

IN THE CARDS

An Amazing Novelet

By GEORGE O. SMITH

CHAPTER I

The Theft

The masked man crept down the corridor stealthily. It was quite dark in the hallway but he knew that it was a synthetic darkness, a matter of temporal convenience, for on a spaceship, time is regulated by the Terran daily cycle of twenty-four hours.

On spacecraft the passenger-sections observe a strict twelve-hour division between sheer brilliance and utter darkness. He estimated that it was a full two hours before light-time, which meant that those couples who preferred to sit and hold hands whilst staring at the rather over-stable aspect of the sky were by now bedded down and asleep.

Even so the masked man understood that with such it was not the sky that was appealing, and that under such circumstances time was a minor and often disregarded item. So he went carefully just in case he should happen upon such.

He was lucky. There were no couples immersed in one another's dreams and so the masked man went all the way from the auxiliary spacelock near the bottom to the "B" deck, just below the rounded hemisphere of seamless plastiglass that domed the top of the spacecraft.

He entered the corridor that led to the staterooms and, by the dim hall lights, found the room he sought. The lock was obviously intended to keep out only honest men and the door was of the same manufacture. He took a tiny fountain-pen-

sized implement from a loop in his belt and applied the business end to the door.

There was neither sound nor light. Silently the thing worked and it completely removed a sliver ten-thousandths of an inch wide as he moved the tiny beam in a careless square around the lock. He grasped the knob in his hand as he completed the cut. That way it would not drop to the floor and make an unwanted racket.

Shoving the door open gently, he entered and closed it behind him. He took a moment to replace the square of aluminum with the lock and, with a couple of quick motions, he welded the square back in place.

An experienced welder would have called the job 'buttering' because the patch was held by only two minute battens of welded metal. It could be broken out with a single twist of the hand.

Then, reasonably safe from outside detection—if the steward passed, he would not notice unless he gave each door a careful scrutiny—the masked man took out a tiny flashlight and searched the room quickly.

A tousled head of luxuriant hair half covered the pillowcase but the face beneath it was not visible from the door. The masked man shrugged and turned to the wall compartment where the baggage was stored. He knew about where to look. He fumbled through three drawers, and finally came upon a box of some ten cubic inches.

It was not too heavy and the masked man tucked it under one arm and smiled confidently. His pen-beam he used to weld the call-button to its frame so that it could not be pushed. He used it to weld the lock in a barred position and, again outside, he welded the patch together firmly. The inhabitant was to all intents and purposes a prisoner until she could command attention by yelling and beating upon the door.

With the same stealth that he had used in coming this way he returned to the auxiliary spacelock. He donned the spacesuit he had left there and looked at the safety-switch that had been welded closed. He shrugged—no need of opening the switch to close the door upon it. He'd welded the switch shut so that opening the auxiliary lock hadn't flipped the warning lamp on the pilot's panel.

Then the masked man stepped out of the airlock into empty space, kicking himself away from the side of the spacecraft. At once he became a separate celestial body, and the motion of the ship with regard to his present status was an acceleration of one gravity, though his velocity was intrinsically that of the spacecraft upon his instant of severance.

But intrinsic velocity of this nature never harmed a soul and the action as he saw it, was that the ship was stable and he was falling with Terran constants towards the tail.

He waited, counting off the minutes by his watch. The spacecraft dwindled and was finally lost in the distance. Yet he waited, for the first use of his suit-drive would raise a spot on the pilot's celestial sphere, giving warning.

An hour later he applied the drive on his suit and, using a small direction finder, he located another arriving ship. Using extreme care, he put himself in the course of the oncomer and applied his suit-drive with extreme caution. He matched the acceleration of the other ship, matched its course and then, by increments, let the ship catch up with him.

Eventually it passed him close enough, and he drove himself through the main open spacelock. He slammed the airlock door and went to the control room. He made a rapid turnover and applied the drive to put as many miles as possible between himself and the pirated superliner.

Only then did he remove his suit, stow it, and address his interest to the package. It contained a strange crystal. The crystal was a perfect cube two inches to a side. From face to opposite face it was as transparent as space itself. Even the surfaces were non-reflecting. Looking through it one derived a sort of tunnel effect, for the surrounding faces were opaque. Holding it at a distance from the eye and looking through it gave the impression of a two-by-two square tube made of some metal having zero thickness. A thin square—an optical illusion—marked the boundary of the optical axis.

He nodded. This was the crystal he sought. He checked one of the opaque pair of faces with a continuity tester and confirmed his belief. For one axis of the crystal was optical, another axis was a superconductor of electricity. The third axis was a magnetic axis and was a perfect conductor of magnetic flux. This was harder to check with simple equipment but the testing of the other two axes gave him sufficient proof.

He nodded in satisfaction.

Success!

Now, give him time to work out his problem, and everything would be just as he had planned. Getting his hands on that crystal, he felt, was going to be the first step in the success of Jim Forrest. He opened a cabinet door and started to push things aside to make space for it, when from behind him, a cool voice said:

"I'll take that!"

He turned at the voice and his face went through several changes, coming out finally with a stunned look.

"You were locked in."

"Yes?" The girl shrugged. "Well, you were locked out! Now I'll take that crystal!" Her statement was backed up by a heavy blaster that looked like a semiportable in comparison to her spacegloved hand. The hand was small and the blaster was heavy but there was no waver to the green-crystal muzzle. It was trained perfectly upon Jim Forrest's belt buckle.

"Yes? And where will you take it?"

"None of your business!" she snapped.

He looked at her suit and shrugged. "Better call for aid," he said, pointing at the space radio. "You'll never make it in suit-drive."

"Drivel!" she snorted. "You'll run me near Terra before we part."

"My dear Ellen Haynes," he said with exaggerated politeness, "may I point out that we are not going to Terra?"

Ellen laughed nastily, which made it seem worse because it went against the human grain to hear such purely vicious laughter coming from such an attractive girl.

"We'll go," she said shortly, "whether you drive or not. I can run this doodlebug too." She waved the blaster suggestively. "Turn it—or else!"

"Y'know," he replied, "maybe you'd better drill me. I don't know that I like the idea of chasing all over the solar system with Ellen Haynes."

"Turn the ship and get going."

"No," he said flatly. He stretched and went into a relaxed posture. "We're heading for Ganymede." He looked at her—stared at her—and smiled slightly. His attitude became almost paternal, as he stepped forward. "You know," he said quietly, "we both want the same things. We ought to do them together."

"Not on my life," she said. "And stop right there!"

"You stole it first," Jim Forrest told her. "Right out from under my hands. I know why. You want to prove the opticostrictive effects, don't you?"

"It is my right to try it," she said flatly. "And I'm going to do it my own way!"

"But I know more about it than you do," he told her gently.

"I doubt that," she snapped.

"I've studied it," he said quietly. "I can identify the proper magnetic and electric axes without test. Can you?"

"I can learn," she said sharply. "Now stop—or I'll fire!"

"You see, when your dad discovered this thing he turned it over to the government. That was the law with any by-product of the uranium pile. They, however, happened to be working on something else, looking for some definite effect and couldn't take time off to investigate a crystallographic monstrosity. So it just laid around and grew dust until I—"

"I know all that," she snapped. "Now...."

"Right," he said calmly. "Right. And I was merely holding your attention until...."

He leaped forward—forward and slightly to one side. She pulled the trigger hastily and the beam spat viciously but invisibly, scorching the aluminum wall of the little craft, where its reflection ricocheted across the room to burn a wall map. The aluminum behind that reflected it again, and this time it lost itself in the absorbing surface of some methacrylate plastic, which swelled and exploded gently into shards of gooey stuff.

By this time, Jim Forrest was beside the girl. He chopped down on her arm viciously. She dropped the blaster and he kicked it into the corner. Then, using his weight, he crowded her into the pilot's seat and reached over and slammed on a full five gravities.

"I can take that and move," he told her. "But you can't. Ellen Haynes, we're heading for Ganymede."

"Captain Turner will kill you," she snapped.

"Captain Turner will have to catch me first." He laughed. "And in the meantime perhaps we can come to some agreement."

"I'll never deal with a common criminal," she told him.

"How righteous!" he scoffed. "And how did you come by this in the first place?"

"Well, it was my father's," she told him.

"A matter of opinion only," he said. "Just your opinion against most of the Solar System. The odds, Ellen, are against you!" He laughed. "And your Captain Turner? Whose side will he take? Yours—or the Solar Guard, for whom he has worked for eight years?"

"Mine," she said stoutly. "He understands moral justice."

Forrest laughed bitterly. "Uh-huh—and a pair of luminous, provocative brown eyes!"

She turned her head angrily away. There was no sense in arguing with the man. Furthermore, she knew that Captain Turner was a long way from an impersonal member of the law so far as Ellen Haynes was concerned. She would bide her time.

Turner would be certain to find them soon and then this criminal would get what he deserved—even if she had to use her charm to enrage the officer. She knew that Jack Turner would see a mad, flaming red if he thought that Forrest had harmed her in any way.

CHAPTER II

Rescue in Space

Not very far behind them, Captain Jack Turner of the Solar Guard was following the little cruiser grimly. When it leaped in acceleration to five gravities, he assumed that they knew he was following them and decided that stealth was no longer necessary.

He crammed his power on, getting a full six gravities out of the Guardship. From time to time he considered the problem that confronted him. His—well, she was not his fiancée, but she meant more to him than the word 'friend' implies—was in possession of material labeled contraband. Nothing of intrinsic value, true—normally it would never have been missed—but it had been removed from the specimen files of the Solar Laboratory, and that in itself was a breach of the law.

There seemed to be a dog-in-the-manger effect here. The government physicists might never get around to looking at the thing regularly, so busy they were. Yet they could not permit any other experimenter to do more than study the peculiar thing through a plate glass specimen case.

Turner's mind rejected the problem. He did not know the circumstances wholly. His matter-synchronized detector told him that the crystal had embarked on the spaceliner from Venus to Terra, that somehow it had left the liner and was now decelerating in such a back-vector that he suspected one of the Jovian satellites as its destination.

The problem of what he would actually do, he disregarded. Up to the time he confronted the girl he could view the problem dispassionately and impersonally. Whether his love for the girl would overcome his sworn duty—he'd face that when it came.

Watching his range integrator carefully, he set the autopilot to bring him into contact with the fleeing ship and then sat back to relax. It was hard on the human system to hit it up at six gravities, though everything possible had been done to make the flyer comfortable under such accelerations.

Even so, loaded with gravanol, which added tonus to the muscles and prevented the draining of blood from the nerve and brain centers, the record was held by a small, wiry fellow named Tom Whitcomb: Eight gravities for four hours before blackout was his mark.

Whitcomb, of course, was merely out for a record and did not have the emotional impetus of a project to steel his system with adrenaline.

The Guardship approached the fleeing craft and Turner dropped his acceleration to match the other ship. He sent a flaming beam at them that racketed against the hull and flared greenish hell through the observation ports and rang all the alarms in the ship. His audiostrictor beam caught the hull and his voice, as he spoke into the microphone, made the little cruiser ring to his stentorian tones.

"Guardship under Turner!" rattled the ship's hull in a controlled vibration that shook the eardrums. "Drop to one gravity! Prepare to submit to search!"

In the other ship, Forrest shrugged. "There's your little pal now," he said.

Ellen looked at him, white-lipped. "What are you going to do?"

He laughed as he flipped the power switch down to one gravity. "This is a personal cruiser," he said. "We have nothing to fight back with other than harsh words and a set of knives in the galley. I should dislike to have this crate riddled by a Guardsman. I should even further dislike the possible discontinuation of my checkered career. We'll see your little chum."

"He'll help me," she said with a positive air.

"That's swell." He grinned wolfishly. "I wish you both luck. But I'm sensible enough to think that it might be better if we could circumvent him."

Forrest smiled wearily. There was no reason to tell the girl that laws were laws and therefore inflexible regardless of the instantaneous injustice to an occasional individual. By and large, laws worked for overall justice or they would not be laws. He rested easily, getting up only once to retrieve the girl's heavy blaster, which he inspected and dropped into his pocket idly.

Then the Guardship was upon them—close enough to reach out and take hold of the little cruiser with tractor beams. The spacelocks came together under Turner's manipulations of the beams and both spacelocks clanged open.

Jack Turner swallowed deeply. Whatever the score at this point, he was confronted with the problem of his life. "You surrender?" he demanded as he entered the control room.

"You're in," said Forrest cryptically. "Now what?"

"The zonium crystal," stated Turner shortly. "I'll take that first. It is the property of the laboratory."

Ellen looked quietly at him. "What about him?" she asked, indicating Forrest.

"Well?" he said shortly.

"He stole it from me," she said plaintively.

"But you stole it from Venus," said Turner. "Under the law, you are conspiring to deprive the government of its rightful property."

"I presume that I am listed as a criminal?" asked Ellen, more plaintively.

Turner blinked. "What can I do?" he asked.

Ellen looked pleading. "Dad discovered zonium," she said. "Dad predicted it and spent six months producing the single crystal we have. Then because of laws, Dad was deprived of the possible benefits of his study and work. Is that fair?"

"Who is to judge fairness?" asked Turner. "It has been the law for seventy years that any product of the uranium piles is the exclusive property of the government. That is because danger might attend any individual experimentation on unknown materials.

"If you do not know nuclear history I can tell you that Tompkins and Clagone nearly blasted Terra off of the map because they inadvertently stacked a couple of transuranic elements side by side. To prevent such mishaps the law was set up. I ask you, Ellen, do you know anything about zonium?"

"Not much excepting its principal properties."

"Then you might be meddling with something that could destroy Sol."

"Not likely," she retorted.

"So?" asked Turner with a smile. "Remember that the unpredictable effects start with the uranium series. Fission occurs in several of the uranium-rare-earth metals, plutonium and the uranium isotopes two hundred thirty-four and two hundred thirty-five. Number ninety-seven was never known until the uranium pile made it, you know, and it, like other elements of the zero group, is an inert gas.

"But it is a gas which exhibits magnetic properties. Number ninety-eight has been known to combine with all of the acid elements. And number ninety-nine is naturally radioactive, breaking down to protoactinium by a double emission of alpha particles. Unless you know what to do with zonium how can you predict its behaviour?"

"Is it right to bury the results of a man's lifework?" demanded Ellen.

Guardzman Turner faced Jim Forrest. "What can I do?" he asked simply. "My affection and my duty are opposing. I

understand both viewpoints. It is hard to see a life work set aside by officialdom, rules and what might seem like bureaucracy. On the other hand I am a member of the Law. I cannot turn traitor, yet I cannot harm Ellen. I would like to retain both Ellen and my self respect."

"My father—" began Ellen harshly.

"Was, after all, working for the Lab," interrupted Turner. "He was amply paid."

"Yes," she said bitterly. "A laboratory fee. You know very well that every technician in the Lab that discovers something useful is given a royalty in addition. That's what I've been cheated of!"

"They may yet investigate it," said Turner.

"I'd prefer the rewards before I'm a hundred years old," said Ellen.

"Look," said Turner after a moment's thought. "Admittedly the government lab ignored zonium for more important things. The government was not interested in zonium until it was stolen. But consider—this crystal has been stolen by people who have experimental experience.

"The government will wonder just why it is so important that an individual will break interplanetary law to possess it. That is a question that will probably force someone to work on it. Then you can gain the benefits legally."

Ellen considered that for a moment. It was more or less true. "Then tell me how it is to be returned?" she asked.

"That is easy. I can make you a temporary deputy of the Solar Guard. You return the crystal to headquarters. I continue to pursue the thief."

Forrest, who had been sitting easily in his chair watching the play of personalities, suddenly sat up and looked at Jack Turner pointedly.

"You mean me?" he asked.

"I do."

"That's a nice trick," snapped Forrest. "Why not deputize me and go hunting her?"

"Because you have nothing to lose by jumping deputization," said Captain Turner shortly. "Miss Haynes has every reason in the world to do exactly as I said. As for the true thief, my report will state honestly that I located the crystal in this ship—your craft, Forrest. I will also state that it is my belief that Miss Haynes was not here of her own free will."

"She came here unasked," snapped Forrest.

The Guardsman nodded. "So did I," he said easily. "And possibly for the same reason. To return the zonium crystal to its rightful owner."

Forrest laughed harshly. "Nice sophistry," he said with a sneer. "You'll omit the fact that your definition differs from that of Miss Haynes as to the term 'rightful owner'? She thinks it belongs to her, you know."

"When she returns the crystal," said Turner, "her intent will be shown by act regardless of her statement—or your statements for that matter."

Forrest smiled. "The scales of justice seem to have become unbalanced by the added weight of a lipstick," he said cynically. "I hope you two will be very unhappy together."

"Accusing members of the Guard will get you little," said Turner.

"I seem to have been got already," grunted Forrest. "Frankly, why don't you return the crystal and let Miss Haynes pursue me? As any pursuit is going to be a laughing matter since you've already caught me, I'd prefer to be pursued by Miss Haynes."

"No thank you," replied the girl. "We'll do it as Captain Turner suggests."

"And he'll chase me all the way to Ganymede while we're living in the same ship—with his crate fastened on to mine?"

"That need not be mentioned."

"Well, I'll darn well mention it!" snapped Forrest.

"You can't prove it," she told him.

"Ellen," said Turner to the girl, "you go into my ship and get the tender ready. You'll take off and head for Mars in the tender, which will be a little rigorous but not too uncomfortable nor dangerous."

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