen. There seemed to be little difficulty about her getting time off from whatever her official duties were. She showed him all the bars and movie theatres and other amusements that the underground city could boast, and Dudley made the most of them in spite of his recent visit to Terra. On the Mars-bound rocket, they would be lucky, if allowed one deck of cards and half a dozen books for the entertainment of the four of them.

It was on the "evening" of his third day that the specter haunting the back of his mind pushed forward to confront him. He had listened for gossip, but there had been no word of the discovery of an unauthorized arrival. Then, as he was taking Eileen to her underground apartment, he heard his name called.

There she was, with an escort of three young men he guessed to be operators of the machinery that still drilled out new corridors in the rock around the city. Somehow she had exchanged the black slack suit for a bright red dress that was even more daring than Eileen's. In the regulated temperature, clothing was generally light, but Dudley's first thought was that this was overdoing a good thing.

"May I have a word with you, Dudley?" Kathi asked, coming across the corridor while her young men waited with shifting feet and displeased looks.

Dudley glanced helplessly at Eileen, wondering about an introduction. He had never bothered to learn her last name, and he had no idea of what name Kathi was using. The redhead had pity on him.

"My door's only a few yards down," she said. "I'll wait."

She swept Kathi with a glance of amused confidence and walked away. It seemed to Dudley that she made sure the three young men followed her with their eyes; but then he was kicking off for Mars within twenty-four hours, so he could hardly object to that.

"Have you changed your mind?" demanded Kathi with a fierce eagerness.

"Not so loud!" hushed Dudley. "About what? And how did you get that rig?"

Had he been less dismayed at her presence, he might have remarked that the tight dress only

emphasized her immaturity, but she gave him no time to say more.

"About Mars, Dudley. Can't you take me? I'm afraid those illegitimate blood-suckers are going to send after me. They could sniff out which way a nickel rolled in a coal-bin."

"Aren't you just a shade young for that kind of talk?"

"I guess I'm a little frightened," she admitted.

"You frighten me, too," he retorted. "How are you ... I mean, what do you—?"

She tossed her blonde hair.

"There are ways to get along here, I found out. I didn't get arrested this time, did I? So why can't you take a chance with me to Mars?"

"Take an eclipse on that," said Dudley with a flat sweep of his hand. "It's just out of the question. For one thing, there are four of us going, and you can't hide for the whole trip without *somebody* catching on."

"All right," she said quietly. "Why not?"

"What do you mean, 'Why not?'"

"I'm willing to earn my passage. What if there *are* four of you?"

For a long moment, Dudley discovered things about himself, with the sudden realization that the idea appealed to some suppressed part of his mind. He had never kidded himself about being a saint. The thing had possibilities. *Maybe one of the others can be talked into restraint into her.*

He snapped out of it. "Don't be a little fool!" he grated. "If you want my advice, you'll—."

"Well, I *don't* want your goddam advice! If you're too yellow to try it, I'll find somebody else. There'll be another rocket after yours, you know. Maybe they'll have a *man* on it!"

He felt his face go white and then flush as he stared at her. He did not know what to say. She looked like a child, but the outburst was more than a mere tantrum.

Sounds as if she's never been crossed before, he thought. I ought to haul off and slap a little self-restraint into her.

Instead, he beckoned to the three men, who had been edging closer with aggrieved expressions.

"How about taking your girl friend along?" he said flatly.

One of them took her by the elbow and tried to murmur something in her ear, but Kathi shook him off.

"If you are afraid for your license, Dudley, I'll say I hid without your knowing it. I'll say one of the others let me in. Please, Dudley. I'm sorry I talked to you like that."

She was making a fool of him, and of herself, he decided. And in another minute, she would spill the whole thing, the way she was sounding off. And her friends were beginning to look hostile as it was.

"What's the trouble?" asked one of them.

"Nothing that won't clear up if you pour a couple of drinks into her," said Dudley disgustedly.

He walked away, and they held her from following.

"*Dudley!*" she yelled after him. "They'll send me back! Please, Dudley. I won't go. You remember what I said about going back—."

Her voice was getting too shrill. Someone in the group must have put his hand over her mouth, for when Dudley looked back, they were rounding a corner of the corridor more or less silently.

Eileen waited in the half-open door, watching him quizzically. "Friend of yours?" she drawled.

"After a fashion," admitted Dudley, pulling out a handkerchief to wipe his forehead. "Spoiled brat!"

He fumbled in a pocket of his jacket, and withdrew a small package. "Here's the bracelet that matches that necklace," he said. "I knew I had it in my locker somewhere."

Her thanks were very adequate.

"Aren't you coming in?" Eileen asked after the pause.

"No ... I don't ... I have to get a good night's sleep, you know. We kick off tomorrow."

She pursed her lips in a small pout, but shrugged. "Then look me up when you get back, Pete."

"Yeah. Sure."

He kissed her quickly and walked away, drumming the fingers of his right hand against his thigh.

Except for the tenseness of blasting off and landing, the round trip to Mars was as boring as he expected. Campiglia won too many chess games at one move per watch, and the deck of cards wore out. For a few days, Wells had a slightly infected finger after cutting himself, but it was a small crisis. The layover on Mars was short, and the thrill was no longer new.

Dudley was glad to step out of the big rocket on Luna.

They had come in during the sleeping period at Ericsson, so the four of them had gone to their quarters for a few hours of sleep after the first babble of welcome from those on duty when they landed. Dudley was awakened by Jack Fisher.

"So early?" he grunted, squinting at his watch. "What brings you around?"

Fisher settled his bulk in the only chair of the bedroom that was to be Dudley's until his next Terra-bound rocket.

"Liable to be busy today," he said easily, "so I thought I'd have breakfast with you."

"Fine!" said Dudley. "Wait'll I shave and I'll be with you."

When he returned from the bathroom, he thought that he had perfect control of his features. There might not be anything wrong, but it seemed odd that Jack should be around so soon. He wondered if the Kathi Foster affair was in the background.

They went up a few levels to a minor eating place and had scrambled eggs that almost tasted natural. Over the coffee, Fisher opened up.

"Had a little excitement while you were gone," he said.

"Yeah? What?"

Fisher let him wait while he carefully unwrapped the half-smoked remains of a cigar. Tobacco in any form was strictly rationed in all Lunar settlements.

"Ever hear of old Robert Forgeron?" he asked.

"The one they used to call 'Robber' Forgeron?"

"That's right. He had so many patents on airlock mechanisms and space-suit gadgets and rocket control instruments that he made the goddamnedest fortune ever heard of out of space exploration. Died a few years ago."

Dudley maintained a puzzled silence.

"Seems the old man had strong ideas about that fortune," continued Fisher. "Left the bulk of it to his only granddaughter."

"That must have made headlines," Dudley commented.

"Sure did." Fisher had the cigar going, now, and he puffed economically upon it. "Especially when she ran away from home."

"Oh?" Dudley felt it coming. "Where to?"

"Here!"

Fisher held his cigar between thumb and forefinger and examined it fondly.

"Said her name was Kathi Foster instead of Kathi Forgeron. After they got around to guessing she was on Luna, and sent descriptions, we picked her up, of course. Shortly after you kicked off for Mars, in fact."

Dudley was silent. The other's shrewd little eyes glinted blue at him through the cigar smoke.

"How about it, Pete? I've been trying to figure how she got here. If it was you, you needn't worry about the regulations. There was some sort of litigation going on, and all kinds of relatives came boiling up here to get her. All the hullabaloo is over by now."

Dudley took a deep breath, and told his side of the story. Fisher listened quietly, nodding occasionally with the satisfaction of one who had guessed the answer.

"So you see how it was, Jack. I didn't really believe the kid's story. And she was so wild about it!"

Fisher put out his cigar with loving care.

"Got to save the rest of this for dinner," he said. "Yes, she was wild, in a way. You should hear—well, that's in the files. Before we were sure who she was, Snowdon put her on as a secretary in his section."

"She didn't look to me like a typist," objected Dudley.

"Oh, she wasn't," said Fisher, without elaborating. "I suppose if she *was* a little nuts, she was just a victim of the times. If it hadn't been for the sudden plunge into space, old Forgeron wouldn't have made such a pile of quick money. Then his granddaughter might have grown up in a normal home, instead of feeling she was just a target. If she'd been born a generation earlier or later, she might have been okay."

Dudley thought of the girl's pleading, her frenzy to escape her environment.

"So I suppose they dragged her back," he said. "Which loving relative won custody of the money?"

"That's still going on," Fisher told him. "It's tougher than ever, I hear, because she didn't go down with them. She talked somebody into letting her have a space-suit and walked out to the other side of the ringwall. All the way to the foothills on the other side."

Dudley stared at him in mounting horror. Fisher seemed undisturbed, but the pilot knew his friend better than that. It could only mean that the other had had three months to become accustomed to the idea. He was tenderly tucking away the stub of his cigar.

"Wasn't so bad, I guess," he answered Dudley's unspoken question. "She took a pill and sat down. Couple of rock-tappers looking for ore found her. Frozen stiff, of course, when her batteries ran down."

Dudley planted his elbows on the table and leaned his head in his hands.

"I should have taken her to Mars!" he groaned.

"She tried that on you, too?" Fisher was unsurprised. "No, Pete, it wouldn't have done any good. Would've lost you your job, probably. Like I said, she was born the wrong time. They won't have room for the likes of her on Mars for a good many years yet."

"So they hauled her back to Terra, I suppose."

"Oh, no. The relatives are fighting that out, too. So, until the judges get their injunctions shuffled and dealt, little Kathi is sitting out there viewing the Rockies and the stars."

He looked up at Dudley's stifled exclamation.

"Well, it's good and cold out there," he said defensively. "We don't have any spare space around here to store delayed shipments, you know. We're waitin' to see who gets possession."

Dudley rose, his face white. He was abruptly conscious once more of other conversations around them, as he stalked toward the exit.

"Hey," Fisher called after him, "that redhead, Eileen, told me to ask if you're taking her out tonight."

Dudley paused. He ran a hand over his face. "Yeah, I guess so," he said.

He went out, thinking, *I should have taken her. The hell with regulations and Jack's theories about her being born too soon to be useful on Mars. She might have straightened out.*

He headed for the tunnel that led to the loading domes.

Ericsson was a large crater, over a hundred miles across and with a beautifully intact ringwall, so it took him some hours, even with the tractor he borrowed, to go as far as the edge of the crater. Jack Fisher was waiting for him in the surface dome when he returned hours later.

"Welcome back," he said, chewing nervously on his cigar. "I was wondering if we'd have to go looking for you." He looked relieved.

"How did she look?" he asked casually, as Dudley climbed out of his space suit in the locker room.

Dudley peeled off the one-piece suit he had worn under the heating pads. He sniffed.

"Chee-rist, I need a shower after that.... She looked all right. Pretty cute, in a way. Like she was happy here on Luna."

He picked up towel and soap. "So I fixed it so she could stay," he added.

"What do you mean?"

He looked at Fisher. "Are you asking as a friend or as a cop?"

"What difference does it make?" asked Fisher.

"Well, I don't think you could have tracked me with your radar past the ringwall, so maybe I just went for a ride and a little stroll, huh? You didn't see me bring back a shovel, did you?"

"No," said Fisher, "I didn't see you bring it back. But some people are going to get excited about this, Pete. Where did you bury her?"

"Blood-suckers!" said Dudley. "Let them get excited! Luna is full of mysteries."

"All right," said Fisher. "For my own curiosity, then, I'm asking as a friend."

"I found a good place," said Dudley. "I kind of forget where, in the middle of all those cliffs and rills, but it had a nice view of the stars. They'll never find her to take her back! I think I owed her that much."

"Ummm," grunted Fisher.

As Dudley entered the shower, the other began to unwrap a new cigar, a not-displeased expression settling over his square, pudgy face.

Under the slow-falling streams of warm water, Dudley gradually began to relax. He felt the stiffness ease out of his jaw muscles. He turned off the bubbling water before he could begin imagining he was hearing a scared voice pleading again for passage to Mars....

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LUNA ESCAPADE ***

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