

AN SF CLASSIC
MURDER IN THE VOID
EDMOND HAMILTON

An Alien Vandal Seeks Control of the Strangest Scientific Weapon Known to Man!

(This issue's classic is a rip-roaring example of purple prosed space opera from the June 1938 issue of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and is by the acknowledged king of the genre, Edmond Hamilton. Blurbs are from the original magazine printing.)

CHAPTER I

CRANE OF THE TSS

The black, moonless Venus night lay solid over the big metal house and its surrounding grounds. The young Earthman who was creeping stealthily through clumps of weird shrubbery and enormous flowers toward the house thanked heaven fervently for the cloudy planet's stygian nights.

But Rab Crane knew that it was deadly dangerous approaching the house of Doctor Alph, even under cover of darkness. For the Venusian scientist's home had become a focus of interplanetary intrigue in the last few weeks. Every planet in the System had heard the rumor of Doctor Alph's discovery of a tremendous new scientific weapon. And every one of them had agents trying to secure it. There would be guards inside the house, without doubt.

Crane's bronzed, aquiline face tensed as he crouched for a moment beside a stiff, grotesque shrub. As a member of the Terrestrial Secret Service he had been sent by the TSS to get Doctor Alph's secret weapon and he'd do it or die trying.

Not a light showed from anywhere in the dark, square metal house.

"Too quiet," muttered Crane to himself. "Looks like a trap."

He shifted his stubby beam-pistol to his left hand, and with his right drew a compact little instrument from his pocket. Then he moved silently on toward the dark house.

"Here goes nothing," he whispered. "In two minutes I'll probably rate a nice memorial plaque at headquarters.

Like a sliding shadow, Crane flattened against the side of the house, just beneath a window. He reached up with the little oval instrument he held.

It was a recorder which registered the presence anywhere nearby of invisible watchmen," those diabolically ingenious combinations of electric eyes and atomic beams, effective alarms that blasted down intruders without warning.

To Rab Crane's amazement, the recorder showed no such protective devices in operation around the window. What did it mean? It looked to him like a deliberate trap set by the Venusian scientist.

But he had to go through with it. Too late to back out now. He severed the catch of the window by a single tiny, smothered flash from his beamgun. He rolled the flexible glass quickly aside and drew himself rapidly up into the dark room. He poised motionless in the dark, listening. The house was as silent as the grave. He could not understand it but his instincts warned him of peril.

Soundlessly he moved across the dark room. He knew that Doctor Alph's laboratory lay at the back of the house. There, if anywhere, he might find some clue to the Venusian scientist's great discovery that had so perturbed the planetary governments.

He watched his little recorder alertly as he advanced, expecting it each moment to flash the tiny signal spark that would warn of a network of deadly beams ahead. But it gave no signal. Apparently the whole web of the houses protective beams had been turned off at the main switch. But why?

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Crane moved quickly out of the room into an equally dark hall. In the hall he tripped on something soft and recoiled, his gun-arm stiffening.

He heard no sound. In a moment he ventured to flash a tiny needle of light from a ring on his finger, onto the floor. His breath sucked inward with a sharp hiss. A Venusian house-guard lay there! One glance assured him the man was dead.

The man's neck had been broken cleanly, as though by a twist of powerful hands. The marks of the killer's hands were still visible, red against the Venusian's milky white skin. A beam-gun was still in his limp hand.

So, Rab Crane thought, someone else had visited Doctor Alph's house tonight, ahead of him. Probably some other interplanetary spy trying to get the Venusian scientist's deadly secret for his own world just as Crane was trying to get it for Earth.

Had the other spy got it?

Crane's heart went cold with apprehension at the thought. He straightened from examining the dead guard and moved quietly down the dark hall. He had no fear of the beam-web now. He realized that whoever had been ahead of him had cut off the whole protective system.

He went around a corner of the hall and almost stepped on two more dead Venusians. They, too, had been strangled by clutching fingers that had snapped their necks like pipe-stems. Why hadn't they beamed the killer with their guns when he attacked them?

The door of the laboratory was wide open. Inside, all was dark and deadly still. But instinct warned Crane against showing a light as he stepped into the room. He stopped, his eyes trying to penetrate the darkness. Then a smell came to him that made the hair rise along the back of his neck.

The smell of fresh blood! It came from the darkness at his right. Crane flicked on the tiny ray of his ring-light, swung its beam to the floor. Another body! And one glance at the distorted face told him who it was.

The Venusian scientist's neck had been broken like those of the guards. But his head had been smashed also into a bloody red mass. His massive face, comparatively undamaged, stared upward in the beam of light, horribly contorted.

Then Rab Crane's stunned mind perceived something and instantly comprehended its pressing significance. The blood pool from the shattered skull of Doctor Alph was still widening along the floor! That meant that it had been no more than a few moments since the killer had been there!

The killer must still be in the house! Rab doused his little light and sprang to his feet. But the realization had come too late.

In the darkness behind him a harsh voice said, "Kill him!"

A black shape became a moving shadow in the darkness. With swift, heavy strides it approached. Then a hard fist struck for Rab Crane's skull in a terrific blow, even as he ducked. Only the lightning, instinctive swerve of the TSS man saved him from instant death. As it was, the blow grazed his temple. He reeled, falling stunned, but his senses did not leave him immediately.

As consciousness receded from him, Crane heard, as though in a dream, a voice saying rapidly:

"Quick! To the Vulcan now! I'll carry the braincase!"

Then a hurry of receding steps, and a harsh voice gloating, mirthfully, in the distance, "When they find the dead Earthman there beside Doctor Alph, they'll think he did it all!"

Darkness closed in on Crane then.

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He awakened to a dim awareness of his surroundings, wondered how long he had been senseless. A dazed glance at his watch told him it had been almost an hour.

As full remembrance came to Rab Crane, he staggered to his feet. The laboratory, the house around him, were as dark and silent as before. His head was aching blindingly.

He had blundered badly, he knew. In his first shock of finding that someone had been ahead of him, he had not stopped to reflect that the other spy - or spies - might still be in the laboratory, might have heard him entering and lain in wait for him.

He tried to remember the orders issued by the unseen attackers. Something about getting to the Vulcan, quick - and something about a braincase.

The Vulcan - that was the big spaceliner that was sailing tonight for Jupiter, with stops at Mars and Earth. Whatever interplanetary spy had been here was planning to leave Venus tonight on that ship!

But what was it that had been said about a braincase? Slowly his stunned brain rallied. The voice had said:

"Quick! To the Vulcan! I'll carry the braincase."

Suddenly into Rab Crane's confused mind shot a possible explanation.

He bent quickly over the dead body of Doctor Alph once more, flashed his ring-light on the shattered skull of the Venusian scientist. He gasped as he saw that his shocking surmise had been right.

There was no brain in the broken skull of Doctor Alph! The scientist's brain had been carefully removed by cunning surgery after the skull had been smashed by a blow. Or possibly the blow had been delivered after the operation so that no one would notice the horrible theft.

"God in heaven!" muttered Rab Crane. "Whoever came to get Doctor Alph's secret, got it - by stealing his brain!"

Rab Crane was aghast. He knew that in these days the removal of a living brain from a man's body, and keeping it living in special serum, was child's play to anyone versed in surgery.

And he knew, too, that such preserved, living brains could be made to think and remember; that they could be communicated with by microphonic and loudspeaker electrical connections to their hearing and speech nervecenters. Whoever had taken Doctor Alph's brain had come here intending to steal it, and had brought a special serum-case for its transportation!

And the brain-thief might be already aboard the Vulcan, ready to leave Venus with his ghastly loot. Once away from Venus, it would not take him long to make the living brain give up its secret, and that meant that the planet the thief served would acquire the dead scientist's terrible secret weapon!

Rab Crane looked swiftly at his watch again. The Vulcan sailed at nine. It was a little after eight. He would have just time enough to get aboard the spaceliner before it took off - if he were not stopped.

He must get aboard! Somewhere on that ship was the stolen brain whose terrific secret might spell conquest of and doom for Earth. His one slim chance now was to get on the liner, yet he had but forty minutes to reach the spacestation on the other side of the great Venusian metropolis!

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The big clock over the spacestation showed just ten minutes short of nine when the TSS man fought through the crowd to the gangway of the Vulcan. People were waving farewell to departing friends, sweating dockhands were hustling last-minute freight into the ports, ship's officers were bawling orders. Over the crowd and flaring lights loomed the vast, cigar-like metal bulk, waiting in its cradle for the moment of its flaming leap into space.

Rab Crane, gripping his suitcase in one hand and interplanetary passport and ticket in the other, ran up the gangplank into the glassite-walled promenade deck where the Venusian ship's officer on duty was being beset by passengers wanting various services.

A shriveled, red-skinned little Martian with enormous spectacles was fussing at the office. "I want my crate of machinery samples in my cabin, not in the hold. They're valuable!"

A squat, huge-shouldered Jovian was thrusting rudely past others to make his complaints heard, and a handsome young Earthman who had evidently had too much of the intoxicating "blue force," was asking plaintively, "Where's the vibration-bar?"

The harassed officer glanced at Rab Crane's passport hurriedly.

"Norman Idwall, citizen of Earth, importer. Okay, Mr. Idwall," he said.

A steward ran along the deck banging a gong and crying, "Five minutes to take-off time! All passengers in their cabins!"

Rab Crane, his heart still hammering from his race to the spacestation, had a steward find his cabin. Once in it, the TSS man locked the door and lay down on the bunk as required.

He was on the ship, at least! But who among its scores of passengers could be the spy who had the brain of Doctor Alph? How could he hope to identify him?

Suddenly, in the little cabin, a hoarse, loud voice spoke to Rab Crane. "Crane, I see I failed to kill you at Doctor Alph's," the voice rasped.

Rab Crane bounded to his feet, his beam-pistol leaping into his hand. He glanced around the cabin; there was no one in it but himself. He flung open the door, but no one was in the corridor.

That harsh voice was speaking, seemingly from the air beside him.

"There are still two minutes left before the Vulcan starts. Unless you leave the ship, you will die one minute after the take-off."

The menacing voice ceased abruptly. But this time Crane had traced it. It came from his own coat pocket!

He thrust his hand into the pocket and drew out a small watchlike metal instrument, apparently a super-compact radio receiver and loud-speaker. Someone on deck must have dropped it in his pocket as he boarded the line Crane stared at the thing, thinking fast. This meant that the brain-thief had seen him come aboard, meant to kill him to get him off the trail. But how could the man hope to kill him here

in his locked cabin.

He could hear the space-doors of the liner slowly grinding shut. The beat-beat-beat of the ventilation system began. There was a breathless hush throughout the ship. Then with a tremendous roar and quivering shock, the vista outside Crane's cabin window vanished as the Vulcan roared out to ward space.

Crane crouched, rocking from the shock of starting, his beam-gun gripped in his hand, his bronzed face drawn in a mirthless grin. The harsh voice spoke again, from the watch-shape thing in his other hand.

"You were not wise enough to get off the ship. Therefore you die-now!"

CHAPTER II

DEATH SHIP

Before that rasping voice had ceased to sound, Rab Crane knew how he was about to be murdered. It seared across his brain in a flash even as his muscles sprang into action.

He plunged for the cabin door, tore it open and hurled the watch-like thing in his hand far down the corridor. Before it even hit the floor, it exploded in a blinding flash of atomic force and light!

"God, why didn't I see it before!" exclaimed Rab Crane hoarsely as he wiped his glistening brow. "He had an atomic charge planted in that thing, where he could detonate it by remote control whenever he wanted."

Then he saw that the blinding flash of force had eaten a hole in one inner wall of the corridor but had done no other damage. Excited voices were crying in alarm and heads were sticking out of doors along the corridor.

Stewards and officers came running into the corridor even as Rab Crane drew back into his cabin.

Listening, he heard the officers finish their futile examination and depart, remarking that the atomic bomb must have been planted in the ship earlier. The excited passengers dispersed, reassured that no harm had been done the ship.

Crane found himself shaken a little, despite his steel-hard nerves. The ingenuity of the attempt against his life had been diabolical. Undoubtedly his unknown antagonist was the most deadly he had ever challenged.

Yet Crane's determination to wrest Doctor Alph's stolen brain from the other spy was strengthened rather than weakened. That weirdly living brain was a doom hanging over Earth!

When he dressed for dinner, Crane put his beam-pistol inside his coat, and the feel of it was comforting as he walked into the big, brilliantly lighted dining saloon. Laughing, chatting men and women of several planets, expensively garbed and gowned and jewelled, filled the room. Under the conversation, a Venusian orchestra was softly playing haunting popular melodies.

The steward who led Rab Crane to a table in a corner apologized for its obscure position.

"It's not a very good table, sir, but it was all we had left for last-minute passengers like yourself."

His words made Crane study the others at the table closely as they introduced themselves. The spy who had the stolen brain would be a last-minute passenger, too. He must be at this table!

The four other men at the table were of four different worlds. One was Kin Nilga, a Saturnian rocket engineer, with solemn green face, pale, big eyes and the great-boned body of his race.

Next to him sat Jurk Usk, a Jovian shipping-magnate, squat, huge-shouldered and heavy-browed like all men of Jupiter ' and as surly and sparing of words as most of his compatriots.

The other two were Kark Al, the thin, wisp-like, spectacled little Martian salesman

whom Crane had heard complaining about his machinery samples; and Donn Ennimer, the handsome, drunken young Earthman he had noticed when he boarded ship.

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The young Earthman had apparently been imbibing further of the intoxicating blue vibrations at the bar. He was talking with drunken owliness, to the table at large.

"The service at this table is unspeakable!" Kark Al, the little Martian, told Crane indignantly. "We've been waiting a quarter hour. I'm going to speak to the captain-"

Crane only half listened to their voices. The TSS man was keenly studying the Jovian and Saturnian. He was remembering how the necks of the men in Doctor Alph's house had been broken with one snap.

Only a Jovian or Saturnian had the physical strength to do such a thing! And these two were the only representatives of their worlds in the dining saloon. Was one of them the man with whom Crane was struggling blindly? His heart began to beat a little faster.

"This is my table, isn't it? My name is Lalla Dee," an uncertain, girlish voice said.

It was a Venusian girl who was claiming the last empty chair at the table. She was young and pretty. She wore a white silk dress, and her dark eyes were shining with naive excitement as she looked over the glittering saloon. Crane introduced everyone to her.

"This is my first trip off Venus," Lalla Dee told Crane shyly. "I just won a contest in college - the first prize was a trip to Earth. Isn't it wonderful - people of five different worlds right at this table!"

Crane smiled and said, "Yes, and all of them hungry. It looks as though our steward had forgotten us completely."

"It's an outrage!" declared Kark Al angrily.

"Not gonna wait any longer for steward. I'm hungry," the drunken young Earthman, Ennimer, said owlily.

And calmly the drunk took one of the exquisite Venusian flame orchids from the center vase, salted it, and began to eat it. Lalla Dee giggled, and Kark Al snorted in disgust.

Crane had not taken his eyes off the Jovian and Saturnian. Jurk Usk sat in the same surly, unmoved silence, but Crane thought that the Saturnian was under tension, that something lurked behind those pale, big-pupiled eyes. Was Kin Nilga his man?

"I was a little afraid to come alone on this trip, but now-" The girl's voice broke off as a scream of awful agony ripped the gay chatter of the saloon and froze everyone into horrified silence.

The scream came from the throat of the drunken young Earthman who had been eating the orchid. The man's lax handsome face was contorted now in agony, his eyes protruding, his body arched half out of his chair, his hands clawing the air.

Another ghastly shriek bubbled from his throat into the frozen silence. Then he crashed down across the table.

Diners sprang to their feet, shouting hoarsely. Stewards and officers came running toward the table. Rab Crane bent swiftly over the young man's body, sniffed at the strange odor that rose from his lips.

Crane straightened, reached for the salt-cellar on the table, sniffed it. His tablemates watched frozenly.

"He's dead - poisoned!" Crane said, finally.

As an officer stooped to lift the body, "Don't touch him with your bare hands!" Crane cried.

For the body of the poisoned man was beginning to glow faintly, his face giving off a feeble, eerie white light!

"Gods of Mars!" cried little Kark Al horrifiedly. "Look at that body - look!"

"This man was poisoned with a super-powerful radium salt," Rab Crane declared to the horrified officers. "He died instantly in awful agony and his whole body is charged with radioactive force now and will have to be handled with lead gloves. Someone substituted the radium salt for the ordinary salt in this salt shaker."

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Lalla Dee looked up at Crane with wide, terrified dark eyes.

"Then maybe it was someone trying to kill you," she said. "The poison couldn't have been intended for any of the rest of us."

Crane knew what she meant. Only Earthmen, out of all the Solar System's peoples, were habitual users of salt. He knew well that the poison had been intended for him - and that someone at this table had made the substitution!

Yet he said, shaking his head, "There's no reason why anyone would want to kill me. I'm just an ordinary importer. No, this young fellow must have had some enemy who took this means to kill him."

"I'll swear that I filled that cellar with ordinary salt today!" said the table-steward hoarsely.

"The whole affair will have to be investigated by the captain," the third mate of the Vulcan said crisply, "meanwhile send for a hospital detail to remove this man's body."

As the body was carried out by leadgloved attendants, Kark Al said sickly:

"I - I guess I'm not hungry after all. I'm going to my cabin."

"I don't want to eat now either," the white-faced Lalla Dee told Rab Crane. "That awful scream!"

In fact, they had all risen from the table except Jurk Usk, the Jovian, who kept his seat and was awaiting his dinner with the surly immobility of his race.

Rab Crane, as he followed the girl toward the door of the noticed that Kin Nilga was already disappearing ahead of them. The Saturnian seemed in a hurry.

Crane's mind was working 'swiftly. Someone at their table had Doctor Alph's brain. And that someone had tried twice, now, to kill him. Of those two things he was certain. But which one? He thought of those snapped necks - the huge physical strength of the Jovian and Saturnian.

He lingered behind Lalla Dee.

"Can you tell me which person at our table came into the dining saloon first tonight?" he asked the shaken table-steward.

"Kin Nilga, the Saturnian gentleman, sir. He was first at the table."

"I want to ask him if he noticed anyone lurking by the table when he entered," Crane said, and went on after the Venusian girl.

But as he moved along the dark promenade deck with Lalla Dee, Crane's

excitement was mounting. Kin Nilga, then, had had the best chance of any of them to plant that deadly poison. And Kin Nilga also had the great physical strength that killer must have had.

Was the solemn-faced Saturnian the diabolical agent who had stolen the brain of Doctor Alph? Crane resolved to find out this very night!

Lalla Dee had stopped by the transparent glassite wall of the deck, and Crane saw that she was still shivering.

"That poor young man's face - I'll never forget it!" she said, her dark eyes clouded with horror. "I feel as if there is some horrible monster on this ship, lurking, hidden-"

"Nonsense! Whoever adopted that devilish method of murder was after one man," Crane told her. "And he' be caught within a few hours." And to distract her attention, he pointed through the glassite wall. "There's a sight you'll never see on Venus."

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She looked, and clapped her hands in entranced delight. In the vast black firmament of space burned the eternal stars, glorious blazing jewel in dark space. The ship was rushing through a constellated wilderness of suns. The rocket-tubes had been shut off and only the steady beat-beat-beat of the ventilation pumps came along the dark deck where Crane and the girl stood.

"It's unreal!" Lalla Dee cried. "I've often dreamed what it would be like to see the stars that we can never see through the cloudy skies of Venus, but I didn't dream it was like this."

She pointed to a calm, green speck of light shining large and bright, almost due ahead of the ship.

"That's Earth, isn't it? Is it really as beautiful as everyone says?"

"I'm an Earthman, and my opinion is biased," Crane nodded. "But I think it's the most beautiful world in the System. Its snowy mountains and deep blue seas; its green fields and quiet forests and rivers and old cities - yes, it's beautiful. Beautiful and worth fighting for, worth dying for-"

He had spoken half to himself, his eyes brooding on that calm green speck. He became aware that Lalla Dee was looking at him intently.

"We're always proud of own particular world, aren't we?" he said.

They stared a little longer at the scene, then Lalla Dee turned from the wall.

"I think I'll go to bed," she told him. "I'll see you at breakfast, Mr. Idwall."

"A sweet kid," Crane thought as he left her at her cabin and walked on toward his own. Then the perilous task ahead of him claimed his thoughts. He must search Kin Nilga's cabin.

As he sat in his own dark cabin, waiting for the liner's passengers to retire, Crane's mind grappled with what lay ahead. If Kin Nilga was the possessor of the stolen brain, then entering the Saturnian's cabin was dangerous.

But he had to do it! Every hour that passed brought the Vulcan nearer Earth where Kin Nilga could easily trans-ship to another liner and throw him off the trail. And every hour increased the chance that one of the killer's diabolical attacks would take his life. Crane waited two hours, until silence filled the corridor. The last passengers had sought their cabins and only the ship's officers and men on duty in

the control and rocket rooms remained up.

Then quietly the TSS man slipped out of his cabin, his hand resting on the hilt of his beam-pistol.

Except for the droning throb of the air-pumps, there was no sound as Rab Crane approached the door of Kin Nilga's cabin.

He stopped abruptly, stiffened, as he came opposite it. That door was slightly open. And from inside the Saturnian's dark cabin came a hoarse, smothered cry!

Crane shoved the door wide open, pistol aimed. He glimpsed a shadowy figure bending over the bunk, and even as he looked he heard a snap that could be only the dull cracking sound of a breaking neck!

Crane knew, in one swift flash of insight, that he had been wrong. Kin Nilga was not the killer! The real murderer was this squat, shadowy shape who had just slain Kin Nilga!

Crane rasped, "Stand where you are or I'll kill you!"

The shadowy killer turned, started across the dark room toward him with quick, heavy steps"

"Stop or I'll fire!" Crane warned. And when the shadow did not pause, the TSS man pulled the trigger of his beam gun.

The thin white beam from his pistol knifed the darkness of the cabin and struck the shadowy, indistinct form of his opponent squarely.

Yet the killer came on! Though Crane fired his deadly beam again straight into the advancing slayer, the shadow did not even falter as he lunged through the gloom at Crane!

CHAPTER III

VOICE OF THE BRAIN

Crane was so stupefied by the failure of his beams - which should have killed any living thing at this close range - to halt the killer, that he nearly lost his life. Before he turned to escape the remorseless figure had reached him.

Hands grabbed Crane in the most powerful grip he had ever felt, bruising his flesh to the bone by the tremendous strength of their grasp. He cried out hoarsely, struggling in the dark against that terrible clutch.

The grip shifted to his neck as Crane fought futilely to escape. Even as he struggled, the TSS man knew that another moment would see his neck snapped, as those of the guardsmen of Doctor Alph's house had snapped.

But his cry had been heard, and the alarmed voices of passengers in other cabins were suddenly audible. The killer, apparently alarmed, flung Rab Crane aside and leaped out of the cabin, his heavy steps receding rapidly down the corridor.

Crane, stunned by the impact and bruised by the other's iron grasp, staggered out of the darkened cabin as the people burst into the corridor and the lights were snapped on. The second mate of the Vulcan cried:

"What's the matter here-!" He shoved past Crane into the cabin, snapped on a light.

He stared at the bunk in which Kin Nilga the Saturnian lay dead, his great neck snapped like a straw, then recoiled in horror.

Then he turned on Rab Crane who was staggering, disheveled and bruised... "Why did you kill the Saturnian?" he snapped.

"I didn't kill him," said Crane. "I heard a row in here and came in. In the dark, the man who killed Kin Nilga jumped me, then escaped."

"A likely story!" cried the officer. "There's been a mysterious explosion and two murders on this liner since we left Venus. The explosion was in your corridor, the first murder was at your dining table. And now you're found over the body of the second victim... You're under arrest!" He had drawn his pistol, was covering Crane with it. Stunned by this disastrous turn of events, Crane saw the difficulty of his situation. He dared not tell them he was a TSS man, or that he sought the great secret from the stolen brain of Doctor Alph. This liner was a Venusian ship and once these Venusians learned the brain was aboard, they'd search to the last corner to get it and its secret for Venus. Then he would be through and the secret lost forever.

"I'm sure you're wrong about Mr. Idwall," a girl's dismayed voice was telling, the officer. "He was nearly a victim of the radium poison himself, in the dining saloon."

It was Lalla Dee who was defending him.

Kark Al, the withered little Martian, nodded corroboration, snapping, "It's stupid to accuse Mr. Idwall of these killings."

"That will be for the captain to decide," the officer said inflexibly. "You'll have to come to his office at once," he told Crane. "The rest of you people return to your cabins."

As Rab Crane was forced by the officer's gun through the crowd of curious,

horrified passengers, he managed to smile reassuringly at the pale, distressed Lalla Dee.

The TSS man's eyes were searching the crowd for Jurk Usk, the Jovian who had sat beside Kin Nilga at the dinner table. The Jovian, then, and not the Saturnian, must be, the killer. No one else on the ship, now, but the Jovian had such strength. And he could not see Jurk Usk anywhere.

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Half an hour later, in the captain's office, the veteran, space-tanned Venusian who was master of the Vulcan faced Rab Crane.

"Mr. Idwall, all the evidence points to you as the murderer of Kin Nilga and of the Earthman," he said. "A search of Kin Nilga's effects has revealed that he was a member of the Saturnian Secret Service. It is obvious that you are a criminal he was pursuing, and that you tried to kill him in the dining saloon tonight, failed and succeeded later in killing him in his cabin. A table steward has said you questioned him about Kin Nilga's movements."

"But how could I have broken his neck like that?" Crane protested desperately. "No Earthman has such strength."

"I do not know just what means you used to murder him," the captain told him unrelentingly, "but our course is obvious. You will be the ship's brig until we where you will be turned over to the space-court for trial."

Crane was led away, down to the lowest deck of the great liner, and thrust into a narrow metal cell on a little corridor off the rocket rooms. He sat down heavily on the bunk.

In the dark cell, silent except for the steady throb of the ventilator, Crane wholeheartedly cursed the turn events had taken. Imprisoned here, he had no chance of securing the stolen brain before the Vulcan reached Earth.

It was plain now that Jurk Usk was the man he sought; that the squat surly Jovian was the shadowy figure who had stolen Doctor Alph's brain. Kin Nilga, an agent of Saturn, had been on the trail of the brain just as Crane was. Jurk Usk had killed Kin Nilga, and tried to kill Crane. Why, he asked himself, had his beams not affected the Jovian? And had it been Nilga or Usk who had killed the Doctor and his guardsmen?

Now, Crane thought hopelessly, the Jovian had a clear field. Kin Nilga of Saturn was dead and he, the agent of Earth, was in prison for the rest of the voyage. When the ship landed, Jurk Usk would go free with the brain and its doom-freighted secret.

That night passed slowly for the tormented TSS man. And after morning came - the morning of a space ship, marked only by the turning on of all the ship's lights - Crane's numbed brain fought frantically for a plan.

Gradually fierce resolve began repossessing him. The men of the TSS did not give up until they were dead! And this mission of his was the most important any man of the Terrestrial Secret Service had ever been assigned. He must not give up! He would not, while he was alive!

He stared around the cell with narrowed, desperate eyes. If he could just get out of this rat-trap, just get to the cabin of Jurk Usk...

He could get out! The inspiration came to Rab Crane's taut brain in a flash. It would be a desperate way of escape, and perilous. Yet it was the only way, and he

would try it!

He was startled out of his quivering intentness by a light knock, a voice outside the locked door. Through the barred opening, Lalla Dee's soft face looked in at him.

The Venusian girl's dark eyes were troubled and anxious.

"They let me come down to see you for a few moments!" she said. "Oh, I know you're not guilty of these murders!"

Crane's nerves relaxed a little. He even managed a grin.

"Good kid," he told her through the bars. "I'm not guilty and I can prove it when we reach Earth. But there're more important things at stake than my own fate, just now."

He pressed closer to the bars, lowering voice.

"Lalla Dee, I want you to do something for me. Will you?"

* * *

Her head bobbed, her clear eyes looking anxiously into his.

"I'll do anything I can," she promised.

"I want you to find out for me just what cabins are occupied by those who sat at our dining table last night," he said.

"Why, I don't see - but I can do that, all right. Wait, I'll go now," she said.

She departed and Crane waited tensely. He had not asked her simply for the location of the Jovian's cabin, because he did not even want her to suspect his paramount interest in Jurk Usk. The girl must not become involved in his desperate scheme.

She was soon back, obviously still perplexed by his request but with the information he wanted.

"The cabins are all on the second cabin-deck, like yours and mine," the girl told him. "That of Jurk Usk is two doors off the main corridor, toward the stern. Kark Al, the Martian, is three doors beyond that. And the cabin of the young Earthman who was poisoned is directly opposite the Martian's. You know where the rest are."

"I know," Crane said swiftly. "You've helped me a lot, Lalla Dee. I want you to go back up now and forget all about this, and no matter what happens to me, don't you say anything that will get you mixed up in this affair."

"Norman, you sound as though something awful might happen to you," she told him distressedly. "What is it?"

"I'll be all right," he repeated "And you're a swell girl, Lalla Dee."

She left and Crane paced the floor, seething with excitement. If he could just get to Jurk Usk's cabin...

He waited impatiently for the coming of the ship's night. When finally the lights had been turned off and the passengers had retired, and the whole craft silent except for the occasional passing step of a sailor and the throbbing of the ventilators, Rab Crane began to act. First he removed his shoes and sox.

Then he twisted with all his strength at one of the metal posts that supported his bunk, until he tore it loose. With this short, thick club in his hand, he climbed upon the now shaky bunk and reached up toward the grating of the ventilator-tube.

The tube was almost two feet across, a round pipe connected with the main ventilation system which dispersed oxygenized fresh air constantly to every room in the ship. Crane inserted his club in the grating and pried. The grating came loose

with a little snap, and he poised, listening. But, apparently, no one had heard.

He stuffed the club into his trouser band and drew himself up into the ventilating tube. He got one shoulder in, then the other. The tube was a terribly tight fit but he inched steadily forward in it. In his face beat the constant flood of fresh, tangy air, and in his ears throbbed the distant pumps. Soon the tube opened into a vertical pipe, a somewhat larger one leading up to the decks above. Crane climbed slowly up this, bracing himself with bare hands and feet against the smooth sides.

Blindly he wormed upward in the dark pipe until he came to the place where a branch tube led horizontally into the second cabin-deck, his goal.

Now he began to count the branch tubes that led off into the separate cabins. Two branches further should be the tube leading to Jurk Usk's cabin. And Jurk Usk, no matter how diabolical his ingenuity, would never expect death to come to him through the ventilator!

* * *

Stealthily Crane inched forward and into the second branch tube. At its end was a light grating. Crane peered down through this into the dark cabin of the Jovian, located the dark bulk of the bunk.

Crane gently opened the grating and dropped soundlessly into the cabin. As he landed, Jurk Usk awoke!

Like a wildcat, the TSS man sprang. As the Jovian sat up, the club fell on his head and he sank back, stunned.

Swiftly Crane tore strips from the blankets and bound and gagged the man of Jupiter. Then he turned on the lights and looked around the cabin, his heart beating rapidly.

"He must have the brain somewhere in the cabin," Crane told himself as he started a swift search.

Ten minutes later he stopped, thunderstruck by the results of his search.

"Good God, the brain isn't here! Then Jurk Usk isn't the killer, after all!"

He had searched every cranny. The brain of Doctor Alph was not here, and his inspection of the Jovian's belongings had convinced Rab that Jurk Usk was really what he claimed to be a shipping magnate and not a secret agent.

Then neither Kin Nilga nor the Jovian, after all, was his deadly opponent! Yet they were the only men on board with the enormous strength the killer possessed. If neither of them was the murderer, who could be? The logical answer to that question forced itself on Rab Crane's brain. He could not believe it, could not understand it, yet it rose before him with the cold force of reason. Glistening perspiration broke out on the Earthman's bronzed brow.

Leaving Jurk Usk bound, Crane climbed back into the ventilating tube and inched downward again through the great pipe.

Slowly, silently he crawled forwards turned off at the third next branch tube. Again Crane wormed toward the grating opening into a cabin. And this cabin was lighted.

Even before he reached the grating, Crane heard a voice that made his hair stand on end. A thin, monotonous metallic voice, utterly without expression.

And it was pleading tonelessly, "Why do you not kill me now that you have my secret? Please kill me - please kill me-"

Rab Crane had found the stolen brain at last! For this voice he heard was the mechanical loud-speaker voice through which the living brain of Doctor Alph was speaking!

CHAPTER IV

YELLOW DOOM

Every nerve quivering, Crane inched forward. At last he stopped, his face almost against the grating, peering down into the lighted cabin. His gaze riveted on a table that stood between the bunk and a wooden crate.

On that table stood the thing he had risked his life to trail - a black metal case eighteen inches square. It had recording-dials in its face, a tiny microphone earphone, and the round diaphragm of a small loudspeaker. And inside that innocent-looking case, in its preserving serum, still lived the brain of Doctor Alph!

And Doctor Alph's brain was still speaking in that dreadful, toneless voice.

"Kill me! Please kill me-"

"Not yet, my dear Doctor," mocked the man standing in front of the braincase. "The death you crave will not come until I have completely tested this secret of yours."

That mocking man who spoke, the diabolical brain-thief and murderer, was Kark Al, the little Martian!

Crane even now could not believe his eyes. How could this little wisp of a Martian have broken men's necks with his bare hands, have withstood the fire of his beams unhurt?

It seemed impossible! Yet, somehow, it had been done. Even though Crane could not comprehend the explanation, he knew that at last he looked on the man he sought.

Kark Al's eyes were cruel pinpoints behind great spectacles. "If you have tried to deceive me," he told the brain warningly, "if you have not told me all your secret-"

"I have told you all. You have made the culture for yourself," said the brain thinly. "Kill me and release me from the torture of this horrible existence!"

Rab Crane was softly releasing the catch of the ventilator grating. He had no weapon but the club and this withered little Martian was the most resourceful and remorseless killer he had ever encountered.

He crouched in the tube, stealthily opening the grating. Then the grating came loose too suddenly and slipped from his hand, falling to the floor with a clang. Kark Al whirled-

And Rab Crane sprang! He shot out of the tube like a living projectile, propelled by a terrific effort of his hunched muscles. He landed full on the Martian just as Kark Al drew his beam-gun.

They crashed to the floor together. The Martian was cat-like in his quickness, but Crane was fighting with madness born of desperate urging, and the withered little red man was no match for the Earthman's strength.

Crane tore the gun from Kark Al's hand, broke loose from the Martian and covered him with the weapon.

"Stand still, Kark Al!" he told him. "My beams didn't seem to hurt you last night for some reason, but I think that if I fire them into your face now, you'll die."

Kark Al's enormous spectacles glittered at Crane in calm curiosity. "Crane, the Earthman," he said coolly. "It was ingenious of you to come through the ventilator.

I congratulate you.

"Yes, Crane the Earthman," Rab Crane said savagely. "And I'm taking this brain, and the secret it gave you for Earth!"

* * *

The brain of Doctor Alph spoke rapidly in its toneless voice:

"That secret is not for any planet, Earthman! It means doom for the rest of the Solar System if it is ever released by any planet. You must destroy it - and destroy me!"

"What is the secret?" Crane asked tensely of the square black case, his gun held steady on the coolly smiling Martian.

"It is death itself, for all organic life it touches," the mechanical, metallic voice answered. "A new kind of bacteriophage, a strange, semi-organic microscopic life which ordinarily preys only on bacteria! Doctor Alph developed this new species, and it preys not alone on bacteria but on all organic life, expanding with incredible rapidity as it assimilates food.

"A mere pinch of this deadly new bacteriophage culture dropped on a planet would be enough to destroy rapidly all life on that planet. The culture would spread like lightning, enveloping and devouring all organic matter like a flame of death running across that world. And Kark Al has a vial of the culture in his pocket! When he stole my brain, he also stole a tube of the death culture. That vial in his pocket can sweep whole worlds clean of life!"

Crane staggered beneath the dreadful revelation.

"God in heaven!" he whispered to the Martian. "And you would use that as a weapon of Mars, against other worlds?"

He thrust out his hand, his eyes blazing with the trembling fury he felt.

"Give me that vial!" he said.

A gun-muzzle abruptly prodded Crane's back and a low, clear voice said:

"No, that vial goes to me! Drop your gun!"

Dazedly Crane let the pistol fall from his hand. He turned slowly.

Lalla Dee, the Venusian girl, had silently entered the cabin door behind him and was covering both him and the Martian with a beam-pistol.

Her face was no longer that of a soft, pretty schoolgirl but was chiseled in lines of stern resolve.

"Lalla Dee!" cried Crane. "What does this mean?"

"It means, Rab Crane," she said steadily, "that just as you work for Earth, and Kark Al for Mars, I work for Venus! Yes, I'm a member of the Venusian Secret Service. Headquarters sent me on this ship at the last minute when they learned that Doctor Alph's brain had been stolen. We had been trying to get Doctor Alph's secret for ourselves, of course, and knew that the thief would try to get away on the first ship.

"I thought at first that you had the brain, but I soon saw that you didn't, that you were on the trail of it just as Kin Nilga and myself were. So I watched you, thinking you might know enough to lead me to the person who did have it. And you've done so. When you asked about the cabins tonight, I kept watch outside them."

She held out her hand to the smiling little Martian.

"The vial of culture, Kark Al," she said. "It and, that brain go back to Venus."

"Lalla Dee, you'll have to kill me before I'll let you get the culture and the brain, to be used, perhaps, against Earth!" Rab Crane cried.

"I'm sorry, Crane, really," she said. "But just as you love Earth, so do I love Venus."

"You two need not continue the useless argument," Kark Al said. "The culture and the brain go where it has always been destined that they should -to Mars."

"You think you can keep them even now, with my pistol covering you?" Lalla Dee said incredulously. "You're mad!"

Kark Al chuckled. "Your ridiculous beam-pistols! Do you think such toys are of any use when you are fighting me, Nald Arkol?"

"Nald Arkol of Mars!" Crane's exclamation of amazement was echoed by the astonishment of the girl's widened eyes, as they both stared at the withered little red man.

* * *

For they knew that they stood face to face with the most mysterious and dreaded interplanetary spy in the whole Solar System - the head of the great Martian Secret Service, the ice-hearted super-spy whom no man had ever seen but about whom every secret service man had heard terrible legends.

The little Kark Al was glittering at them amusedly.

"I see that you, have heard of me," he said. "Do you still think a stupid beam-gun is enough to fight me?"

He laughed harshly.

"No. It is time to end this little comedy. Seize them, Thoh!"

In answer to his shrill order there rose suddenly out of the wooden crate beside the table, a squat, horrible figure. It was human in shape and wore grotesquely the clothes of a man. But it was not human. It was a metal robot! A mechanical man!

The robot sprang toward Rab Crane and the Venusian girl. Lalla Dee fired at it. The beams hit the robot squarely, splashed off. It was made of some rare metal impervious to ordinary atomic beams. In the next instant it had seized Rab Crane and the girl, was holding them helpless in its huge metal arms.

"Now you know how the men in Doctor Alph's house were killed," Kark Al exclaimed triumphantly. "Also Kin Nilga, the Saturnian spy who had learned I had the brain and whom I had to kill for that reason. This robot, Thoh, whom I smuggled aboard as machinery samples, can be operated by direct order or remote control.

"And now he and I and the brain - and you two prisoners, also - are going to leave the Vulcan! A Martian naval cruiser has been secretly trailing this liner, waiting to pick me up when I leave the ship. I'm leaving now and taking you two with me. If I left you here dead, someone might read from your brains the nature of our new secret weapon. Aboard the cruiser, I'll torture valuable information from you, then destroy you completely. And then-"

The eyes of Kark Al expanded in blazing emotion that held the helpless man and girl paralyzed.

"Then the deadly culture and the secret of Doctor Alph will go to Mars. And some day ships of Mars will go forth and drop a death vial like this one on each of the other planets! We'll sweep all the rest of the Solar System clean of life. Then

our people can go forth and take every world from Mercury to Pluto for ourselves. Everything - all the Universe for Mars!"

Rab Crane struggled wildly in the robot's inflexible grasp.

Then he opened his mouth to shout for help. Better anything than that Kark Al keep the secret.

"No! You do not give an alarm!" Kark Al hissed, and sprang forward with pistol raised butt foremost.

It crashed down on Crane's head in a stunning blow and the TSS man knew nothing more.

When he returned to consciousness he found himself wearing a heavy flexible metal suit. A spacesuit! Its glassite-fronted helmet was on his head and he breathed tangy oxygen from the tank inside the airtight suit.

Crane tried to rise and found that the wrists of his spacesuit were tied together. Beside him lay Lalla Dee, unconscious and similarly clad in a spacesuit, also bound. They were in one of the Vulcan's space-locks, both inner and outer doors closed.

Then Crane saw Kark Al. The Martian was getting into another spacesuit. The great robot stood motionless beside its master.

Kark Al bent over Crane finally, said coolly in his muffled voice, "Thoh got you from my cabin to this space-lock without anyone in the ship seeing us. Now we are leaving the ship!"

The Martian, once inside his suit, quickly secured a chain to his belt and tied it to the waists of the others so that he and the two prisoners and the robot formed a human chain.

* * *

Then Kark Al quickly took down from the rack beside the row of spacesuits, a hand-rocket - a small affair whose reactive push was enough to move several people in the void.

Kark Al touched a button and the outer door of the lock slid open. The air in it puffed out with a sharp sound, and they looked out into the star-gemmed blackness of space.

Rab Crane saw now that the Martian had slung from his shoulders a square, insulated case which he knew contained the brain of Doctor Alph. And as he realized that the Martian was achieving final success, he tried desperately to attack him.

But Kark Al at that moment stepped calmly out from the lock into empty space! The chain at his belt yanked Lalla Dee and Rab and the robot after him. They all floated there in space, a human chain, scraping the hull of the huge liner as it forged onward.

Kark Al's hand-rocket flashed flame, its impulse dragging them all forward. They moved outward from the liner, pulling away from its gravitational drag. The stem of the liner dwindled swiftly until only its lights were visible, and then those too vanished. The Vulcan was gone! They floated alone here in space, the Martian and his two bound, helpless prisoners and the great impassive robot, who needed no spacesuit because he did not breathe. Kark Al no longer used his hand-rocket, now that they were free of the liner. Crane knew that he was waiting for the Martian cruiser to reach them.

They turned slowly as they floated there, the immense starry firmament seeming to revolve around them. Rab glimpsed Lalla Dee's white face, conscious now, through the glassite front of her helmet. His own heart was numb with the cold of ultimate failure.

A few lights appeared against the stars in the direction opposite that in which the Vulcan had gone. The lights came closer and Rab saw they were those of a long, grim black spaceship coming slowly and cautiously through the void. The Martian cruiser that had been secretly trailing the Vulcan!

Kark Al flashed his hand-rocket three times, then repeated the signal. The Martian cruiser veered, came toward them, its bow rocket-tubes firing to brake its speed. The human chain was drawn slowly toward the cruiser by its gravitational attraction. Soon they bumped along its metal side.

Kark Al drew them toward a space lock that waited, open and ready. He jerked them inside and shut the outer door. Air hissed into the lock from storage tanks. Then the inner door of the lock opened and into it ran a half-dozen men; red-skinned, bristling-haired Martian officers in the gray uniform of their planet, and pulled them into the ship's inside.

One of them was the captain of the cruiser. Excitedly he helped Kark Al out of his spacesuit. Crane and Lalla Dee, still in their suits, lay beside the silent robot.

"Nald Arkol, did you get the great secret?" the Martian captain cried.

Kark Al's eyes flashed behind his spectacles as he answered, pointing to the square insulated case he had brought.

"Yes, I got it! The brain of Doctor Alph and his secret!"

He drew from his pocket a metal tube and took out of it a glassite vial filled with a yellow, fluffy substance.

He held it up proudly.

"Gentlemen, this is the secret that will make our planet sole master of the Solar System. This culture will destroy all life on every world, and give us all nine planets for our empire!"

The Martian officers cheered wildly, their faces flaming.

"The day of Mars has come at last!" they yelled.

* * *

Rab Crane's brain was a turmoil as he looked through his helmet at the vial Kark Al held aloft. The deadly culture - and it was in a glassite vial! The TSS man saw, in that instant, the superhuman chance to snatch eight planets from the jaws of doom!

He took that chance! With one wild upward lunge, Crane threw himself forward. His tied metal-clad hands struck the vial in Kark Al's grasp and knocked it to the floor. The glassite vial tinkled to shattered fragments.

"Gods of Mars!" screamed Kark Al as the vial broke. Then death was on him, was on them all, and those were his last words.

The fluffy yellow substance on the floor seemed to explode outward over the Martians, expanding with the speed of light, covering them with a thick blanket of yellow fluff faster than the eye could follow.

It was the deadly bacteriophage Doctor Alph had cultivated, multiplying with the incredible speed the scientist had spoken of, devouring the flesh of the Martians like

flame devouring tinder!

Kark Al and the other Martians were already indistinguishable, disintegrating mounds of yellow fluff. The stuff covered the helmets and space-suits of Rab Crane and Lalla Dee but could not penetrate through their air-tight glassite suits.

Crane brushed the yellow fluff wildly from before the eyes in his helmet, saw that the incredibly expanding bacteriophage had puffed out through the whole interior of the Martian cruiser. He could hear dim screams as every man in the ship, every atom of organic life, was fastened on and devoured by the culture.

Then, in a short while there was silence inside the cruiser. The Martians were gone, devoured. The ship held only the masses of ravening yellow life that had destroyed them!

Crane staggered close to Lalla Dee.

"Try to unbind my wrists," he said in a muffled voice, through the helmet. "But for God's sake don't open your suit in the slightest or you're doomed!"

"I'll - I'll try," said the Venusian girl shakenly.

Her trembling bound hands finally managed to undo the bonds around Crane's wrists. He unbound her, then, and released the chain that had tied them to Kark Al and the robot.

The huge robot, Thoh, still stood immobile beside them. The mechanical man's metal body had not been affected by the devouring bacteriophage, but he had received no order from his master to act, and had not moved.

Crane pushed Lalla Dee into the space-lock and told her:

"Take a hand-rocket and get as far out in space from the ship as you can. I'll be with you in a moment."

She obeyed, opening the outer door of the lock, stepping out into the void and using the hand-rocket she had picked up to propel her away from the Martian cruiser.

In a few minutes she saw Crane's space-suited figure leaping out of the space-lock, using another hand-rocket. She met him, grasped his arm as they floated together at a distance from the cruiser.

"What did you do?" she cried to him, her voice conducted to him by their touching space-suits.

"I made sure that that cruiser will never drift onto any world and loose that awful plague there," he told her. "I laid a fuse to its tanks of rocket fuel."

Even as Crane spoke, the distant Martian cruiser suddenly burst into terrific light, a destroying explosion that flamed for a moment like a new sun, then vanished.

"That destroys the plague on the cruiser," Crane told her. "Now for ourselves - the culture is smeared all over our suits."

* * *

He took his hand-rocket and with its flame carefully seared every square inch of the outside of her metal suit. Lalla Dee did the same for him. The last germs of the deadly culture had been destroyed.

"Before I laid the fuse, I used the cruiser's radio to call the Vulcan," Crane told her. "They're turning around to come back and pick us up."

"And Doctor Alph's brain perished in that explosion too?" Lalla Dee cried. "No one else will ever find the secret of that culture?"

"No one else, thank God!" said Crane. "It's a power too great for any world to have."

"I'm glad that neither of us won this game, man of the TSS!" she exclaimed. "And I'll give the Vulcan's officers an explanation that will satisfy them, without letting them know the truth."

"Look, there comes the ship now!" he said, pointing.

Far off against the solemn stars, the lights of the returning Vulcan were showing. But Rab Crane was gazing past them, toward the distant green light-speck of his own world. No one there but his Chief would ever know the danger that had threatened that smiling world - and that had been averted.

Only the Chief would ever know, and all the reward that Rab Crane would ever get from him would be a little longer, stronger handshake than usual.

But that was reward enough for a man of the TSS.

THE END