

# **Eight Million Dollars From Mars!**

**By Winston Marks**

**Pauker had killed ten men to get eight million dollars. Now his flight to Mars would insure his safety from justice. Or would it?**

## **Eight Million Dollars From Mars!**

His poise was perfect as he crossed the concourse with the highly vaulted ceiling. He moved with purpose but not in haste, his arms swinging freely, eyes straight ahead. At his heels, the squat, robot luggage-carrier dutifully followed the "bone" which he carried in his right hand.

At the long baggage counter, the husky, human attendant took the "bone" and led the carrier under the counter through the low passage onto a platform scale. He whistled. "That'll be \$4,175.00 excess baggage," he said.

Pauker nodded curtly and withdrew his billfold. He laid his ticket and the currency on the counter while the attendant clipped paper tags to the handles of his four bags, broke off the stubs at the perforations, shoved the luggage off the cart onto a moving belt and replaced the "bone" in its "homing" slot. The three-wheel robot rolled off the scales, out the short tunnel under the counter and headed back for the entrance.

"We don't see many leather bags here," the man said pleasantly. "They weigh up too much."

Pauker's eyes darted to the man's face nervously as he examined the ticket and made change. Was there suspicion in the young, bland features?

The traveler was well aware of the extravagance of his heavy bags, and he knew that most interplanetary trippers used the lightest, flimsiest containers to remain under the 100-pound limit. At the

risk of appearing conspicuous, Pauker had decided on the stronger suit-cases. There must be no chance of an accidental rupture of his luggage. Legitimate people don't haul bundles of \$1,000 interplanetary bills around with them—not eight million dollars worth.

But it wasn't the young man's remark that broke his composure. It was the sight of his four bags bouncing along the endless belt and disappearing through an arch into the next room. Suppose customs got nosy?

Normally, his research had revealed, only a cursory X-ray for weapons was made, and he had delayed checking them through until the last moment, so it was unlikely they would hold them up. Yet the fear clutched his belly. He snatched at the baggage tags, his ticket and change, jammed them in his valuables pouch which was fastened to his belt, and moved hastily out of the depot.

Signs guided him to the line of waiting vehicles, and in two minutes he was deposited at the base of the portable, fourstory, passenger prep-building that sidled parallel to the spaceship.

He surrendered his ticket at the ground-level door and was passed into the men's disrobing room. Naked, except for the waterproof, web belt to which he attached his pouch of personal effects, he folded his clothing into the transparent bag with his berth number stamped on it, dropped it in a marked hopper and stepped into the showers.

More signs led him through the soapy, sluicing bath chamber that smelled mildly of phenol, through a gusty, hot drying room, and into the corridor of inoculation booths. It was an ingenious maze of tiny spaces. You stepped in, placing your feet on the painted foot-

prints, slipped the steel I.D. plate containing your metabolic data into the slot, and *click*, a measured dose of anti-this-or-that serum shot from a compressed air needle and penetrated the proper area of the body without breaking the skin.

Pauker marvelled at the speed with which he moved down the row of booths. The sliding exit panel from one booth into another remained closed until the shot was completed, then flipped open, and you moved on, untouched by human hands. The shots were painless, a mere prickling sensation, and Pauker compared it to the brutal hypo-punching he had endured in his youth during military basic training.

By the time he reached the last of the seven booths he was relaxing. The mechanism of murder, robbery and escape which he had spent five years planning had functioned perfectly. From the pull of the trigger to the present moment, the operation was a tribute to his genius of concentrating scrupulous attention to every minute detail. Now he was beginning to enjoy the peace of mind that comes to a craftsman when his work of art nears completion, and he knows success is positive.

As inside man on the fabulous Brinks-Interplanetary robbery, it had been necessary to accomplish a very expensive identity change when he dropped out of sight. Over \$20,000 of his own savings, spot cash, had been invested beforehand setting this up. But his biggest risk had been in the double-cross. It was his biggest risk, and also his greatest stroke of brilliance.

Staging the rendezvous with his seven underworld accomplices for the pay-off, he had arranged that they arrive separately. Each in his individual hideout, had thought it would be a general get-together

at the same place, same hour. Each arrived promptly at a different time at a different rented flat, but all collected the same lethal payment something less than an ounce of soft lead.

Ten men had died to bring the fortune into Pauker's hands, three guards and seven, hoodlums. And each had been marked from the beginning. Now there were no witnesses, no loose-ends, no chances of meeting an avenging gangster on Mars, no waiting for a slug in the dark. Neat! Clean! Perfection as he'd planned.

The entry panel to booth seven clicked behind him, he slipped the I.D. plate into its slot and felt the sting pluck at his neck as the serum, drug or whatever needled into his tissues. As he started to step from the painted foot-marks a voice came hollowly over the partitions, then louder as the exit door of the booth slid back.

Standing down the hall some ten paces were two men profiled to him. One was the young, blond baggage man. He was saying, "— with a red scar under his left eye. You sure you haven't seen him? It's quite import—"

Pauker, shrinking back in the booth, couldn't get entirely out of view. He jammed his I.D. plate in the slot again, and the exit panel closed. He exhaled a stale breath with trembling relief and leaned against the wall. The voices continued, muffled by the partition, but he could only catch a few words.

"—sorry—blast-off in six minutes—thing about it—not your responsibility."

Then it was quiet. Pauker waited a full minute before he began tugging at the exit door. It refused to open. A siren screamed

faintly outside, and a voice boomed a warning down the corridor, "Clear the prep chamber. Blast-off in four minutes."

Pauker fought back his panic. When the smooth, featureless panel failed to open he stepped back to the hypo machine, winced slightly as the second shot hit him in the same spot, precisely, and then he moved swiftly through the panel which fell away, down the corridor, over the covered ramp into the men's gallery of the spaceship.

A white-uniformed, male attendant hurried him down an aisle of sponge-padded double-decker bunks, after a quick glance at his I.D. "You almost missed the boat, mister," he said as he strapped Pauker down. He slid the needle into an arm vein with an apology. "Sorry, no time for a local."

Pauker didn't complain. His heart was pounding noisily, and he was much too upset to notice the stab in his arm. It was the nutrient tube which would feed him for some nine months in space.

When the male nurse was gone, Pauker realized that a small speaker by his ear was talking to him, softly, reassuringly, and after he heard and felt the lump of closing hatches, he began listening.

The voice was finishing a description of the bubble-cities of Mars. "And of the sixteen metropolitan centers, Marsfield, of course, is the luxury spot of the planet. The spaceport is located there, and all passengers clear through this lovely city of recreation. Even if your business takes you on to the other cities, don't fail to pause in Marsfield and enjoy the City of Beauty and Pleasure," the soft, feminine voice urged.

He wouldn't fail to pause, Pauker reflected. Marsfield was his destination. And now it looked like he'd really make it. That damned baggage man had given him a bad moment. There was no red scar on his left cheek, but his over-sensitive imagination had screamed that Customs had opened his bags and sent this man down to search for him. Obviously, the baggage man had been looking for another passenger, and there had been no necessity to retreat into booth seven for concealment.

Oh well, he thought, if he made no worse errors than this he could look back at a rather faultless operation. An extra shot of some serum might give him a stiff neck or a headache, but this was a minor thing, and it served him right for losing his head.

The purring voice in his ear expertly seduced his attention. He knew it was part of the departure routine to dispel nervousness of the several hundred passengers aboard, some of whom were bound to be claustrophobes. The close-packing of humanity was necessary, of course, from space limitations. So were the arrangements for keeping them immobile on the whole trip.

This was no ocean liner where you could wander about, swim and play shuffle-board. You bought your ticket, lay down and played dead for nine months. It was part of the contract.

On the other hand, as the girl was explaining, "All possible care has been taken for your safety and comfort. We are about to blast-off now, and during early acceleration I will continue talking to you, explaining the many answers to the questions that occur in most people's minds."

The first vibration seemed to start in his own chest, and the frequency was so low that he felt, rather than heard it. Then the



## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

