

On Board the Martian Liner

by Miles Breuer, 1889-1947

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WHEN space travel is an accepted matter—who knows but that it might be soon—there must undoubtedly be much room for adventure—not only what we know would be incident to the danger of moving through space, or what would be due to the unknown factors that might be met with on landing. Because a man is going through space, it is not a foregone conclusion that he will become all that is noble. Neither will mysterious offenses be confined to the earth. But we can't send a detective on every ship. Dr. Breuer has a much better plan and amply proves the efficacy of his method in this thrilling short story. There is definite literary merit in it and scientific interest.

Chapter I

"YES sir!" said "Streak" Burgess, star reporter of the *Times*, into the telephone.

"And write me up a good feature article of the trip," the editor's voice barked into his ear. "Give me vivid, human stuff. The public is sick of these dry science articles. And remember that we're trying to arouse people to space-mindedness. Here's three good planets, with no end of business opportunities, and the people are asleep. Wake 'em up!"

Burgess hung up the receiver and whirled on his heel.

"Where do you have to go this time, Mr. Burgess?" inquired a youthful voice at his side.

"Oh, hello Chick!" said Burgess.

Burgess knew Chick merely as a boy of about seventeen who ran loose about the premises of the Club on his father's membership, and who in his youthful fashion idolized the popular and successful reporter. In spite of the discrepancy in their ages, the two had become chummy, although Burgess hardly remembered Chick's real name. Johnson, or some such common, everyday name, it was.

"I've got to start for Mars in four hours," Burgess explained. "You see, to the *Times* managing-editor, a reporter is not a person; he's merely a projectile."

"Oh, Mr. Burgess, please take me with you. Please do!" implored the boy. "I'll pay all your expenses in grand style. Please let me go with you. I'd give anything to go to Mars!"

"Well, at least you're space-minded anyway," the reporter laughed. "I'm sorry, kid," he said gravely. "I couldn't do it. It would get me into trouble with my paper. And the laws are mighty strict about anyone under twenty-one going up in a

space-liner, except under the care of a parent or guardian. But, I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

"I'm going to Mars some day!" the boy said desperately. "I'll show you!"

"I haven't the least doubt about it," Streak Burgess laughed. "I wish I could take you along. I'd do it just to get you away from that precious gang of young toughs you are running with. I've got to meet your father some day and warn him that if he don't get away from his money for a while and look after you, you'll—you'll get into bad company."

"You mean The Science Club?" Chick asked.

"Sweet name, I'd call it. Remember, Chick, I've seen a lot of the world. Your Science Club looks like a bunch of crooks to me, who are going to use you for a tool. Your ugly president with the birthmark on his cheek is all labeled for the electric chair."

"Oh, Pug? Pug isn't bad. You just ought to know him better," Chick protested with the faith of youth.

"Well, so long!" Streak Burgess went off with the speed that had earned him his nickname. Momentarily he forgot the adventure-hungry boy; and when the time came to leave the Club and betake himself to the spaceport, Chick was nowhere to be found.

THE departure of a space-liner is always a thrilling spectacle. To the casual onlooker, it looks like a mad, chaotic turmoil of people and vehicles about the base of the vast, silvery bulk that looms hugely into the sky. Immense trucks backing up with the last consignments of fast freight to the platform overhung by countless cranes reaching out of the blackness of the vessel's ports; a stream of lighter trucks carrying baggage; one aero-taxi after another depositing now a man, now a woman, now a group of several on the platform; the flashing of the brilliant uniforms of the space-fleet officers, the hoarse shouts of the crew and stevedores, the dense crowd outside the tailing, waiting for the moment when the bulging vessel would rise slowly and majestically upwards, and disappear as a brilliant speck in the sky. Who has not been thrilled again and again by the arrival or the departure of a space-ship?

The reporter was at the dock early, watching. His job as observer of human-nature on a Martian trip had begun. Already he was making notes in his mind: the timid-looking little lady who had just stepped out of an aero-taxi and hesitated a moment, clasping her hands and drawing a deep breath before plunging into the blackness of the ship's door, must be on her first trip. But the two swaggering men who walked nonchalantly in, puffing their cigars over some sort of an argument that was more important than the picturesqueness of the scene, must have made the trip more than once: obviously commercial traveling-men. All of a sudden he noted Pug's purple cheek on the platform. The presence of the big bully on the spot gave Burgess an odd sense of uneasiness. But, in a moment Pug was out of sight, and Burgess saw no more of him.

Burgess waited at the edge of the platform, watching the passengers go aboard, and planning to be the last one to go on himself. Just as the edge of the platform, which was really the lowered hatch of the ship's door, began to rise, he stepped up on it. As he did, a sudden commotion arose that nearly startled him into falling off.

An aero-taxi dashed down dangerously near the heads of the crowd, and skimmed within a hair's breadth of the rising platform. Out of it jumped and rolled and landslid a great, round hulk of a man, showing a red face now and then as he pursued his pell-mell course down the rapidly inclining platform and into the ship's door. Three traveling bags hurtled out of the aero-taxi into the ship's corridor.

Fat man, traveling-bags, and Burgess, all landed in a heap on the floor of the bottom-corridor, as the big hatch swung to. Burgess, still on his feet, backed away. Down the corridor to the right, was more commotion: shouts and clanking and the roar of motors. Some belated piece of freight was being forced into the other door, against the protests of the ship's crew, who had already begun to close the hatch.

When that was over, Burgess looked at the fat man who sat on the floor among his traveling-bags, a rueful picture of melancholy despair. He tried to rise, and his face twisted into an expression of pain because of some bruise.

"Porter!" he yelled sharply. "Porter!"

The great, ungainly figure of the porter stalked down the corridor from the left. Gently it helped the fat man to his feet and picked up his traveling-bags; and the two of them departed into the gloom of the ship.

The porter was a size No. 3 televox-robot. He stood six and a half feet high, and moved with a curious croaking sound. There is a rather odd thing about the televox-robots that the General Electric has never been able to explain: although their manufacture is rigidly standardized nevertheless each machine turns out to have its individual peculiarities, and differs from all the others. It seems to have a personality of its own. Machines of this type have a square head with eyes and ears, an opening for oil, and a little diaphragm with which they can answer simple questions of a routine nature.

"When you're through, come back and show me my room," Burgess called after the robot.

And indeed, in a few minutes the huge figure came stalking back, its queer croak re-echoing through the metal corridor. The porter led Burgess to the elevator, which carried them off to the upper deck. In contrast to the glaring confusion outside, it was cool and quiet inside the ship. As the elevator went up, they left behind the musty odor that came from the hold, passed the smell of oil and ozone that came from the engine-room level, and stepped out into the fresh air of the passengers' quarters, where the air-renovating apparatus had already been started. The mahogany enamel on the duralumin walls, the upholstered velvet furniture the soft green and brown carpets all looked quite pleasant and comfortable, and Burgess felt a little glow of anticipation of a few comfortable days ahead. Most people considered the trip a hardship and a nuisance, but his life was a lively one, and for him the trip would mean a rest.

THE passengers' quarters occupied the topmost level of the after portion of the ship. Ahead of them were the officers' quarters, and forward of these, the quarters of the crew, or the forecastle. Below was the vast hold for freight, except in the center of the ship, where the machinery was located. Burgess took a look about his stateroom and then hurried to the after-gallery. Always the passengers

congregate in the above place when the ship takes off; for it is entirely walled in with glass, and from it the Earth can be seen sinking downwards. Even the two traveling-men, who had already made a dozen trips, were looking eagerly down out of the window, for no one can ever become quite accustomed to that amazing spectacle. The Earth at first seems like a huge *concave* bowl, with a high rim all around, and a deep cavity below. The rim sinks lower and lower, and all of a sudden by some magic, it has become small and *convex*. Even after one has seen that change a dozen times, one never gets over the wonder of it.

There were twelve people gathered in the after-gallery: twelve people who were daring to venture across sixty million miles of space; who were to live together for six days almost as closely as a family. Five of them were women. The only one absent was the poor old, fat man who had boarded so precipitately. The sounds of the sealing of the ports had ceased, the hammering, the sizzling of air, the shouts, the grating of huge screw-levers. Then came the toot of the hoarse whistle and the roar of the reaction-motors.

In a moment the two traveling-men had turned away and were deep in argument about the cost of some commodity. They were always arguing about prices. A newly-married couple, who were making a honeymoon out of the trip, were whispering excitedly to each other. The little lady, whom Burgess had already observed coming aboard, had her face set hard; the emotion of the moment was almost too much for her. She was a Miss Waterbury, a Pittsburgh school-teacher who had been saving her pennies for years in order to make the trip to Mars. Possibly her expression was due partly to the sickening sensation which was felt for a few moments by all, as one feels a sinking when an elevator starts.

One by one the passengers trickled away from the after-gallery, down the corridor, into their staterooms or into the drawing-room at its opposite end. Burgess' stateroom was at the middle of the corridor and just opposite that of the fat man, whom he could see sitting glumly in the corner as he went into his own room. Next to him he could hear an elderly couple fussing vehemently; later he became acquainted with them as Colonel Thayer of the Air Guard, and his wife, en route to the Colonel's new post on Mars.

AT the dinner-table, Burgess got a good look at all the passengers. Always there was in his mind the question: Why are these people taking this trip? What motives prompt them to risk their lives to get to Mars? One by one he checked them, and all of them seemed to be quite in place, except the poor, nervous, timid old fat man. Next to Burgess sat Kaufman, a keen, able-looking man, who was on his way to look into some business openings, which on that new-old world, with its degenerate inhabitants and its wealth of heavy-metal ores, looked wonderfully promising. Across from him sat the fat man, anxious, worried, thoroughly miserable. Next to him were a wealthy young society couple, utterly bored and *blasé*, hoping to find new thrills in a new world, because everything on Earth was tame to them. Then there was Kaufman's secretary, a very pretty young woman who was just now in the thrills of delight because the young engineer, Harry Flynn, going out penniless to seek his fortune on Mars, had turned out to be an old home-town acquaintance of hers.

One could understand why these people were on the trip. But the red-faced fat man was the soft, comfortable type of person, who groans when he has to get up out of his chair. He looked timid. He looked as though he ought to be by the fireside in bathrobe and slippers. What did he want on the long, hard, dangerous trip to Mars?

Chapter II

Mystery on Board.

AFTER dinner, Burgess managed to stroll down the corridor, just behind the fat man, in the hopes of getting better acquainted with him. Several of the passengers went out on the after-gallery to contemplate the marvelous wealth of brilliant stars in their inky black setting; but the fat man headed for his room. As he stepped into his door, Burgess touched him on the shoulder, intending to start a friendly conversation. The fat man gave a violent start and whirled about; and Burgess found himself looking into the muzzle of a big forty-five automatic pistol.

The fat man was white and trembling; one could see that he was not used to handling a pistol. But that made it all the more dangerous for Burgess, at whom the thing was pointed. With a quick movement, Burgess ducked to the ground and knocked the pistol out of the man's hand. It fell with a crash to the floor. Hoping that no one else had heard it, Burgess swept it up, pushed himself into the stateroom, and closed the door. He sat down with the gun on his knees. The old man was backed into a corner facing him, pale as a sheet, and panting desperately. Burgess was tremendously sorry for him.

"Now what's the trouble?" Burgess asked kindly. "I certainly wouldn't do you any harm."

"Who are you?" the old man panted.

Burgess flipped his coat lapel and showed his badge.

"I am a *Times* reporter. Tell me what you are afraid of. These little affairs are right in my line, and perhaps I can help you out."

The fat man studied Burgess for some minutes. Finally, without a word, he reached into his pocket and handed out a letter for Burgess to read. It was written in white ink on a brilliant scarlet paper:

Most of the recipients of the red letter have been wise enough to hand over the money promptly. Three were foolish and refused. They were Lowell, Hirsch, and Carlotti. Do you remember what happened to them? No one can save you from the same fate unless you fork over at once.

I need another million dollars for my project. You can spare it as easily as the ordinary man can spare a quarter. Have it ready in twenty-four hours in liquid securities or banknotes. A man will call for it at your home. He does not know me nor where I stay; therefore, if you have him followed, the money will be lost, and I shall be compelled to use you as an example to the next man upon whom I call for help.

If I do not get the money, there is no way in which you can escape me, no place where you will be safe. I'll get you, no matter what precautions you take.

"I got it early this morning. Do you remember Lowell, Hirsch, and Carlotti?" the fat man asked.

The reporter nodded.

"Three hideous murders of wealthy men within the past year, and unsolved to date," he mused. "The letter seems to have been written by a man who is intelligent, but somewhat insane. That's the most dangerous kind. Have any idea who it might be?"

The fat man shook his head.

"Now, I'm worried because of the impulse which made me rush to this ship as soon as I got the letter. I thought this the best way to escape. But, after I had thought it over, I realized that to anyone else, it would obviously be the first thing I would do. I'm afraid I bungled."

"Why should flight on a space-liner be so obvious?" the reporter asked.

"Well, you see, I'm Johnson, the president of the company that owns this line, *The Mars, Ganymede, and Callisto Transportation Company*. I was so scared by the letter that I did a very simple-minded thing to come here."

There was a rap on the door, at which Mr. Johnson started violently. It turned out to be several sailors, making the routine search of the ship for stowaways. Behind them came the Captain of the ship, and peered into the room.

"I got your letter of introduction," he said gruffly to Burgess. Then he spied Mr. Johnson.

"Oh, how do you do, sir," he said, all meekness and courtesy. "I've got to be careful," he explained to the President, who was virtually the owner of the vessel. "There has been too much of this stowaway stuff. There's danger in it, and the law has recently made it a capital offense. A few weeks ago, on the *ARISTOTLE*, a little overcrowded ship twenty-one days on the way to Ganymede, a stowaway used up more air than had been figured on; this in turn resulted in a deeper breathing on the part of the passengers, which exhausted the oxygen supply prematurely, and the ship arrived in port with half a dozen passengers unconscious from asphyxia. If I ever find one of those rats on my ship, I'll—"

He strode down the hallway, finishing the threat into his whiskers.

"Unless a stowaway is discovered, your enemy, if he is on board, must be one of the passengers," Burgess said to Mr. Johnson. "Could that be possible?"

"I don't know any of them. And he might be anybody." Mr. Johnson looked very much depressed. "Well, I'll stay here with you and keep an eye open. You're not afraid that I might be the man who is trying to kill you?"

"I don't think so." Mr. Johnson studied the reporter. "There is your badge, and Captain Scott knew you. I shall be glad to have you stay."

"Or," suggested Burgess, "perhaps it would be better yet for both of us to move into my stateroom."

Mr. Johnson nodded in acquiescence, and started to push the button to summon the porter. Burgess stayed his hand.

"I'll carry your things. The fewer the people that know about this move, the better."

FOR eight hours of the twenty-four, the lights were turned down, and "night" prevailed on the ship. During the "evening" the wild young society couple were playing bridge with the two traveling-men. Mrs. de Palogni's voice grated unpleasantly on Burgess' ears; but the sight of the honeymoon couple close together on the after-gallery again served to redeem his attitude toward his fellow-men. He could imagine the thrills that the two young people got out of being all alone out in space, with nothing but stars in all directions, and the brilliant disk of the Earth below. In another corner, Miss Waterbury and Cecilie May, Kaufman's pretty secretary, already well acquainted, were lost in wonder at the Heavens beneath them. The porter came croaking down the corridor. With a whispered "good-night," Burgess put Mr. Johnson into the upper berth and took the lower one himself, for strategic reasons.

Sometime in the night, Burgess woke up with a start. He glanced out of the port at the brilliant stars and the dense black sky, and felt his heart pounding in some unconscious alarm. He lay still and listened. There was a faint clicking sound, which came, was silent, and came again. It issued from the door on the opposite side of the corridor.

Burgess got silently out of bed, taking his pistol in one hand. Then, suddenly he threw open the door of the stateroom. A dark figure was just opening the door of the stateroom opposite, the one that had been Mr. Johnson's. It whirled and ran up the corridor. In an instant Burgess had snapped on the corridor light and was speeding in pursuit. The dark figure ran ahead and into the drawing-room, with Burgess in pursuit. The drawing-room was dark; Burgess went in rather cautiously, pistol in hand. He found the switch and snapped on the light. There was no one in the room. With amazed glances he searched the room, but no one was there. He hurried to the door opposite the one by which he had entered, but found it locked. It was always kept locked, for it led to the officers' quarters. It could not have been unlocked and locked again during the second or two that it had taken him to turn on the light.

Burgess stared blankly around. The fugitive had disappeared!

Chapter III

The Stowaway.

DOWN the corridor, doors were opening and sleepy heads were poking out. The porter stalked up, the whirring of his gears audible in the night's quietude.

"Do you want anything?" he asked in soft, courteous tones.

"No," said Burgess. "I couldn't sleep, and came to find something to read." He had decided to say nothing for the present. Then he was assailed by a foolish little feeling: the porter could understand his "no" but nothing of the rest of the explanation. It was difficult to keep in mind that these things were only machines; one felt like treating them as conscious human beings.

The passengers retired sleepily to their respective rooms, and the porter returned to his niche; his faint croaking stopped and the night was quiet again. The hum of the ship's reaction-motors was barely audible, for once the ship got under way, very little power was needed to maintain velocity.

Burgess was tremendously puzzled. The crew's thorough search had found no stowaway. It must be one of the passengers. Which one could it be?

He studied them all over at the breakfast table. They were all present except Mr. Johnson and Colonel Thayer's wife, both of whom were a little ill with space-sickness. Though the artificial gravity-fields had pretty well overcome space-sickness, some people were still susceptible to it. After breakfast he talked the matter over with Mr. Johnson, who lay in his berth, pale and nauseated.

"If anyone wants to kill me, why don't they do it now?" he asked with grim humor at his illness.

"Here they are." Burgess checked over the passenger list. "Kaufman is a big business man; the Colonel is a soldier; Cecilie May, Miss Waterbury, and Mrs. Thayer can be left out; they are not criminals, especially not murderers. The de Palognis are too rattle-brained; they couldn't even think up such a scheme. That leaves the two traveling men and Flynn, the young engineer, and they're impossible. It *can't* be any of the passengers."

Mr. Johnson called for the Captain, who appeared in the stateroom shortly. The matter was explained, but the Captain was inclined to laugh at it.

"Impossible!" he snorted. "We went over this ship with a fine-toothed comb last night."

"Could it have been one of the crew?" Burgess asked.

"Say!" exclaimed the Captain. "Those fellows have to work. If one of them left his post for ten seconds, he'd be missed."

It was decided to take young Flynn into their confidence. He looked to be a very honest and earnest chap with just the alert type of mind that was needed to help solve such a riddle. The plan was that either Burgess or Flynn would be constantly on guard.

BY noon Mr. Johnson felt better and was up and around. In the afternoon the Captain sent word that they were passing quite near a large asteroid, and all the passengers were gathered in the after-gallery. Most of the passengers gazed in puzzled silence at the bleak and jagged surface of the huge, rocky fragment outside; only the de Palognis were trying to crack a few cheap jokes about it, comparing it to a French pleasure resort, where they had tried to amuse themselves last summer. Mr. Johnson left the group early and went back to lie down. Suddenly his cries resounded from the corridor:

"Porter! Porter! Help! Help!"

"Buzz! buzz! buzz!" came the porter's busy-signal. It meant that he was engaged on some other job and could not come at once.

Flynn and Burgess were in the corridor in a couple of leaps. There they saw Mr. Johnson struggling and panting—alone. He was disheveled and breathless, and as they appeared, sank slowly to the floor.

"What is it? What's the matter?" Burgess demanded.

"Something—somebody grabbed me by the throat," Mr. Johnson gasped. "But I couldn't see anything."

Burgess wondered if Mr. Johnson's illness and terror had begun to derange his mind. The porter came up and helped them carry the old man to his berth. No, the old fellow was, in spite of his nervous timidity, too shrewd and level-headed to go off that way. Something must really have happened. The passengers, remembering the scare during the night, gathered in the drawing-room and questioned each other.

IN a couple of hours, Mr. Johnson felt better and was trying to be cheerful. Burgess, who had been at his side all of the time, noting that the old man was dozing, decided to let him sleep. He called the porter.

"Watch him while I walk about a little," he directed. "If he wants anything, call me."

As he came into the drawing-room, Burgess was assailed by a hundred questions. Mr. Johnson's identity had become known to the passengers; and this occurrence, combined with that of the "night" before, had roused their curiosity. He was still puzzling, trying to decide how much to tell them, when a pistol shot crashed out, down the corridor. Everybody turned in that direction, to see the tall form of the porter sway in Mr. Johnson's door, topple backwards, and fall with a great crash to the floor. There he lay still.

"Murder!"

"It's the porter, poor fellow!"

"Someone has shot the porter!"

Cecilie May screamed, and Flynn was soothing her in a wonderfully tender tone of voice, though everyone was too tense to notice it.

"It's only a machine," Flynn said to her. She shrank toward him, also quite unconscious of her action, and laughed nervously. Then Mr. Johnson appeared at the door of his stateroom with a smoking pistol in his hand, looking very sheepish. The Captain came in through the dining-room, disgust showing very plainly in his expression.

"Too bad," Mr. Johnson said to the Captain "I was half asleep and saw the robot bending over me and it rattled me. My nerves have been pretty shaky."

The Captain growled something and called two sailors to drag the porter away. Later on he announced that the apparatus could be repaired, but that it might take days, for the bullet had cut over a thousand wires.

"In the meanwhile," the Captain said, "you'll have to wait on yourselves. I can't spare a man from the crew, and we haven't any extra robots."

The Colonel groaned and the two traveling-men looked worried. Flynn grinned hugely at their concern. The porter did nothing but foolish, trivial little tasks, which everyone could have done just as well for himself. But most of them felt helpless. There was much running to and fro. Burgess heard the Colonel and his wife fussing in the neighboring stateroom about the proper way to make up a bed, and Kaufman walked ostentatiously down the corridor fetching a pitcher of water.

"Be sure and let me know if you need anything," Flynn said to Cecilie May.

FLYNN sat up with Mr. Johnson until midnight, and was then relieved by Burgess.

"Why is it that we can't radio from the ship to the Earth?" Burgess asked the engineer; "this would be a cracking good story for the *Times*."

"There is a layer of charged particles about sixty miles above the Earth's surface, and no radio wave has yet been sent through it. It would be convenient if we could keep up communication with the home folks, all right."

Burgess sat and studied about the mystery, while up and down the corridor sounded the snores of the passengers through the dim illumination. There was something creepy about a night way off in space, millions of miles from anywhere. Something creaked down the corridor, and there was a swish and a rustle.

"Sh-h!" came a whisper from the darkness. "Mr. Burgess!"

Burgess leaped to his feet, pistol in hand.

"Don't shoot," came the whisper. "It's me."

Burgess snapped on the light and stood there

"Chick!" he gasped. "You here?"

The vicious threats of the Captain about stowaways flashed through his mind as he stood there in horror and looked at the grinning boy.

"How did you get here? How did you elude the search?" he demanded.

Chick laughed proudly at his own cleverness. "Remember the box that came aboard at the last moment? I was in that."

"Well, hurry back there and hide. The Captain is fierce on stowaways and he'll murder you if he finds you. I'll bring you food and water."

"I've got all the food and water I want, but I'm tired of being shut up. I want to see what space-traveling is like."

Burgess' jaw suddenly fell. Down the corridor came the Captain, on his nightly rounds about the ship. Burgess felt a cold perspiration break out all over him as the Captain peered into Chick's face.

"Aha! the prowler!" exclaimed the Captain.

He grabbed Chick's collar and blew a whistle. Two husky sailors ran up and seized the boy roughly.

"What are you going to do with him?" inquired Burgess in consternation.

"Throw him out of the air-valve with the garbage," growled the Captain. "I've got enough stowaways. Besides—prowling around and causing a lot of trouble..."

Chapter IV

The Disappearing Killer.

SEVERAL people in pajamas and bathrobes arrived on the scene. Mrs. de Palogni was gurgling with real excitement. For once her jaded senses were getting a real thrill out of something.

"Poor kid!" said Flynn, as the sailors gave Chick a shake that made his teeth rattle.

The grunts of Mr. Johnson could be heard coming from within the stateroom, as he got off his berth and came to the door.

"What's up?" he groaned, sticking his head out of the door.

Suddenly his eyes widened, as he saw the boy in the clutches of the two sailors. He straightened up and became all at once very severe. "Charles!" he said sternly.

"How in the world did you get here?"

"Father!" exclaimed the boy, going all to pieces in a hysterical laugh. "Father! Are you on this ship? Well, don't let them kill me."

"Well, I should say I won't," the old man said, a sudden tenderness coming into his voice. He studied the situation for a few minutes while everyone else stood silent. The Captain looked from father to son. Mr. Johnson's next words showed, however, how a meek and nervous man like himself could have succeeded in building up a gigantic corporation like the *Mars, Ganymede, and Callisto Transportation Company*.

He could think quickly and to the point.

"We need a porter," said Mr. Johnson. "Charles wants a ride. All right. Charles, you're the porter, and can work for your ride, even if you are the President's son."

There was a burst of cheering from the passengers at the clever way in which a difficult situation had been solved.

"Thanks, dad!" said Chick simply.

"But—" gasped Burgess. "What about the red letter? And the attempts on your life?"

"Well, it wasn't Charles," Mr. Johnson said with a gentle finality in his voice. He was proud of his son, but did not believe in spoiling him.

And the next morning Chick was making up beds and shining shoes. Most of the passengers protested against accepting these services from him, but the boy was a good sport, and did everything that his job required of him. During his spare time he spent every moment watching the ship's mechanics repairing the mechanism of the televox-robot. By evening Chick and Flynn were firm friends; they were talking about reaction-motors, meteorite deflectors, three-dimensional sextants, and such things with a fondness that only the two of them felt. Also, Chick's alert eye promptly noted Flynn's partiality toward Cecilie May, and that young lady was the recipient of real service from the new porter. The son of a millionaire seemed happy to lift suitcases, carry pitchers of water, and brush coats. And whenever he saw Burgess, he grinned at him triumphantly, as if to say, "I told you so!"

THAT evening was a pleasanter one for the little group of passengers. Everyone's space-sickness was over, and the tension of the past twenty-four hours was relaxed. A jolly party gathered in the drawing-room. Games of cards, ping-pong, and backgammon went gaily forward. Finally, the furniture was cleared away, a phonograph requisitioned, and a dance was started. The ladies, being in the minority, were very much in demand. Even the cranky Mrs. Thayer, the Colonel's wife, smiled and flushed as one of the traveling men gallantly offered her his arm and whirled her about in the dizzy steps of the new *whizzarro*, while the school teacher, floating in the arms of Burgess, was positively radiant. Mrs. de Palogni was trying to split up the bridal couple and get a dance with the young

husband, but he was sublimely unconscious of her existence. However, he did give the Captain a dance with his bride. Likewise, Cecilie May gave her first courtesy dance to Kaufman, her employer, who then went back to his chair and watched the group abstractedly, undoubtedly figuring the prices of pitchblende and zirconite in his mind. Chick bustled about with a tray and glasses, and even Mr. Johnson seemed to have forgotten his nervousness for the time being, and beamed happily on the group as though it were his own family enjoying a good time. However, he slipped away early from the dance, looking rather tired, and went to his stateroom.

Burgess also withdrew from the activities and stood in the corridor, watching the crowd. The little by-plays of human nature appealed to him. However, before many minutes were up, he had a feeling that somehow, somewhere, all was not well. He did not believe in premonitions, realizing that they were always explainable on the ground of some sensory stimulus that had set the subconscious mind alert, some faint sight or sound not registered in the consciousness. He therefore kept his eyes steadily on Mr. Johnson's door; in fact, he had up to the time that he noticed the queer unrest, maintained an uninterrupted watch without thinking, ever since Mr. Johnson had stepped into his room. He had seen nothing.

Now there was some sort of a vague thumping. It seemed that he had already been hearing it for some minutes in the back of his mind. Now the thumping was growing weaker, and gradually it stopped. In sudden alarm he leaped down the corridor in big strides. A man dashed out of the door of Mr. Johnson's stateroom, and ran swiftly down the corridor in the opposite direction, toward the dining-room. "Now we've got him," thought Burgess. "He can't get away this time."

With a shout, the reporter dashed after the fleeing figure. In the dining-room he stopped to snap on the lights. The room was empty. He hurried on through into the after-gallery. That also was empty. It contained no furniture, and the bright lights illuminated every nook and cranny of it. There was no way out of the two rooms except the corridor by which he had come in. What had become of the man? There was a commotion behind Burgess in the corridor, exclamations and babbling of voices. He hurried back to find a crowd about Mr. Johnson's door. As he ran up, the people stepped aside and opened up a path for him to get through. Inside the stateroom Mr. Johnson lay on the bed motionless, his face a dark purple. He was not breathing. On his throat were five black marks.

"Strangled!" exclaimed somebody in the crowd. Burgess tore open Mr. Johnson's shirt, and detected a faint flutter of the heart. The next moment the Captain was on the scene and in charge. Cold packs were put about the throat and artificial respiration instituted. Soon their strenuous and persistent efforts were rewarded by a flutter of the eyelids, several gasps, and finally a groan. Mr. Johnson turned over and sat up, choking and gasping, trying to talk.

"Hagan," Burgess could distinguish, though it meant nothing to him. "Wanted the money again," came in a whisper. "I hit him but he was too much for me."

A lump rose in Burgess' throat. The fat, flabby, nervous old President, on the inside, was a good sport.

The reporter counted the crowd. There were ten people. The Colonel's wife was in the drawing-room, tanning herself. The human face hides emotions, rather than

displays them. Not the least suggestion of a clue could he find in the countenances of any of them. Could he but see behind the masks of astonishment and horror, would it be possible to guess which one had done it? Yet he had to admit that the probability of any of these people having done the cowardly deed was exceedingly remote. Everyone of them had been behind him, absorbed in the dance at the time when he had heard the thumping, which must have been the struggles of Mr. Johnson while he was being throttled.

The Captain came in and picked up Mr. Johnson's pistol, which lay on the floor beside the berth. Burgess was telling him the story:

"None of these passengers could have gotten past me and I was between them and Mr. Johnson's room. The time I spent in the dining-room and after-gallery was only a few seconds, certainly not long enough to give anyone a chance to choke a man. I chased the fellow into the dining-room, and when I got there, he wasn't there."

"There's something fishy about this," the Captain growled into his beard.

Burgess was determined to solve the puzzle, and made up his mind to work as he had never worked before. "*Times reporter unravels interplanetary mystery*" he could see the headlines say in his mind's eye.

"You're sure it couldn't be one of the crew?" Burgess asked the Captain.

The Captain laughed.

"That shows how little you know about discipline on an interplanetary liner. I can account for the presence of every man during every minute of the time. But, we're going to go over this ship again. One man got by our first search; there must be another. And from now on, an armed guard stands by Mr. Johnson's door, day and night."

THE man with a rifle was already in his place. The search of the ship began at once. The searchers began in the passenger section, going through trunks, looking into corners, searching the most impossible places, far too small for a man to hide in. They proceeded systematically, beginning at the drawing-room end. The rest of the night they could be heard down below, shifting the cargo, hammering on boxes and cases. The noises began at the forward end and gradually moved aft. In the morning the Captain showed up in the dining-room, tired and cross.

"How is Mr. Johnson?" he asked.

"His condition is good;" replied Burgess, "except for his pain and discomfort. He will get over it perfectly."

"If there had been anything on board bigger than a rabbit, we would have dug it out last night," the Captain said. "We opened every case of freight that weighs over seventy-five pounds, unscrewed every hatch, threw light in every corner. It beats me."

The Captain clicked his jaw shut and looked fierce. Burgess grinned.

"You think that's a puzzle?" he said. "Well, what about this one? I chased a man down the corridor into the dining-room. He was not in the dining-room when I got there. He was not in the after-gallery. He did not pass me.

"What became of him?"

"Is there any way of getting out of the dining-room or after-gallery except by the way I came in?"

The Captain stared at him.

"No. The only communications with the rest of the ship are the food service tubes which are four inches in diameter, and a hatch that it would take twenty minutes and a lot of noise to unscrew."

The Captain stopped and thought a moment.

"How did the man get out?"

Burgess was puzzled. By the strongest kind of logic, there was a man hidden on board, and this logic was confirmed by material proof on poor Mr. Johnson's person. Yet this man had disappeared before Burgess' eyes, and a thorough, systematic search of the ship had proved that he was not on board.

Chapter V

Technical Assistance.

THE reporter took his turn at nursing the President, while the guard stood at the door with his rifle. Noon lunch and the dinner meal in the evening were gloomy, nervous occasions. Everyone started at the least noise. Kaufman's brows were drawn and dark. Only the de Palognis seemed to be getting a thrill out of the situation, whereas the honeymoon couple were quite impervious to it. The young engineer carried Cecilie May's service plate at both meals, and the two ate together, one talking enthusiastically, the other listening raptly. The girl seemed to feel safer near the young man, and was afraid to be about the ship except in his presence.

Burgess was intensely worried. The villain had almost gotten away with his nefarious scheme this time. There was still time enough before they reached Mars for many things to happen, he strolled to the after-gallery, and found himself in a secluded corner where he could think undisturbed; he stood there and looked out upon the deeps full of countless stars, and tried to marshal his ideas about the mystery. He was roused from the depths of his reverie by low voices behind him. He was conscious of having heard them for some time without having paid much attention. A sudden embarrassment made him keep silent. They did not know he had overheard, and he did not want to break up the occasion. If they never found out he was there, it would be just as well.

"I love you," said a man very softly. It was Flynn.

"I love you, too," Cecilie May whispered timidly.

"I'm glad I found you."

"Isn't it wonderful?"

There was a long period of silence.

"I'm terribly sorry," the man's voice said, "that it will be so long before we can get married. I haven't a cent, and I don't even know what I'm going to do when I get to Mars. I'm afraid—that a professional man's start is a slow and difficult one."

Cecilie May cheered him with soft words and kisses.

RIGHT there was where Burgess got the idea that eventually led to the solution of the mystery. It developed slowly while he was having to keep as quiet as a mouse in order not to interrupt the lovers. Eventually the newly engaged couple wandered away, and Burgess hurried back to spend a little time at Mr. Johnson's bedside.

The old man could whisper a little, but swallowing was still terribly painful. The guard stood motionless at the door. After he thought he had allowed plenty of time, Burgess went out to look for the young engineer, and found him getting ready for bed.

"Would you like to help solve this mystery?" Burgess asked him.

"Anything I can do—" Flynn said. "I'm not much on mysteries."

"In two days we reach Mars," Burgess said. "Here, in close quarters it is possible to watch Mr. Johnson carefully. When he gets to Mars the killer will have free rein, and the old man will be in greater danger. That's still a pretty wild country, you know. We've got to catch him before we land."

"I don't see how you're going to," the young engineer said. "The ship's been searched—"

"Well, I got an idea last night. I was thinking about you and about your work. You're an engineer?"

Flynn nodded.

"You know all about scientific things?"

Flynn laughed.

"I wish I did," he said.

"Well, this mystery needs science to solve it."

"I'd be mighty proud if I could help any."

They went into Burgess' stateroom and sat and talked and figured with pencils on paper; they leaned back and planned. Finally Flynn said:

"That ought to work. Now to see the Captain. But it will take me several hours of work in the ship's shop to get things ready."

They put their plan before the Captain.

"It's all right with me, as long as you don't interfere with the guard," the Captain said, but looked incredulous.

"We only want to move the guard ten feet up the corridor. He can stay within plain sight of the door, where he can reach it in one second; and we shall both keep our eyes on the door."

The Captain looked dubiously from one to the other.

"Burgess has a good reputation. Flynn looks as though he knew his stuff." This to himself—then aloud: "Go ahead. But I'll be around, too, and keep an eye on it."

As they came back into the corridor, they found Chick standing horrified with a piece of paper in his hand. The guard looked worried and frightened, and the Colonel was sputtering incoherently. It was a note that had been found on the floor of the sick man's room. Yet the guard insisted that he had not taken his eyes off his charge for an instant; and he was a tried and trusted man.

"You cannot escape me," the note read. "In spite of your precautions, I'm going to get you. Fork over the million or you won't reach Mars alive. A check will do; leave payee line blank, and lay it on the doorsill."

Burgess and Flynn nodded to each other and smiled.

"That confirms our idea," Burgess said to the Captain. "Do not blame the guard; I'm sure he is right in what he says. But there is no need to pay any attention to the note."

FLYNN was busy all day in the ship's shop. But the next morning the passengers saw Flynn and Burgess playing catch with an indoor baseball down the length of the corridor. A crash and the tinkling of glass announced an accident: the smashing of the light-bulb over the middle of the corridor. Then Flynn attempted to replace the bulb; he tried several bulbs from different parts of the ship, but none of them would work. Finally he gave it up and left a dark bulb in the socket. "It doesn't matter," he said. "There is plenty of light from the bulbs at the ends of the corridor."

However, some of the passengers were worried, for the dark bulb was right over Mr. Johnson's door, leaving it the darkest portion of the corridor. Chick was dispatched into the lower regions of the ship with a suitcase, and returned dragging it as though it were immensely heavy. Burgess and Flynn spent the whole afternoon in Burgess' room. Everyone was restless, and wandered from one thing to another, not knowing what to do. After dinner Burgess appeared among them, leading one of the traveling men by the arm.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I have just learned that Mr. Banks here knows a lot of astonishing tricks with cards. You are all in need of diversion at this time. Let's get everybody together."

They gathered in the drawing-room, and the traveling man stood up in front of them with a deck of cards in his hand. He pulled his coat-sleeves up on his forearm, and spread his cards fanwise.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," he began. "Will one of the ladies please step forward. I shall turn the cards face down, so that I cannot see them. Now, Miss Waterbury, you draw out a card. Be careful not to let me see it, but remember it well. Now put it back. Do you all remember what the card was—"

He pattered on, and Burgess slipped out of the room as soon as Banks had the attention of all of them. In his stateroom he and Flynn bent over a strange conglomeration of apparatus. On one end was a great quartz lens, borrowed from the ship's bolometer. The other end looked like the receiving portion of a television apparatus, with a hood drawn over the screen.

"Is everybody busy in there?" Flynn asked.

"He's got 'em going," Burgess smiled.

"Then give the guard his signal."

The guard pretended to become interested in the card tricks, and gradually edged his way up the corridor, away from Mr. Johnson's door.

"I don't see the Captain," said Burgess, "but I'll bet he's somewhere on the job."

"Take a look into it," Flynn said. "I've hooded the screen because the light from it on our faces would reveal our presence in here. This way it is absolutely dark."

Burgess looked into the hood, at the screen.

"What about it?" he asked. "I see the corridor. It looks just the same as per naked eye."

"Look again," Flynn said, keeping his voice low. "Without the instrument the corridor right here is rather gloomy because the middle bulb gives no light; all the light there is comes from the bulbs at the ends of the corridor. Now look into the instrument."

"Ah," said Burgess. "I see. In here, the middle of the corridor is brilliantly lighted, and its ends are dark. Just the opposite. How do you work that?"

"The middle bulb is not dead. It gives infra-red light, which is not perceived by the human eye. This instrument sees by infra-red light; all visible light is screened off by a colloidal-silver filter. The lens gathers the infra-red image, throws it on the infra-red sensitive photoelectric cells, which project it on the ordinary television-screen as visible to our eyes. In other words, this is a viewer for infra-red light."

"But why—"

"Sh-h. Suppose we wait. We've been talking too long now. Let's keep absolutely quiet. Tell me, after I have my face under the hood, if there is the least bit of me visible from the door? And let me have your gun."

There was a tense, silent wait. The sounds of the party in the drawing-room came to them, exclamations, titters, sudden floods of argument, a period of silence, a burst of laughter, rustling and commotion, and the performer's patter. However, they had not long to wait.

THERE was a creak down the corridor, exceedingly faint. Then a faint swish. Flynn grew tense at his instrument, his breath coming fast. The reporter exerted his utmost to maintain silence in his excitement, for he could not see a thing anywhere. The corridor was empty, search it as he might, except for the guard halfway toward the drawing-room. He breathed with his mouth wide open, for he was so excited that when he closed it, the breath shrilled loudly through his nostrils.

Chapter VI

Unveiling the Inscrutable.

SUDDENLY the engineer shouted out into the corridor: "Hands up! I've got you covered. Now take that cape off! I'll count ten, and if it isn't off by ten, I'll shoot. Your cape won't stop bullets."

The next instant his shot crashed. He leaped up, knocking Burgess in the ribs with his elbow. In two jumps he was across the corridor and in Mr. Johnson's room. Burgess dashed out after him, to see the Captain emerge from an adjoining stateroom. In another instant Chick was also on hand. The sounds of the party in the drawing-room suddenly stopped, and open-mouthed people trickled down the corridor. For there were sounds of a terrific commotion coming out of Mr. Johnson's room.

First there was a hoarse shriek from the sick man. Then there was the spectacle of the young engineer fighting violently all around the room—with nothing! His arms were out, as though locked around somebody; he heaved and grunted and staggered—all alone. A couple of times he almost went down. The rest of them, even Burgess, were too astonished to do anything except stand there staring and paralyzed. Mr. Johnson lay in bed like a man frozen stiff. Flynn staggered back against the wall as though someone had hit him.

Illustration:

First there was a hoarse shriek from the sick man.

AFTER what seemed like an age, though it was only a few seconds, Burgess began to grasp the situation, and stepped into the room to see how he could be of assistance. But already it was not necessary. Flynn was on his knees, six inches above the ground, as though on top of something, though there was nothing there. He was pummeling terrific blows with his fists; and then desisted and began pulling and tearing at something under him. There was a loud rip, and a swing of his arm revealed a strip of clothing and a part of a face beneath him. Another pull disclosed another strip of clothing, an arm and a leg. Flynn was pulling something off a man who lay prostrate, on the ground and who was becoming visible in long strips. In a moment Burgess and Chick were on the prostrate man and had him pinioned down. Then Chick recoiled as though he had been shot. The man on the floor was ugly as sin and had a purple birthmark on his cheek!

"Pug!" cried out the boy, deeply hurt. "You?"

Burgess chuckled.

"I'm sorry it makes you feel bad," he said to Chick, patting him on the back. "But I'd call it a valuable piece of instruction."

The President sat up in bed. The prisoner stood between two husky sailors, with the Captain behind him.

"So you're the pretty fellow who wrote the red letters?" Mr. Johnson said, his sore throat wheezing in his excitement. "I've seen you about my place a time or two. What'll it be, Captain?"

"You can have him put in irons and brought back to New York for an expensive and long-drawn-out criminal trial. Or, I can take him under the space-navigation laws on two counts, as a stowaway and on insubordination, and put him out of the air-valve."

"Take him yourself. I should regret it if I took one chance too many. Brace up, Charles. We are sometimes mistaken in our friends. Your dad has learned lots of little lessons like that." He motioned to Flynn.

"You seem to have managed this business," he said, again displaying his innate shrewdness. "Tell me how."

"Very simple, sir," answered Flynn, rather confused by the limelight suddenly turned on him. "Mr. Burgess presented to me the two facts: (1) There was a crook loose on the ship, and (2) He was not one of the passengers, officers, nor crew. Therefore, in some way he must be hidden, and had eluded the searches. The

question was *how?* The fact that Burgess saw him go into a room from which there was no egress, and yet did not find him there, rather simplified the question.

"There popped into my head an item from *The Engineering Abstracts* about some experimental work with a double-refractible fabric made of a cellulose base combined with silicon salts, which will refract a light-ray through itself and continue it in its original straight line. If a light-ray is bent around an object and continued in its original straight line, that object becomes *invisible*. Objects in the laboratory where these experiments were carried out were practically invisible. Only some rough preliminary work was described in the abstract.

"That offered a perfect explanation of the phenomena on this ship. Here the conditions are perfect. The light from these helium lamps gives a narrow wave-band and can be much more perfectly refracted than daylight. It occurred to me, in my effort to think of a way to discover this person, that if I could see by the light of a different wavelength, it would not be properly refracted, and I could detect the crook's presence. But any attempts to use such a light would give away our plans and put us all in serious danger. Therefore I would have to see him by means of some invisible wavelength. Either the ultra-violet or the infra-red were available. But ultra-violet is difficult to generate, while the infra-red is easy: I merely blackened an old-fashioned nitrogen-filled incandescent-wire bulb. Then I rigged up an infra-red viewer and watched for him. I saw him sneak into Mr. Johnson's room, at a moment which we had purposely prepared, so that everyone's attention was obviously distracted elsewhere. I intended to shoot him, but he got in line with Mr. Johnson and I was afraid to take the chance, and had to jump on him."

Cecilie May was hanging on to Flynn's arm. Mr. Johnson fired a few rapid questions at both of them, and in the twinkle of an eye had all their intimate secrets out of them.

"I need a man to put in charge of the repair station for space-liners on Mars," he said to Flynn. "It is an out-of-the-way place, but it has in the past been a good stepping-stone to better jobs. The position is yours. Bless you two young people."

Kaufman raised his eyebrows.

"So, here's where I'm left without a secretary," he said. "But since it has happened this way, I guess I'll take it cheerfully. Here's a little wedding present."

He wrote out a check and handed it to the confused and blushing Cecilie May.

A sailor stood in the door, saluted the Captain and announced the following:

"The lookout reports that Syrtis Major is visible through the front port. We ought to land in about four hours!"

