

Fish Men of Venus

by David Wright O'Brien, 1918-1944

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Manny Carter fled from the planet where he was a hunted man, but a shipwreck in space brought him back—to an incredible undersea plot of the fish men...

Illustration:

Recognition leaped into Eileen's eyes as she saw the man on the floor

"DON'T move!"

Manny Carter's heart went cold at the sound of the voice behind him. There was a sudden sickness in the pit of his stomach. Slowly, he turned.

On the promenade deck of the space liner Asteroid there had been nothing but silence and darkness—silence penetrated only by the half-hum of the percussion room deep in the bowels of the ship, and darkness broken only by occasional meteoric splashes of flame coming from the void surrounding the liner.

Crouching there on the promenade deck Manny Carter had been aware of the silence, and grateful for the darkness surrounding him. He had been waiting for this moment, waiting in his tiny cabin until he was sure that the other passengers had all retired. He'd given them two extra hours of grace—there wasn't any sense in taking chances—and as he'd moved silently across the aluminum deck planking he'd breathed a silent prayer of supplication. If he could only reach the lifeship hanging from the rail davits—but now...

"Up with your hands, Carter!"

Automatically Manny obeyed the command of the short gray-haired man who confronted him.

His eyes fixed in fascination on the vibrator-pistol pointed unwaveringly at his middle, but he remained silent.

"I had a hunch," his captor was saying, "that you'd slip aboard the ASTEROID. And I also had a hunch that you'd try to make a break for it in a space lifeship. It's all over, Carter. You're nabbed. I arrest you in—"

The sentence was left uncompleted, for Manny Carter, watching his chance with a timing born of desperation, crashed down on his captor's head with a fire extinguisher from the wall. With the slightest of sighs the older man crumpled to the deck, his vibrator-pistol ringing hollowly as it slid from his limp grasp to the aluminum planking.

For an instant, Manny stood motionless above the unconscious form of his victim. Then, swiftly he stooped to retrieve the vibrator-pistol, stuffed it inside his belt lining, and waited. A second later Carter had the pistol once more in his hand and was facing the companionway entrance on his right. Someone was coming up the companionway to the deck. If he was seen... But it was too late to try to make it in the lifeship, and he had no time to conceal the body of the man at his feet. So Manny Carter ran his tongue along dry lips and pointed the muzzle of his weapon at the entrance.

His exclamation, as the intruder came through the entrance and onto the deck, was involuntary, horror-stricken.

"Eileen!"

The girl, recognizing him, was equally astonished, but there was pleasure in her eyes, in the tone of her voice as she spoke.

"Manny! Well if this isn't something! I didn't know you were aboard. I thought—" Her voice stopped as though suddenly frozen, and she stood staring at the gray haired man at Carter's feet, at the vibrator-pistol in the young man's hand.

"Manny," there was sudden terror in her voice now, "Manny, what's wrong, what's happened?"

Then she gasped in anguished bewilderment as recognition leaped into her eyes—recognition of the gray-haired man sprawled inertly on the deck. "It's Dad!"

MANNY CARTER had been standing dazed from the moment of his first involuntary cry. And now, as he watched the bewilderment, the terrified suspicion

growing in the gray eyes of the ethereal, auburn-haired girl before him, he found himself paralyzed for speech. He gulped futilely as Eileen Dodge, the girl he loved, dropped to her knees beside the man he'd just smashed to the deck. The little gray-haired man who tried to arrest him—Alson Dodge, her father! What a ghastly trick of fate.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was husky with the torrent of emotion he felt. "Eileen, he—he's not hurt badly. I—had to do it, please understand me. I was forced to—it was my only chance."

Alson Dodge moaned faintly, moving his head uneasily in his daughter's arms. Eyes flashing, Eileen turned to Carter. "I didn't know it was you. He hadn't told me." She bit her lip. "He probably wanted to spare me the knowledge that the murderer he was after was you!" Her eyes blazed accusingly but with infinite hurt at Carter. "*You—*" she repeated in stricken tones, "*the murderer my father was trailing!* No wonder you didn't meet us when the liner left Venus. No wonder Dad was unwilling to say anything when I asked him why you hadn't come to see us off." Her voice was shaking, almost sobbing. "Manny, Manny how could you have done this to us—to me!"

Dumbly, Carter tried to speak. The hate and grief that suddenly welled in the girl's eyes, however, was too much for him. He tore his gaze from hers. How could he explain? What could he say that she would believe?

She had known her father's mission—to trace down the murderer of Bramm. But Alson Dodge had spared his daughter the knowledge that he suspected her fiancé of the crime. Now—tragically—Eileen Dodge had stepped into a panorama that mere words could never explain away. A scene that would do more to convince her of Manny Carter's guilt than any indictment in the world!

Manny Carter started to speak. He was determined that, in spite of the incriminating evidence surrounding him, Eileen Dodge would learn the truth. He didn't expect her to believe him—but he had to try to make her understand. His brain was framing the words, "Eileen, please understand me, don't think what you're thinking without giving me a chance to explain. Don't—" He was framing the phrase, when hell—deafeningly and blindingly—broke forth in the bowels of the gigantic space liner.

The alarm bell rang almost simultaneously with the ear-splitting explosion that roared up from the engine room, through the corridors, and out onto the decks of the Asteroid. But Manny Carter didn't hear the bell. Knocked off balance by the rending explosion, he was thrown heavily into a lurching sprawl. He didn't hear anything after his head smashed against a bulkhead plate...

LATER, he had no idea how much later, Manny Carter regained consciousness. There were voices around him, excited voices. It wasn't until he tried to rise that Carter realized he was shackled. Then, through a haze of throbbing pain, he looked dazedly about at his surroundings.

He was lying on the floor of one of the ASTEROID's lifeships, and standing within his vision were Eileen Dodge, two strangers, Alson Dodge, the uniformed captain of the Asteroid, and a good-natured, pleasant looking fellow who was gazing intently at him.

"He's come around," said the pleasant passenger.

Alson Dodge crossed to his side and stood above him. There was anger in the gray-haired man's eyes. But before he could speak, Carter addressed him. "What is this? What's happened?" he managed to blurt.

"You're in custody, Carter," replied Alson Dodge, "and you won't be eluding me this time. We're aboard a lifeship of the ASTEROID. There was an explosion in the percussion tubes of the engine room. It set the liner ablaze. We managed to get clear in the lifeships. You can thank Eileen that your hide was saved—for the present. She dragged you into the lifeship while the crew and passengers were abandoning the vessel."

"But where—?" Carter started.

"We're some two thousand miles above Venus, and we're going down. Once this business is over I'm turning you in to the authorities. You're charged with the murder of Prince Bramm." He shook his head soberly. "And I don't envy you when you face trial for killing a Venusian Prince!"

"But I didn't, I swear—"

"Do you expect anyone to believe that?" Alson Dodge cut him short coldly.

The two passengers, a man and his wife, stared at Manny with ill-concealed curiosity. He met their glances, his eyes boring through them until they were forced to turn away. The Captain of the ill-fated ASTEROID, Carter remembered his name as Sommers, scarcely gave him a second glance, giving all his concentration to the controls of the craft. Then Manny forced himself to look in Eileen's direction, only to find that she had turned her back on him and was apparently intently interested in something outside the thick porthole of the lifeship.

"Well," Carter declared bitterly, "this seems to be some little party." He spoke directly to the calm, good-natured fellow who, of all the passengers in the craft, was the only one still watching him.

"I'm sorry," the sympathetic man said quietly, "that it had to turn out like this, Manny." Even as he spoke, his left eyelid closed in a significant wink, observed only by Carter.

Suddenly Carter felt renewed courage. Chambers, Dan Chambers, the chap with the calmness, was still willing to help him. Carter knew that Chambers would aid him again as he did the first time. In spite of his despondency, Manny Carter managed an answering wink to Dan Chambers.

For Dan Chambers, his ex-boss, was one person who believed in him. It had been Chambers who aided Manny in getting secretly aboard the Asteroid. It had been Chambers who helped him make his escape from the Venusian authorities. Chambers was for him, and the thought was more than consoling to Manny Carter.

FOR the next several hours the passengers aboard the tiny lifeship paid no more attention to Manny Carter. And lying there in the corner of the craft, the shackled young prisoner had time for a great deal of thinking. He devoted it to a review of his plight and the steps that led him to his present situation.

Everything had been splendid with Carter, until the last two days. Sub-Administrator of Trade for the Earth Council, Manny Carter had worked hard and

faithfully at his post on Twenty,⁽¹⁾ the solitary land dot on the face of the watery planet Venus.

The Venusians, creatures half-human and half-fish, carried on an extensive pearl trade with Earth. The island Twenty had been the base for these dealings, for it provided a livable spot for the earthmen during the pearling transactions with the Fish Men of Venus.

Since the Fish Men were unable to live on Twenty—it being above water and out of their natural environment—they had delegated one of their number, Prince Bramm, to act as their representative to the earthmen on Twenty. This was made possible by the construction of a water palace on the island. Here Prince Bramm had been able to live in comfort while supervising the pearl trading between his people and the earthmen.

As Sub-Administrator of Trade, Manny Carter had many dealings with Bramm, Prince of the Fish Men. Dan Chambers, Chief-Administrator, allowed Manny to negotiate most of the smaller pearling deals. And working under Chambers, Manny had been making a name for himself. There had even been rumors that Earth Council contemplated giving him a Chief-Administrator's post on Saturn or one of the other planetary bases. Eileen Dodge and Manny planned to marry as soon as he got that promotion. The Investigator for Earth Council had hinted that the couple did not have long to wait.

Then Bramm, Prince of the Fish Men, was brutally murdered. The kindly old Venusian had been found, two mornings before, lying several hundred yards away from his water palace on Twenty—dead. The evidence showed that he had been forcibly dragged from the palace and left to drown in the air.

Evidence also showed that the leader of the Fish Men tried to crawl back to his water castle, but had suffocated before he could reach it.

Circumstances pointed to Manny Carter as the murderer. The buckle from his office-belt, bearing the initials "M.C." was found clutched in Prince Bramm's hand flaps. And Manny Carter had been the last man to see the Venusian alive.

At first Carter decided to give himself up, but Dan Chambers, who believed his somewhat younger assistant's story, convinced him that such a move would be disastrous, that Venusians would demand punishment and that Manny would be railroaded into the role of scapegoat. "The rocky road of the innocent," Chambers had said, his great, good-natured face frowning.

Chambers made the arrangements for Manny's escape aboard the liner ASTEROID which was headed back for Earth. They had decided that Manny could leave the liner in mid-space by means of a lifeship, and find his way to safety on Earth, until Chambers, working on the case, could clear him.

But Alson Dodge, assigned to the case, had his duty to fulfill. Like it or not he had to seek out Manny Carter and place him under arrest. And Alson Dodge hadn't had the courage to tell his daughter the truth.

But now Eileen knew, and Manny was captive, headed back for Venus to stand trial for the murder of Bramm, Prince of the Fish Men. Fate, in the form of the explosion in the percussion chambers of the space liner ASTEROID, had made that return somewhat unconventional. Seven castaways from a space liner—headed for Venus in a lifeship.

"It's a mess," Manny said bitterly to himself, "a real mess. But somehow, some way, I'm going to get out of here."

The drone of the small atomic motor at the rear of the lifeship seemed to lull Carter's anguished thoughts into a hazy panorama. He was aware of the aching throb in his head, the slowly blurring figures of the others in the lifeship. Manny Carter hadn't closed his eyes in the last forty-eight hours. But now sheer fatigue took control of his weary mind and he dozed into a troubled sleep...

IT must have been the break in the muted purring of the lifeship's motor that brought Manny Carter back to consciousness. There was the sound of excited conversation coming from up forward, and as Manny turned his body this way and that in an effort to squirm to a position of vision, he noticed that the voice of Dan Chambers seemed to be the loudest, the most insistent.

"...the most feasible move," Chambers was saying. "It's more than certain we can't force the motors much further. And the delay won't be much."

"I have more than just that to think of," Alson Dodge said gruffly. "I have a prisoner to deliver, Chambers. It's urgent that I get him to Venus as soon as possible."

"Chambers is right, however," Captain Sommers was talking now. "It's almost positive that our atomic motors won't hold up much longer. If we can land, undoubtedly we'll be able to get assistance from whatever tribe of Fish Men are in that vicinity."

"They're right, Dad," Eileen Dodge broke in. "The delay won't be long, but it is necessary."

There was a murmuring of assent from the other two passengers, the middle-aged man and his wife, then Manny heard Alson Dodge clear his throat. "Good enough, Captain Sommers. If it's necessary, there isn't anything to be done about it. But please don't take any more time than is needed."

Captain Sommers' voice was terse, slightly bitter as he replied. "I don't care to take any more time than you do, Inspector Dodge. Please remember that it is essential for me to get back to Venus as it is for yourself. Remember, man, I've lost my ship with that explosion. It's not pleasure that's waiting for me, by any means."

"Sorry, old man," Dodge said. "I'm afraid I came near forgetting that."

"How soon will we be ready, Captain?" inquired Chambers.

"We should start our dive in the next half hour," Sommers declared. "Everyone had better get ready."

Carter heard footsteps, then, and Alson Dodge approached him. He was holding a space suit in his arms, and he bent momentarily to deposit it on the floor beside Manny. Then he spoke.

"I'll have to ask you to make me a solemn promise, Carter."

Manny looked at him questioningly. "What?"

"We're going to be on Venus shortly. And since the motors won't last long enough to take us directly to Twenty, we'll have to travel underwater until we find a Venusian village where we can make repairs. It means that I'll have to remove your bonds, Carter. You'll have to put on one of these space suits when we submerge."

Manny merely nodded.

"I'll have to ask your promise not to attempt escape during that time," Dodge concluded.

"You have it," Carter answered briefly.

Wordlessly, Alson Dodge produced the keys to unlock Manny's shackles.

A moment later his young prisoner stood erect, stretching his hard, cable-like muscles gratefully.

"Thanks," Carter said.

Looking around, Carter saw that most of the other passengers, with the exception of Alson Dodge, Chambers, and himself, had already climbed into their space garb and were busy adjusting the oxygen and pressure gadgets. He tried to catch Eileen's eye, but was unsuccessful. Then he sighed and began to dress himself in the spatial equipment. Once, during the dressing process, Manny noticed Chambers looking in his direction and was grateful to see his former superior give him a knowing wink which seemed to say, "Don't worry, fellow, we'll get you out of this."

Fifteen minutes later Captain Sommers cut the motors on the lifeship and turned to the passengers. "We're coming down on the water," he announced.

Eileen, her father, and the middle-aged couple grouped themselves around the thick-plated porthole to get a glimpse of the territory on which the lifeship was descending. Captain Sommers stood quietly at the controls, occasionally checking the descent instruments. Dan Chambers took this opportunity to ease closer to Carter.

"Take it easy, Manny. I still believe in you, kid. The game isn't over by a long shot," he said softly. "I know the territory we're going down into. Once we're there, I'll see to it that you get the chance to make another break for it."

"Thanks, Dan," Carter replied. "I owe a lot to you, even if things did get messed up a bit. When I'm able to clear myself, I'll pay you back somehow."

Carter nodded swiftly, gratefully. Then an uneasy thought occurred to him. Escape? He'd given his word to Alson Dodge that he wouldn't try to escape again. Not, at any rate, until the lifeship was once more on its way to Twenty.

"Nonsense," Carter told himself sharply. "What in the Hell has my word got to do with this? Did they believe me when I protested my innocence? My say so isn't going to result in a trial for a murder I didn't commit!"

Chambers had joined the group at the porthole, and Carter, preferring to stay where he was, sat down on one of the benches lining the wall of the craft, turning his attention to Captain Sommers' skillful handling of the landing.

With the most imperceptible of jars, the tiny lifeship settled on the water. Killing the atomic motors entirely, Captain Sommers turned to the passengers.

"Very well," he said. "We're safely on Venus. We dive below water in five minutes. I'd advise you all to put on your space helmets before we go down."

Silently, the group obeyed Sommers' command. Then, after what seemed to be an eternity of preliminary gauge-testing, the white-haired ex-captain of the Asteroid faced the passengers of the lifeship once again.

"Ready," he said briefly.

The nose of the tiny craft seemed suddenly to go leaden, as if pushed front-end-over by a gigantic hand. There was the faint sound of the pressure gauges

whistling, the lights in the small cabin flickered for but an instant, then, except for an imperceptible sloping of the floor, everything seemed to return to normality.

"How long will it be until we find a Venusian village?" Alson Dodge asked the Captain.

"Not long, not long at all," Sommers reassured him. "If the directions Mr. Chambers has given me are correct, we are almost within vibration wave of one of them now."

Carter saw Alson Dodge turn to Chambers. "You know the Venusian territory well, Chambers?" There seemed to be the slightest hint of a challenge in his voice.

Carter cursed himself for not having adjusted the ear-phones inside his helmet to a general auditory vibration for, although he had been able to hear Sommers speaking to Dodge, and Dodge's reply, he failed to pick up Chambers' answer to the old man's question. Quickly, Carter flicked the adjuster button on his suit to a general frequency pick-up. He came in on the tail end of the handsome good-natured Administrator's reply. "...after all, it's my job, y'know," Chambers finished.

DURING the minutes that followed, Manny Carter centered his attention on Eileen Dodge. Wistfully, he forced himself to follow her with his eyes as she moved back and forth in front of the instrument panels at the nose of the lifeship. Once he thought for an instant that she stole a glance in his direction. But if she had, she forced herself to turn coldly away, as if she had permitted herself to look at something quite distasteful very much by accident.

"God," Carter thought to himself, "she looks lovely even in that clumsy, cumbersome space suit."

Through the glass turret-like helmet, the lights seemed to slant sunnily down on her beautifully red hair, giving it an almost halo-like sheen. This last mental comparison was too much for Manny Carter, and for the first time in the last forty-eight hours he choked back a lump that rose swiftly to his throat. During the past hours he had been trying not to think of Eileen Dodge and all the things her loss meant to him. It was more than he could stand. The girl he loved—the girl who had once loved him—certain that he was a murderer!

At that moment Manny Carter was never firmer in the conviction that he couldn't die, couldn't let himself be railroaded into a final punishment for a crime he hadn't committed. His lean, tanned young jaw set firmly and his square, hard fists knotted and unknotted themselves at the thought of the rank injustice of his plight. But Manny Carter wasn't feeling any schoolboyish emotion of self-pity. Instead he felt rage, hot burning rage and determination to right the wrongs he had suffered.

"I'll show them," he muttered half-aloud. "I'll show them all, damn it." Then he flushed, for simultaneously all heads of the other passengers in the cabin turned in his direction. Manny realized that they had all picked up his muttered challenge through their helmet ear-phones.

IT couldn't have been more than several hours later when Captain Sommers turned to the group in the lifeship with the announcement: "There's a village directly ahead of us. Fish Men are already coming toward the lifeship. We'll find a mooring spot in the next five minutes."

Dan Chambers smiled. "I told you that we'd find a village if you followed my directions," he said easily. "This is probably Maeku, a village I've contacted on pearling business on several occasions."

Suddenly Carter became alert. He couldn't remember, from any previous knowledge, of ever having seen any transactions closed in the Administrative offices on Twenty that involved Maeku. As a matter of fact, he seemed to recall that Maeku was charted as one of the Venusian sections that were completely unproductive insofar as pearling was concerned. He felt himself grow tense within. Chambers' plan for his escape was beginning to materialize.

But Carter didn't have time for further surmises. Alson Dodge crossed to where he stood, and placing one hand on his arm the gray-haired interplanetary investigator spoke with an air of firm decision.

"I'll have to ask you to keep constantly in my sight, Carter," Dodge declared quietly. "You understand, of course. You've already made one break for it and I can't risk another." Then he addressed Dan Chambers who stood expectantly in front of the steel air-lock door at the nose of the ship. "I wish you'd take care of my daughter, Chambers. I don't want to take any chances on something going haywire with these Fish Men. After what's happened to their Prince on Twenty, they might be stirred up a bit."

"Be glad to," smiled Chambers, "if Eileen doesn't mind. But I don't think we've much to worry about insofar as the Venusians are concerned. They're a peaceable people. I don't think they mean to harm us."

Then Captain Sommers flooded the tiny cabin with sufficient air pressure to keep out the sea that enveloped the little lifeship. The door was thrown open in the next moment, and the little band of castaways from the liner ASTEROID stepped forth into the dimly-lighted streets of the strange Venusian undersea village.

A WELCOMING committee of Fish Men had grouped about the tiny lifeship. As Carter looked swiftly through their ranks he felt a sharp, unexplainable sense of distrust. There was something written in their wide dislike eyes and flat faces that made him uneasy. Then Dan Chambers took charge of the situation as the others looked on with an air of expectancy.

"Where," he demanded in the Venusian dialect, "is your leader?"

THERE was a commotion in the ranks of the Fish Men, and they parted to permit a huge, malevolent looking Venusian to move to where Chambers was standing. He was the same as the thousands of Fish Men Carter had grown used to in his services as Sub-Administrator on Twenty, and yet he wasn't. There was something different about him, and Manny Carter searched his mind to discover what that something was. Except for his unusual size—most Venusians were of short stature—the leader of this particular village didn't seem different. But still there was something... Carter gave it up as Dan Chambers addressed the creature.

"We have come from Twenty," Chambers was saying, "our great ship was destroyed. And now we must return to Twenty. We wish to make repairs in your village."⁽²⁾

The huge Fish Man spoke in Venusian, gill-like mouth opened and sending tiny air bubbles up through the water with each syllable. "We are glad to offer ourselves to your service. State your wishes and I shall see that they are carried out even as commands."

Captain Sommers had been listening intently to the interchange of conversation, and now he broke in on Chambers and the Fish Man. "It will be necessary for us to have our lifeship raised several yards off the ocean bed. If this can be done by your men, I will appreciate it."

The Fish Man merely nodded. Then, turning to Chambers he spoke. "My name is Atar, I lead the villagers of Maeku. Would the other visitors care to rest inside our shell huts while the repairs are being made on the vessel?"

Chambers turned to Alson Dodge, who had been silently standing beside him. "How about it? I think it might be a good idea."

"Very well," Dodge replied. Then he gestured to Eileen. "Go on ahead with Chambers, dear. I'll follow in a moment."

As Chambers, taking Eileen by the arm, followed the beckoning hand flaps of the huge Fish Man Atar, Carter heard him laugh. "Don't look so frightened. These people are harmless, once you get used to seeing so many of them hanging around."

The middle-aged married passengers—Carter had learned their names to be Mr. and Mrs. Foswin—followed swiftly behind Chambers and Eileen, as if they were frightened by the idea of being left alone in the strange undersea village.

Then Alson Dodge stood in front of his prisoner. "Come on, Carter," he said. "I want you to stay very much in my sight while the repairs are being made."

The shell huts which Atar, the village leader had mentioned, were actually extremely well constructed dwellings. With the exception of the furniture and accessories, meant for undersea life, they rivaled some of the finest earth dwellings Manny Carter had ever seen.

The hut, a huge building of solid shell construction, into which the passengers of the lifeship were led was spacious and comfortable—if any undersea buildings could have been comfortable to land beings.

While Captain Sommers and Alson Dodge talked quietly with Atar the Fish Man, Carter silently pondered over the strange premonitions he felt concerning the village. He looked up, now and then, to see Dan Chambers talking casually, charmingly, to Eileen.

Atar disappeared, finally, with Captain Sommers, evidently to give directions to his villagers in connection with the repair of the ship. The middle-aged Foswins went along with them, undoubtedly curious about their odd surroundings. Minutes lapsed into an hour, then two. Alson Dodge, growing uneasy, began a restless pacing. Dan Chambers, however, appeared unperturbed by the delay of Captain Sommers and the Foswins.

Manny Carter was looking pensively at the bright carboncade bulbs that provided an almost daylight illumination for their underwater surroundings. Then, as if on a swiftly given signal, their glare faded into nothingness, leaving everything in pitchy, inky blackness!

IT was all so sudden, one instant there had been light, and the next moment nothing but impenetrable darkness. Alson Dodge had been the first to cry out. Then Carter heard a startled scream of terror from Eileen. Dan Chambers' voice, speaking swiftly, reassuringly, came to Carter through his headphones.

"It's all right. Everything is all right. Don't get excited. Must have been a voltage transference in repairing the lifeship. Follow the illumination of my torch. I'll lead you out of here."

There was a flickering, then an undersea torch blazed in the corner where Dan Chambers stood last. It wasn't strong enough to provide any more light than was necessary to carry its own radiance. But Chambers was evidently waving it back and forth in a beckoning signal. Then it moved ghostily in the direction of the nearest door.

Carter was starting out after the torch when a hand seized his arm. Startled, he wrenched himself free, stepping back a pace. Then, before he could prevent it, a hand reached forth to spin the communication dial on his chest plate to "short reception." In the next moment he heard Chambers' voice, calm and collected.

"Take it easy, Manny, this is your chance for a break. It's all been staged for your benefit, kid. The torch that Dodge and his daughter are following is held by one of the Fish Men. Sommers and the Foswins are being held. The lifeship's been juiced up to give you a chance for escape. I'll be able to explain it all to them, once you're free."

Something made Manny Carter hesitate for the briefest of seconds. Could it have been his promise to Alson Dodge? Or was it—Then it was past, and Carter remembered the penalty that awaited him if he was taken back to Twenty, remembered the law of self-preservation over all else.

"Let's get going," he said sharply. "Lead the way, Dan."

They had covered several hundred feet through the tangled mass of seaweed that engulfed them knee-deep at the rear exit of the shell hut. Through the murky half-light surrounding them, Carter was now able to make out the outlines of the lifeship, evidently held in readiness for his escape. Suddenly he stopped, turning about to face Chambers.

"What about the girl?" he asked. "Will any harm come to her, or to the rest of the passengers?"

"Lord, no," Chambers answered. "Manny, be quiet and keep going or you'll never make it!"

Then they were pushing swiftly through the tangled undergrowth toward the lifeship once more. Then they were at the door to the craft. Several Fish Men stood in readiness, waiting to help Carter and Chambers slide the lifeship along the ocean floor to a position where it would be free for an immediate take-off.

Carter was at the door, now, and he turned to Chambers, placing his gauntleted hand on the other man's shoulder. "Thanks, Dan." Then he was inside, heard the door slam shut behind him. He took his place at the controls of the craft, and felt it moving out from the tangle of seaweed under the guidance of Chambers and the Fish Men. Carter saw that he was clear, with a straight stretch of ocean floor ahead of him. Through the thick-paned window at his right he could see Chambers' grotesquely space-suited figure moving out of range followed by the

naturally weird forms of the Fish Men. He reached for the throttle switch, his hand just a trifle hesitant.

A moment later the atomic motors sparked into crackling vibration and the lifeship was speeding down the open stretch of sea bed to safety.

"To safety," Manny muttered to himself perhaps a half hour later. "And what in the hell is it going to get me?" He had decided to remain undersea for the first part of his flight, pointing the nose of the lifeship in counter-direction to Twenty.

Now, all at once Manny Carter's hard young jaw went slack. A swift, sickening doubt, the culmination of all his previous vague suspicions, crashed in on his mind. The Fish Men at the village of Maeku—too late he realized what he remembered about them!

"No," Carter told himself savagely. "It can't be. I'm acting like a fool. It's just my crazy imagination, my rotten memory. It can't be!" But in spite of his words, in spite of the almost overpowering instinct for self-preservation, Carter threw the controls of the lifeship savagely about, heading back in the direction of Eileen Dodge, Dan Chambers, and the odd Fish Men of Maeku!

THE distance Manny Carter covered in flight seemed doubled, now that he was returning once more to Maeku. Doubled, no doubt, because of the fact that, in flight, Carter had worried only for himself. But now his frown of anxiety was caused by an unpleasant mental picture of Eileen Dodge, her father, Sommers, and the two unsuspecting Foswins. Carter knew what they must be facing.

"I've been a chump," Carter groaned aloud, "pray God I haven't been a chump too long!"

It was simple, so awfully simple that Carter cursed himself for not having suspected it at the start. The Venusian village of Maeku had been the first positive indication. Chambers spoke of having had pearl dealings with the villagers. There were no pearls within a thousand sea miles of Maeku. It was included in the blocked, unproductive squares that Carter had charted on his earth reports from Twenty.

Nor was that the only ominous part. Atar, leader of the Maeku villagers, had aroused Carter's suspicion. And now he knew why, for the huge Fish Man, identical to other Venusians in almost all respects, bore the outcast brand of Venus. On his back, where there should have been the black, sleek fin that was part of the anatomical structure of the ordinary Venusian, there was instead—the jagged, gray, menacing fin of the killer shark!

There was no doubt in Carter's mind whatsoever. Atar and his Maeku Fish Men were the Venusian renegades who had never been seen by Earthmen, but whose existence had often been testified to by brutal undersea pearl pirating. Manny remembered the venerable Prince Bramm speaking of the outcast tribes of Venus, of their desire to drive earth people from the face of the watery planet and seize control of the pearling trades. And Chambers, Dan Chambers, had been dealing with them!

"It was smooth," Manny muttered, smashing his knee sideways against the accelerator bar, "too damned smooth! Chambers had Bramm murdered and convinced me to take flight, so it would look absolutely certain that I was guilty.

He didn't want me to give myself up, not until he had had his chance to organize the renegades and gain control of Venus. Then he would have been in a perfect spot. Dictator of Venus. If Earth wanted any more pearls,⁽³⁾ they'd deal with Chambers and his pirates, or not at all!"

But what of the explosion aboard the ASTEROID? Manny's brow wrinkled in perplexity. Was it sheer accident? It was too well done, too expertly timed to have been a thing of chance. The Asteroid was the only space liner traveling between Venus and Earth. Its destruction meant that actual communication—other than radio, that is—between Earth and Venus would have been cut off for at least three weeks. And in three weeks Chambers would have time to sweep the planet clean of anyone standing in the way of his monstrous scheme!

Of course! It could only be Chambers! He was the only man who could have engineered any crooked work on Twenty. He was present when Bramm was killed—at least he was on the island. He was on the ship when the mysterious explosion—not so mysterious now!—had wrecked the liner. He was on the scene to direct the lifeboat to the right spot to be picked up by his own cohorts. And now, he was allowing Carter to escape, so that if anything did go wrong, Carter would be the goat. Clever, that man!

DAN CHAMBERS, pleasant, good-natured, calm Dan Chambers, the one man on Venus Carter thought to be trustworthy, loyal. Why, Chambers would have taken his—Manny Carter's face went deathly white at the last unspoken thought. Why not? Why wouldn't Chambers have figured on that as well? Eileen was attractive. Chambers had expressed his admiration of Carter's fiancée countless times—under the guise of friendly admiration. Suddenly Chambers' actions toward Eileen Dodge became obvious, horribly obvious, to Manny Carter!

Face taut, hands clenching the controls of the lifeship in a vise-like grip of desperation, Manny Carter breathed a silent supplication that he had not been too late in his discovery, that he hadn't played the fool too long and thus thrown away his one chance.

EVERY second seemed several eternities, as the tiny craft split its way through the murky green depths. And Carter, peering with anguished impatience at the indicator gauges on the control board in front of him, tried to move the little lifeship forward and faster, forward and faster, by sheer willpower.

Time became a dull, gray, agonizing blot in Carter's mind. It seemed to him as if he had been sitting there at the controls for endless centuries. The throttles on the motor ranges had been opened wide, and the atomic engines were crackling with a furious, hysterical, hell-driven whine. Tiny beads of sweat formed on Carter's bronzed forehead, trickling down the bridge of his nose, clouding his eyes with their salty sting. He brushed them away when he thought of it, but most of the time he gazed fearfully at the pressure gauges, praying huskily that the motors would not give out, would continue to crackle onward under the driving fear that his throttle hand imparted to them.

So intent was Carter, so agonized, unseeing was his concentration, that at first he didn't notice the blot of light in the distance. But then, when the glowing aura registered itself in his brain, growing larger and larger as the lifeship approached,

he reached swiftly to the throttle cut-off, and almost immediately the atomic motors gratefully subsided into a faint humming sputter. Maeku was just ahead!

As he eased the ship slowly forward, Manny Carter's mind went through a series of desperate calculations, seizing schemes and then discarding them, realizing odds and then ignoring them, for until this moment he hadn't given thought to a plan of action.

One thing seemed fairly certain. He couldn't barge right into the village, announcing his presence to everyone and anyone. It was also true that, should he leave the lifeship and proceed to Maeku on foot, he would need some sort of a weapon with which to defend himself. Carter eased the lifeship to a complete stop.

Climbing stiffly from the control seat, he walked to the rear of the tiny craft and began a thorough search for something which would serve as a weapon. "Or," Carter thought bitterly to himself, "a reasonable facsimile."

Moments were wasted as Carter tore through every possible cache for a weapon. Storage lockers revealed nothing, niches beneath the emergency caches were also empty. He was perspiring freely from the frantic search.

"To hell with it," he thought desperately, "there's no more time to waste." He was starting toward the airlock door and was throwing open its release, when the object caught his eye. It had been placed in an unnoticed holder above the door itself—an automatic type atomic arc torch, the kind used to cut through metal in emergencies that might occur aboard the craft. It was capable of working under water, or in any sort of pressure conditioning. Meant for a tool, it was not, however, too clumsy to be used as a weapon. As a matter of fact, the handle of the atomic torch was fashioned in much the same manner as the butt-end of a vibrator-pistol.

"It's something," Carter muttered grimly, "and it's going to have to work." Swiftly he tore the torch from its holder, pressed down on the air-lock door release, and stepped out into the undersea jungle.

He switched off the receptor button on the front of his space suit. There would be no need for communication. Besides, Chambers was probably still garbed in spacegear, and Carter didn't want to take the chance of having him—with his receptor adjusted to a general pick-up—hear his heavy breathing as he made his way through the undergrowth that formed a sort of jungle around the village.

IT was slow, treacherous going. And several times Carter was almost caught in the vampire-like grasp of carnivorous undersea plants that reached out toward him as he passed. He knew that, once they seized prey, the flesh-feeding fungi never released their death grasp, so his narrow escape on both occasions made his heart hammer with the excitement of the danger that surrounded him and the greater danger that lay ahead.

It was fully fifteen minutes before Carter emerged from the underwater jungle and onto the edge of the clearing that encircled the Fish Man village of Maeku. For several minutes, he hesitated on the fringe of the clearing, trying to adjust his eyes to the new brilliance of the lamps of Maeku. And those minutes almost cost him his life.

He didn't hear the slithery, silent approach of his adversary, so it must have been sheer instinct that made him wheel about. And just in time—for less than

four feet behind him was a shark-finned Fish Man of Maeku. In the evil-looking creature's hand-flap was clutched a two-foot long pearling dagger!

There was a sudden green swirl of bubbles as the Fish Man drove in toward Carter, knife raised high for the plunge. Carter forced himself to wait precious split-seconds, till he was positive the creature was in range of the atomic torch. He had to take the chance, for his weapon was as yet untried.

Then, as the wide, emotionless, dislike eyes seemed almost against his very own, Manny Carter, breathing a prayer to the Gods of Combat, squeezed hard on the trigger of his atomic torch.

The Fish Man never drove his gleaming blade downward, for with a horrible, half-human gurgle, he dropped the knife, clutching in searing agony at his middle. In the instant before the creature fell, Manny Carter saw screaming anguish written in those wide, watery eyes.

A swift inspection convinced Carter that he would have no more trouble from that particular enemy. Then he rose from where he'd crouched over his fallen foe, and looked quickly about. He feared, for a moment, that the battle might have betrayed his presence to others in the village. But as seconds fled, and there was no sign of that Carter thanked his maker that the Fish Man had uttered no cry save the almost inaudible death gurgle.

As an afterthought, and an additional precaution, Carter stooped once more over the body of the renegade Venusian, picking up the pearling knife from where it had fallen beside the body. Stuffing this in his belt, Carter wet his dry lips with his tongue, and returned his attention to the shell huts of the village. Eagerly, his eyes searched along the strangely deserted street in an effort to locate the shell palace that apparently housed Atar, Fish Man chief of Maeku.

A sickening premonition assailed Manny Carter at that moment. Supposing he were too late? Supposing the apparent emptiness of Maeku meant that Chambers had already started the renegade Fish Men on their terrible mission? Then where would he find Eileen, and Sommers, and the rest of the party? Had they already been killed?

Carter was moving forward when he half-stumbled. Looking swiftly down at his feet, he gasped in numb horror. The objects he had almost tripped over were the utterly lifeless bodies of the two Foswins!

FOR a timeless, breathless period, Manny Carter stood staring horrified at the bodies before him. The middle-aged couple had been brutally, savagely, torn open by knives! Obviously the slaying had been perpetrated with the aid of the gruesome pearling weapons carried on the persons of the Maeku Fish Men.

Carter had to force himself to take his eyes from the pair, had to summon every last atom of willpower to lift his gaze from the Foswins and look elsewhere to see if the rest of the passengers had been similarly treated, murdered in cold blood.

Moving his eyes slowly around the ocean floor, Carter looked for indications of other struggles. There was a sort of relief, although but momentary, in the discovery that there had been no other struggles but the one that resulted in the brutal murder of the unfortunate Foswins.

"So the others must be still alive." Carter felt himself seized by blind ungovernable rage; rage at Chambers, futile maddening rage at what his own

stupidity and trust had cost. Gone was his sense of caution, his wariness of danger. There was only one thought in Manny Carter's brain as he stepped out into the strangely silent streets of Maeku. He was going to find Eileen, and he was going to take primitive forceful vengeance on the deceptively good-natured Chambers.

Manny Carter had already killed, and he was ready, eager, to kill once more.

From shell hut to shell hut, Carter made his way along the street, opening doors, barging into empty, deserted dwelling places and rushing out again. At the end of the street stood the palace of Atar, leader of the renegade Fish Men.

In an instant, Carter was at the door.

Then he was inside the lofty building, heading for the place where Atar had left them just before Chambers enabled him to escape in the lifeship.

The carboncade lights burned brightly in every room of the building. Then Carter heard voices, and he stopped, breathlessly, to listen. The voices came from a door to his right, and one of them, he recognized with a heady flush of red rage, was Dan Chambers!

Swiftly, Manny Carter crossed the narrow hall, had his hand on the door. In the next moment he stepped into a small, brightly lighted room. Turning, astounded at his entrance, were Chambers, Alson Dodge, and Eileen!

Time hung motionless as Carter had the split-second panorama stamped into his mind. Dan Chambers seemed slightly dazed, and there was a jagged gash along the arm of his space suit. On the floor beside Eileen and her father were thick hemp coils, evidently used as bonds for the pair. Eileen's face was white, terrified, making the tumbled maze of her magnificent red locks seem even more brilliant beneath her space helmet.

Alson Dodge was looking at Carter with a bewilderment that was rapidly turning to rage.

Carter switched his receptor mechanism open with a quick automatic gesture. "Carter," he heard Alson Dodge grate. "By God, you have your unholy nerve!"

Then Chambers' voice broke in: "You renegade swine, Carter. Have you come back to finish your rotten work?"

Eileen merely stared at him with an unspoken look of mingled revulsion and bewilderment. Then Carter spoke his first words. "Damn you, Chambers! I don't know what in the hell this is all about. But I finally figured out your little scheme. And you're through, Chambers. Do you understand me? I'm going to kill you. Burn the guts out of your rotten body." His atomic torch pointed at Chambers, Carter advanced slowly across the room.

"Stop," the sudden almost hysterical command came from the lips of Eileen Dodge, and it was enough to make Carter halt momentarily. "Haven't you done enough?" the girl was saying. "Murder, revolution, greed, isn't there anything you'll stop at? Do you have to kill again? Have you gone stark, raving mad, Manny Carter?"

AT that instant it became terribly clear to Manny Carter that Chambers had once more played a trump hand. Chambers was making Eileen and her father think that he, too, was an innocent victim of Carter's ruthlessness.

That he, himself, had escaped the clutches of the Maeku Fish Men and was trying to save them.

He had undoubtedly told them that Carter's escape in the lifeship was the signal for a revolt which had been planned ever since the murder of Prince Bramm. That explained the deserted streets. The renegade Venusians were probably already on their way to surprise the peaceful Fish Men and unsuspecting earth colonists on Twenty. And Chambers, who had cleverly stayed behind, was playing his just-in-case hand. He was pinning it all on Manny Carter, and if it didn't succeed, Chambers would still emerge a hero—even in the eyes of Eileen!

Manny Carter realized, as the sweat beaded itself on his brow and trickled tauntingly down his face, that Chambers had him stopped cold. It would do no good to kill Chambers, for in the cunning brain behind that handsome face there was the only knowledge that would ever clear him. If he blasted Chambers into eternity he would have slight satisfaction, for into eternity would go, also, the evidence that could save Manny Carter and redeem him in the eyes of the world and Eileen Dodge. And Chambers, smirking sardonically in Manny's direction, was evidently quite aware of that.

"What do you intend to do with us, Carter?" Chambers was saying, and doing a beautiful bit of acting as he spoke.

The smirk on his face became slightly more evident, agonizingly irking to Carter.

"I should," said Carter levelly, "blow you to hell anyway. Just to see you die!"

Fear slid quickly across Dan Chambers' face, then vanished with Carter's next words. "But I won't. I'm going to make you talk. Somehow you're going to spit out the truth, whether you like it or not."

"You're raving, Carter. I'm more than positive that you've gone mad. Drop that atomic torch, man. Things are bad enough for you as it is, without making them any worse." Chambers was playing to a full house now, and taking devilish relish in it. He could be the heroic figure, arguing a murder-bent, raving killer out of his wildness. Oh, yes, very, very heroic. A performance that wouldn't hurt Eileen's opinion of him in the slightest. He was playing it to the hilt, even to moving over to where Carter was standing. But Carter, seeing his intention, raised the atomic torch immediately.

"Get back, Chambers. Get back, or I'll forget myself. Your plans wouldn't be worth a spark on Mars if I killed you!"

"Don't try it, Dan. He's gone mad, I tell you." The voice was Eileen's, and of all the sentences that had been spoken since Carter entered that room, hers was the one that hurt the most.

Suddenly Manny Carter knew where his only chance lay. It was a wild, almost impossible scheme. It would be the end of things if there were any remaining Fish Men of Maeku still in the village. But it was a chance that had to be taken. And the way Manny Carter felt, he'd gamble on a Fish Man surviving an air tank at that moment.

Manny gestured with his atomic torch. "Come on," he told the trio. "The lifeship is outside where I left it. We're going out there, all of us." Wordlessly, Eileen, her father, and Chambers moved as Carter directed them. They were in the hall when Chambers turned insolently to Carter. "You're just piling it up worse for yourself, Carter. I'll give you this last chance to hand over that torch."

"Shut up," Carter snapped in reply. "Shut up and keep moving."

THEN they were once more in the streets of Maeku. And Carter held his breath as he looked up and down the carboncade lighted avenues. There was still no sign of villagers. Undoubtedly they were on their way toward Twenty. The shark-finned creature Carter had slain on entering the village must have been a lone sentry left there by Chambers. Probably at this very moment Chambers was wondering what had happened to the Fish Man.

Silently, the odd-appearing group moved through the deserted streets of the undersea village. Carter noticed the quick glance that Chambers shot to either side as they drew closer to the fringe of the undergrowth surrounding Maeku. Undoubtedly he was trying to figure out what had happened to his Fish Man sentry.

"Looking for someone, Chambers?" Carter said softly. And from the sudden, involuntary jerk in the man's back, Carter knew he'd struck home with his question. Deliberately, he herded his captives forward in the same direction that he had taken to arrive at the shell palace. They were retracing his steps, foot by foot.

Then Eileen screamed, and Carter cursed himself for not having concealed the bodies of the Foswin couple. Her father quickly stepped in front of the gruesome sight, shielding her from further view of the brutal scene, but it was too late, and Eileen fainted in Alson Dodge's arms.

"You swine," Carter heard Alson Dodge mutter, "you bloodthirsty swine, Carter!" Sickly, Carter realized that another atrocity had been attributed to his hand. But he clenched his jaws and forced himself to grate:

"Move on, even if you have to carry the girl!"

Carter was deliberately moving closer to his captives, until he was walking a scant three feet behind them. Alson Dodge was slowing up because of his added burden in Eileen. When they passed the queerly spread, pain contorted body of the Fish Man, Carter, listening sharply, heard Chambers' involuntary swift intake of breath. But that was the only sign that his enemy gave.

Then the underbrush grew deeper, until a few moments later they were in the jungle, heading for the lifeship. Manny Carter tensed his muscles in anticipation of the plan he waited for, moving even a few more inches closer on the group in front of him.

Then his chance presented itself, and moving silently, as swiftly as his muscles allowed him, directly behind Dan Chambers, Carter shoved with all his strength, bowling the unsuspecting captive off the tiny trail on which they had been traveling.

CHAMBERS' first reaction was a grunt of amazement as he tried to regain his balance, then an oath as he realized he couldn't. His hoarse scream of utter terror came immediately with the knowledge that he was sprawling helplessly into the arms of a gigantic, flesh-feeding undersea pitcher plant of Venus!

Alson Dodge wheeled around as the cry from Chambers almost split his eardrums. He cried out in terror as he perceived what had happened. Then, dropping Eileen to the safety of the path, he started toward Chambers. But Manny

Carter had anticipated as much, and his atomic torch was leveled directly at Dodge's head before the man realized it.

"Stand back," commanded Carter. "Dammit, stand back, or you'll get caught too."

"You pushed him," cried the horrified little man. "You, you pushed him!"

The agonized cries of Chambers had subsided to a low moaning whimper of babbling terror, and Carter spoke again. "Right. I pushed him. And no one's going to aid him until he comes out with the truth."

He faced Chambers, now. "Do you hear that, Chambers? I have a knife. It's your only chance to free yourself from that plant. You'll either tell the truth, or be eaten alive. Take your choice!"

There was a sickening, plucking sound, as the tentacles of the flesh-eating plant started their ripping pawing of Chambers' space suit. But Chambers was still whimpering incoherently, and sweat broke out anew on Carter's forehead as he realized that he wouldn't have the guts to let anyone—even Chambers—die under such horrible circumstances. He prayed silently to his creator for the strength to hold out longer than Chambers. Carter forced his voice to the hardness of steel.

"Chambers," he spat. "It's now or never. Are you going to spill the truth?" Carter reached into his belt and drew forth the pearling knife he'd taken from the Fish Man. He forced himself to hold it tantalizingly near the flailing arms of the enmeshed Chambers.

"This knife can cut you free. But it won't, until you clear me."

But Carter had only to fight inherent decency. Chambers faced the madness of terror. And Chambers broke. "All right, for God's sake, I'll tell. I'll come clean, I tell you. Cut me free! For God's sake cut me free! I killed Prince Bramm. I framed you, started the revolt. I admit it, do you hear? I admit it. I admit it! Ohhhhh, God, cut me free!"

Carter turned to Alson Dodge for but an instant. "Enough?" he snapped. "Are you convinced?"

Alson Dodge, his face the color of death, could only nod and reply weakly. "Yes, that's enough. Now, free him. For the love of heaven, even he doesn't deserve to die like that!"

"CHIEF-ADMINISTRATOR of Venus," breathed a pretty redheaded girl on the balcony of the earth embassy of Twenty. "That's some promotion, even for a hero who staves off renegade revolts like people in stories."

"Yes," murmured Chief-Administrator Carter, taking a cue from the long forgotten balcony legend of Romeo and Juliet, "like a story, even to marrying the beautiful heroine and living happily ever after!"



(1) Twenty is the designation number of the Earth outpost on Venus and is one of 31 such posts scattered throughout the solar system for purposes of trade. Twenty is the only land area of the watery world.—Ed.

⁽²⁾ It is a well-known fact that sound waves carry much better under water than they do in air. Anyone who has pounded two stones together at the bottom of a swimming pool will readily agree that this is a fact. Sound waves, indeed, carry much further in atmosphere when that atmosphere is saturated with moisture, such as fog, or mist. Thus, when Chambers addressed the Venusian he was certain that the Fish Man would hear him. The sound waves carried through his helmet, into the water, and quite effectively as in atmosphere.—Ed.

⁽³⁾ Although on Earth synthetic pearls of great beauty are easily created, and natural pearls are abundant, Venusian pearls are vastly different. Properly, they are not pearls at all, although they are a formation built up by a small deep-sea fish. Rather than being opaque, as are Earth pearls, whose lustre is a surface quality, which breaks up the light into the delicate colors of mother-of-pearl, they are fully transparent and rather lack-lustre until warmed to body or near-body temperature. Then they burst into vari-colored flame that seems to flow through them like liquid fire, to ebb and flow even outside the surface of the pearl to a distance of as much as half-and-inch, as though the colors were escaping from the pearl itself. They possess a fascinating loveliness that is equalled by no other gem on either Earth or Venus. Even Martian rubies cannot match them for display purposes.—Ed.