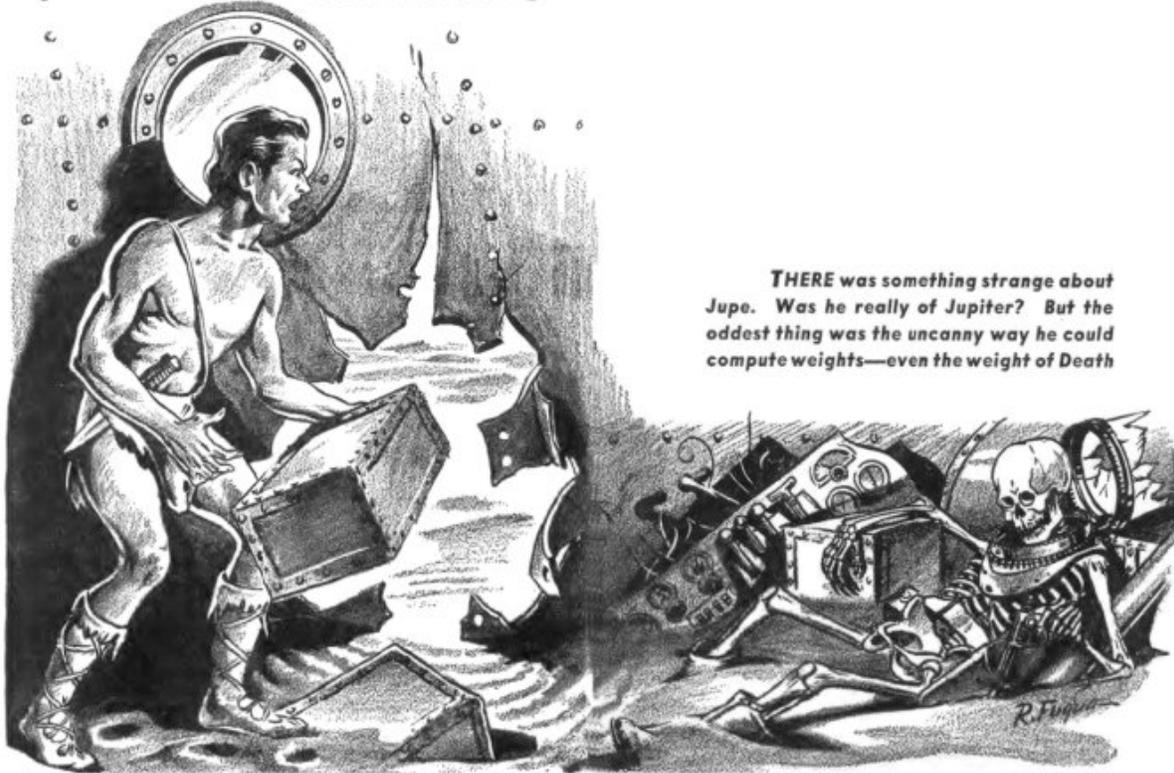


The Stevedore



The Stevedore of Jupiter

by Don Wilcox

“SNAP it up. Get that stuff loaded!” It was the season of storms—not a favorable time for a salvaging expedition. But Captain Branaugh was an impatient man. So he ignored the danger.

The silver sands swept through these bad lands of Jupiter, scouring the copper-red crags and illuminating the air with a satin-silver glow. The gray old abandoned hull that had once been a space freighter had weathered eighteen years of these sand storms and it looked it. But the name, *John Heen*, painted on the prow, could still be distinguished.

Captain Branaugh and his mate of the brand new freighter, *Hanover*, had handpicked

six seasoned thugs to make up their six-man army of guards. They had filled out their crew with three desert-skilled workmen, one of them a veteran of an earlier expedition to this planet.

One additional pickup, however, had occurred at a lonely oasis here on Jupiter, where the expedition had made a preliminary stop to replenish their water supply. There Captain Branaugh had picked up “Jupe.”

The heavy end of the job of transferring the cargo of the *John Heen* to the hold of Branaugh’s gleaming *Hanover* fell to Jupe. For Jupe was young and willing and able.

“What wouldn’t I give for some of his muscle!” said Stephens, the youngest of the three workmen.

“Better not tell your blonde girlfriend about him, Steve,” said Peterson, unrolling a drum of steel cable.

“He’s different from any native Jupiterian I ever saw before,” said Keller. “I spent two years up here with Captain Heen and I saw a lot of them—too many.”

“*I am different*,” said Jupe, smiling proudly at being able to take part in a foreigner’s conversation. “I am a castout.”

“Wonder where he learned to speak English,” Peterson said.

“No telling,” said Keller, “if he’s an outcast from his own tribe, he probably makes a practice of hanging around foreign traders.”

The three workmen, with Jupe’s willing help, succeeded in stretching the steel cable across the dry river bed, in spite of whipping winds. Then the work began...

THE mate and the six guards had nothing to do but eat, drink, sleep, and play cards, while the cargo was being taken on. This they did until two of them grew restless and ventured through the sand storm to the old abandoned ship to pass the time of day with the captain.

“How’s he behavin’, Capt’n?” one of the guards asked in a sly undertone, “Everything under control?”

“Stop your worrying, you dumb thugs,” the Captain snarled. “Go back and sleep if you’ve nothing better to do.”

“Right you are, sir,” said the second guard. “We just thought we’d ask. You’ve been inside this wreck for the last six hours with no protection—”

“And that Jupiter guy does have menacin’ muscles,” said the first guard. “You gotta admit that.”

“Stop being jealous,” said the captain.

“I tell you he’s harmless. He knows enough English to obey orders, and not enough to talk back. Hell, he’s even friendly. I call him Jupe.” The Captain’s snarl warmed up into a sarcastic haw-haw. “I even pound him on the back.”

By way of illustration Captain Branaugh took a crack at the wall of the sand-drifted companionway. The whip—a short length of lithe steel cable looped around his hand—shattered the rotting panel, and brought down a shower of sand.

Then Jupe came trudging out of the freight room bearing another steel chest on his powerful shoulders, and the captain couldn’t resist. With a cool wink at his two Right-You-Are-Sirs, he flung the steel lash at Jupe’s back.

Jupe apparently did not feel the blow. The stroke left no mark, nor did it have any visible effect upon the big fellow’s balance.

One of the guards, emboldened by this demonstration, said, “Hi, Jupe, old pal,” and threw a foot out to trip him. For an instant the guard’s black boot and Jupe’s bare ankle were inter-locked. Then Jupe was trudging on with his burden and the guard was picking himself up out of a heap.

Jupe, narrowing his eyes against the blowing silver sands, toted the steel case out to the sand embankment to place it in a neat row with the others already there.

FROM the improvised entrance in the old ship’s hull the guards watched him. His enormous muscles fairly streamed with perspiration. Naked except for trunks, he looked like an over developed football man coming out of a shower—after a victory. That broad smile was his normal expression, and his large purple eyes and big white teeth gleamed with a mystery as deep as the mysteries of this little known planet.

“No work for us as long as that bird’ll

stick around.” one of the guards mused. “Between him and the Capt’n’s three heavy-labor boys, we won’t have to turn a hand. Let’s get back to the ship.”

“If you ask me, that Jupe ain’t typical Jupiterian, accordin’ to the pictures in the papers. He’s some sort of crossbreed. An’ that’s most likely got something to do with knowin’ English.”

“Hell, I thought he was English when we first come on him all alone down at the oasis. The Captain asks him what he’s doin’ there all alone, and the fellow says he’s a outcast, so the captain says to come on an’ we’ll feed him. So he gets aboard, an’ eats like a horse, an’ drinks like an elephant, and then we make the final hop and set down beside this old wreck, an’ the captain puts him to work.”

“Damn funny the way the captain can’t pull himself away from that old wreck, even for a meal,”

“Yeah. After eighteen years waitin’ for this trip, knowin’ the stuff was up here free for first comers, I guess he’s plenty anxious to get it loaded an’ back to earth.”

“What the hell did he say the stuff was—mictite?”

“Mictonite. He said he wouldn’t trade it for diamonds, ounce for ounce. The U. S. A. metal markets are cryin’ their eyes out for it. Um-mmm ... Say—” the guard turned to make sure no one was within hearing. Silver sands were screaming through the dry river channel that separated the old abandoned *John Heen* from Captain Branaugh’s new freighter. The guard muttered in a graveled undertone. “There’s six of us guards—all of us with the right kind of records. Me, I used to apply baseball bat diplomacy to strikers. You, you’re a grad from Sing-Sing-”

“H-s-s-sh.” His companion silenced the conversation until the big Jupiterian passed. Then, “Plenty of time for this talk

after we start back.”

Stephens and Peterson helped the two guards back across the channel to the *Hanover*. The storm was fairly blinding by this time, and the sand bombarded their space helmets like tiny pellets of flying steel.

WITHOUT the steel cable the game would have been called on account of bad weather. But with one man to hook each steel box onto the pulley, and two to tow it across, the work went on as speedily as the captain could drive it. Two men to every trip, the captain had warned—a warning well taken. The pull of gravity, more than double that of the earth, was enough to make the very act of walking a burden. The high wind and rugged terrain cut the men down to the mobility, as Stephens noted, of huge snails. But Jupe’s muscles were adapted to these conditions. In spite of his heavy build he had an agility and a grace—yes, and something more subtle. Something that could be seen in the way he leaned into a surprise blast of high wind, or gauged the swing of a steel box when Keller would hook it onto the pulley cable. It was an uncanny sense of balance, a sense of the weights and strengths of the forces everywhere about him.

Perhaps it was instinctive. Perhaps it had developed out of the Jupiterians’ age-old combat with strong gravity.^[1]

¹ This is realty the truth. On Jupiter, where gravity is much greater than on Earth, it becomes a factor of tremendous importance in almost every action of its inhabitants. Buildings must be constructed to bear up under greater stress; application of power in any manner which combats gravitational influence must take that influence into greater consideration; the effect of swift movement on the body is greater, and greater dexterity and muscular reaction is necessary. Scientifically,

Captain Branaugh grinned at himself as he watched this young giant's muscles play. All brawn and no brains, thought Branaugh. And an outcast—he could readily understand that. Jupe was definitely off-stripe. His legs, though stocky, weren't as short and thick as the typical Jupiterian's. His head was of less extreme broadness. And, most disconcerting, he had picked up the English quicker than the unfriendly natives Branaugh had encountered on the voyage eighteen years before.

"These boxes next." Branaugh pointed to the pile in the middle of the sand-drifted room.

"But those—" Jupe pointed to the boxes in the far corner.

"Not those, Jupe. We'll leave them here."

"You said take all," said Jupe.

"Shut up with your damned arguing." said Branaugh, His tone brought a fierce light into Jupe's perpetual smile, and he felt constrained to temper his words. "The corner ones are heavier cases. I remember. I helped Heen pack them. We may not have room for all. We'll leave that corner to the last."

Jupe frowned with partial understanding. Earlier he had been querying the captain and the workmen about English units of weight. Now he picked up a handful of sand, poured it into Captain Branaugh's hands.

"How many ounces?" Jupe asked.

"About eight. Why? What the devil are you up to?"

The young Jupiterian walked into the

there are hundreds of ways in which gravity plays a physical part in the daily life and work of a Jupiterian. It is only natural that a factor that has become so important results in a natural aptitude for analytic solutions to its problems, and the mathematics involved.—Ed.

forbidden corner and picked up one of the boxes, brought it over to Branaugh, beaming eagerly,

"This box is twelve, maybe thirteen, ounces not so heavy," said Jupe, "as last box. So you see, you mistaken. I try another."

"*Come out of that corner!*" Branaugh cracked his lash against a steel lid, but Jupe had already acted on his impulse. He lifted another box.

"This one only two ounces heavier... And this one—*Uuugh!*"

A HUMAN skeleton fell from among the steel chests. Its dry rotting bones scattered. Jupe bent over them.

"Get back to work, you damned devil!" Branaugh roared. "What the hell you staring at? That's nothing but a pile of bones."

Jupe didn't move until the captain struck him the fourth time with the steel cable lash. The captain's other hand held a revolver. Even then Jupe bent down and picked up something up before moving away—an engraved gold ring. This Branaugh could not see, for Jupe's back was turned.

"Get moving, I tell you!" The captain's words scraped like a steel saw against stone.

Jupe suddenly obeyed in the most literal fashion. He marched out of the dilapidated hull and struck out across the desert.

"Go after him, you men. Don't get lost. Take a rope, tie yourselves together. Run him down. We need him."

All three of the workmen struck out, somewhat dubious over such an undertaking. Keller knew there was no chance of out-running a native Jupiterian on his own planet, "He's got a hundred yards on us and we're not gaining. If he'd only look back—*Jupe! Jupe!!!*"

It was useless to shout against the screeching winds.

"I'm for letting him go," Peterson declared. "What right has the captain got to make him work?"

"Or to drive him off into the desert?" Stephens added. "No man could live more than a few days in these bad lands. I'm for bringing him back."

"We're all three for giving the fellow a square deal," said Keller. "That's why the captain sent us."

"What do you mean?"

"Jupe has discovered we don't disrespect him the way the guards do. He might come back for us when he wouldn't for them."

"You're giving Jupe credit for a lot of intelligence," said Peterson. "We're all foreigners to him. Can he discriminate? I figure if he's sore enough at the captain he'll tear us all up."

"What do you suppose happened between him and the cap—" Stephens suddenly changed his tone. "Look! We're gaining on him."

Out of the silver haze of sand, Jupe's bright purple eyes and white teeth gleamed amiably as the three men dragged up to where he waited.

"I take you back," said Jupe, "before you three will lost yourself."

Back they went and again the work went on.

THE three workmen, after sixteen hours of toil, demanded rest before finishing.

But Jupe's life was not tuned to a twenty-four hour day. The captain put him to work on the Hanover side of the channel, carting the steel chests into the sleek freighter, packing them back in the hold.

Jupe was again smiling. A simple soul, thought Captain Branaugh. Afraid of skeletons, offended at sharp words, restored to peaceful subservience by a square meal. All

right, the fellow could work on while the crew slept.

The captain gave him specific instructions about loading the hold compactly. It was a job that called for precision. Jupe apparently was in the mood for carrying out orders precisely. The captain watched him for a few minutes, heard him naming aloud the weights—pounds and ounces—of each box he lifted. So many nonsense syllables, thought the captain, and took himself off to bed.

Some hours later, Stephens, Peterson and Keller were awakened by the Jupiterian's low whisper.

"The captain wants you. Go to upstairs room," said Jupe with a little less than his usual big grin. "Wait there for captain, *you three*." He added the number with emphasis.

The men muttered among themselves as they ascended. The only room at the head of the stairs was the emergency control room, rarely used, even in flight.

"It's screwy," said Stephens, shaking out of his sleepiness. "But captains are supposed to know what they want. I doubt if he's dressed yet, but we've got to be on the spot waiting."

They lounged on the emergency control room bench at the head of the stairs. They didn't have to wait long. Without warning from below, a book whizzed up the stairs and fell on the floor before them.

Keller picked it up. "What's the idea?" No answer came from below.

Keller opened the book, Stephens and Peterson looked over his shoulder.

At that moment a door sounded and Captain Branaugh bounded up the stairs. He had a pistol in his hand. Two Right-You-Are-Sirs followed at his heels, guns ready.

"So it's conspiracy, is it?" The Captain blatted in a voice that shook the dials. He glared through sullen sleepy eyes. He wore only his sleeping garments, as did the guards.

Obviously the three of them had just been awakened by Jupe, and their fire-alarm manner suggested intentions of murder.

"There's no conspiracy," Keller snapped. "We were told to wait here for you."

"You'll have to talk faster than that," Branaugh growled, "Your pal Jupe spilled it. I ought to kill you outright. Gimme that account book, you damned sneaks."

One of the guards snatched it.

"You're wrong, Cap!" Stephens cut his words bitterly. "We just picked it up—"

"To pry into my wealth—I know." The captain was on a trigger edge. "The next word I hear about this plot to kill me—"

"Jupe lied, I tell you," Keller rasped.

"Shut up! Another breath and I'll—"

"You'll *what?*" Stephens defied.

FOR an instant everyone thought the captain would fire. Then his expression changed to a cold brutal smile.

"Aren't you the sweet innocent things," he said with saccharine sarcasm. "Get bundled up and move the rest of that cargo before I do something unpleasant..."

The three workmen had plenty of time to discuss this strange turn of events in the hours that followed.

Not one of them was surprised at the captain's part in the affair. His middle name had been brutality from the start. And Keller remembered he had played a similar role in the expedition of eighteen years before.

The one disturbing thing about Branaugh, however, was that he had withheld his brutality at an unexpected moment. All at once he had become strangely conservative in his treatment. For one of his nature, such a turn looked exceedingly treacherous.

As for Jupe—

"When I get back to my little blonde," said Stephens, "I'm going to hate to tell her what I'll have to tell her. She'll ask about the

Jupiterians, I'll have to admit that the only one I saw pulled the lowest, most deliberate, most dastardly frame-up, I ever had pulled on me."

"If you get back," Keller amended. "I've a hunch this thing'll chalk us up as casualties."

"I've got a hunch," said Peterson, "that that damned captain and his corkscrew native are pulling a hoax all their own. Did the two of them have any dealings on your first visit up here?"

"Eighteen years ago?" Keller shook his head. "Hell, this Jupe wasn't morn'n a baby then. I have my doubts if he was even born yet."

"Anyway he's up to something plenty tricky," said Peterson. "He's no ignoramus. Notice how he goes for weights and figures."

Peterson recalled that soon after Jupe had learned the mathematics of ounces, pounds, and tons, he had playfully lifted each of the three workmen, also the guards, and told them their exact weights.

"That's the Jupiter instinct in him," Keller declared. "Old Captain Keen had lots of respect for the Jupiterians. He mixed with them and made friends—until our crew started trouble."

"Meaning Branaugh?"

"You guessed it. Branaugh's arrogance cut them like a buzz saw." Keller conceded it was lucky that all contact with the natives would be avoided on this trip.

As to the earlier expedition, the unfriendliness engendered by a few young upstarts including Branaugh—then a lieutenant—had led to the tragic failure of the John Heen to take off.

"Old John Heen was the only person who could navigate his ship. And he had gone and lost himself in the desert, and even his native friends failed to find any trace of him.

"I remember one beautiful starry-eyed native woman that had been old John Heen's

choice through our two years' stay. Seems to me they were married by Jupiterian rites. Anyway, after he disappeared she went on searching for days, always coming back to the ship to report. Most of us came to feel plenty sorry for her, seeing that Captain Heen must have meant a good deal to her the same as he did to us."

Finally, Keller said, a vast, unfriendly tribe swooped down and threatened to annihilate the party. The precious metal meant nothing to them, it was foreigners they were after.

A take-off was hazarded, but the ship failed to get off. As everyone knew, it had been overloaded.

"The best we could do," Keller said "was lock up, grab our two life boats and take our chances. That's how Captain Branaugh and I happen to be alive today. You know the rest. The men who were in my life boat had enough air and food to get by on. But only one man came through alive on the other life boat—Captain Branaugh."

AS Keller concluded his account he peered up at the skies. A deep silvery twilight held sway over the bad lands. Most of the light came from one of the big platinum moons.

The scene was a welcome contrast to the hot blowing sands that had preceded. To Stephens and Peterson, unaccustomed to Jupiter's moons, it was a weird setting in which anything might happen.

Even so, they were scarcely prepared for the sight that suddenly passed before their gaze. It was like something out of a phantom world.

They had been waiting, during their recent conversation, for Jupe to bring more boxes out of the old shadowy hull. Now he appeared, coming down the entrance incline with a human skeleton in his arms.

Jupe did not bother to notice whether anyone saw him. He paused, turned the armful of bones gently from side to side, to shake off the sand and dust. He turned away from the old ship and marched solemnly, reverently.

The three men made haste to follow, keeping some fifty yards between them and this apparition-like sight.

When Jupe stopped, they slipped behind jutting copper-red stones and watched.

Under the dim light of that Jupiter evening a long-delayed burial service took place. Stephens, Keller, and Peterson, stinging with the violent suspicion this mysterious Jupe had generated in them, looked on in silence, mystified.

Jupe scooped out a shallow grave, using a flat stone for a shovel. He placed the bones tenderly, his restrained movements were a striking contrast to the heaving of heavy boxes that his muscles seemed made for.

Stephens whispered, "An earth man's skeleton, isn't it?"

Keller answered that he had never compared Earth and Jupiterian skeletons. Stripped of their muscles he doubted whether their differences would be so noticeable.

If Keller had any guess beyond that, he kept it to himself...

BY THE ship's clock it was the lunch hour. Everyone was in the dining room. As usual, Jupe was first to finish his meal. He always ate at his own private table—a trunk up-ended in one corner. Now Captain Branaugh strode over to him, ordered him to get back into the hold and get the boxes arranged.

Stephens exchanged glances with his two confidantes. They too were watching every interplay between Jupe and the captain.

Branaugh turned to the guards and announced, "We'll shove off in a few hours."

Jupe Spoke up. "I ask to go back to your planet with you." So saying, he smiled and strode out to return to work.

His exit was followed by a scattering of guffaws.

"Nuts," said the captain.

"Who does he think he is?" the mate said. "There's no profit in loading a ship with dead weight. For every Jupe we could haul a couple million—"

"Shut up!" the captain exploded, adding harshly, "all of you."

The mate's break, Stephens later observed to Keller, had evidently caught the captain in the gizzard.

Now everyone was ordered to sort through his own belongings and throw out every ounce he could spare. The last-minute rush was near at hand.

Branaugh and his guards tried out the lifeboats and the weather at the same time. With this load—and no one except the captain knew just how near to a capacity load it was (excepting Jupe, perhaps, with his uncanny mathematical memory)—it would be essential to take off in windless air. The two lifeboat parties set out to hop over these regions far enough to gauge the coming air currents.

During their absence Stephens noticed that Jupe was nowhere to be seen. There was no time to wonder where he was or what he might be up to. The job before Messrs. Stephens, Peterson, and Keller was to bring over one last box—without any Jupiterian aid.

By the time they heaved the steel chest into the wide central corridor of the ship they were near exhaustion. They had come over the channel under a hot bright sun, and for a moment, before their eyes adjusted to the darkness of the ship, they literally did not know whether they were coming or going.

"Slide your cargo to the other end, you fools," the mate shouted from the control room as they were about to roll it in upon his

premises.

At the opposite end of the corridor they left it for Jupe's final loading. The captain had assigned all of that to his ready muscles. He was both stevedore and skilled executor of this loading job.

LOADING a cargo, as every space man knew, was no trifle. The high velocity acceleration and retarding of a ship, combined with faulty loading of its contents, had accounted for many of the space tragedies of earlier days.

But the hold of the good ship *Hanover* was replete with modern safety devices. The "red star door," as it was called, would provide a barrier of steel between the freight-filled room, aft, and the corridor that led fore to the control room.

As to the arrangement of the steel boxes, Captain Branaugh had pasted a chart on the red star door to designate the exact location of each, thus specifying the added precaution of breaking joints between alternate rows.

Now the three workmen stood gazing at that chart, noting that the Jupiterian stevedore had intelligently checked the spaces off, one by one, in simple obedience to the captain's orders. The cargo formed an almost solid wall within the open door. There was room for only one more box at the top.

At this moment the lost Jupe suddenly reappeared from a most unexpected source. An upper level box slid forward without warning, hands reached out from behind it to swing it gently down into the doorway, the hands were followed by muscular arms, then a nearly naked muscular body slithered out of the closely packed wall of cargo.

"Hello to you," said Jupe with an immense smile. "I got lost to take a nap."

He dropped to the floor. He picked up the last of the boxes and filled the remaining

space. He checked off the last space on the chart, and walked away.

“Am I seeing things or is he a Houdini?” Stephens muttered.

“Something’s screwy,” said Peterson, scratching his head.

“I think I know,” said Keller in an undertone. “He’s left a hole among those boxes so he can stow away.”

“Uugh! And the mate said his weight’s worth a couple million in mictorite,” Stephens gasped. “By law we’re supposed to tell—”

“We’re in no position to tell Captain Branaugh anything,” Keller snapped. “We’re the captain’s favorite scum of the earth—thanks to Jupe.”

“Hell, we’re everybody’s goat,” Stephens groaned, pacing the floor. “Damned if I wouldn’t like to blow a lid off and see what’s boiling.”

“Sit tight,” said Keller.

“And be glad your blonde cutie can’t see you now,” Peterson added.

THE thin whine of light rocket motors announced the return of the two lifeboats. In a moment the captain and his six guards were rushing hither and thither through the chambers of the *Hanover* making a final check-up for the take-off.

“Set your dials,” Branaugh shouted to the mate. “In precisely twenty minutes we bang off. No time to lose. We’ll get the jump on the weather.”

Four of the guards grabbed the last of their luggage, checked out, took one of the lifeboats and rocketed off.

The other lifeboat was attached to the ship for the remainder of the party—two guards, captain, mate, three workmen, and possibly a stowaway. Stephens took in the situation and blew a fuse.

“Listen, Cap. What’s the big idea? Is this ship so heavy you’ve got to shake a

lifeboat and four guards to lift it?”

For an answer the captain slammed the young workman against the wall and strode on. Stephens leaped after him, grabbed him by the arm.

“So heavy we can’t even get off in a wind? Why the hell don’t you dump a box?”

Flaming anger shot through the captain’s face, but he swallowed it in favor of a rasping laugh.

“Outa my way, fool,” he barked. “It’s fifteen minutes till take-off. Get your surplus junk overboard. We’ve got to lighten up.”

Stephens caught a nod from Kelfer and knew he’d better obey. Jupe’s purple eyes smiled at him mysteriously from across the corridor. An undertone conversation passed between the two guards. What was it all about? Did anyone know whether the ship was loaded to rip to pieces in mid-space? Sure as hell somebody ought to know.

Had Stephens heard the bit of conversation that passed between the guards, it wouldn’t have clarified his confusion in the slightest.

“Still keepin’ it under your hat?” said one of the guards.

The other nodded. “Lucky we didn’t pull the other four in on it. We can put it over easier ourselves, an’ the swag’ll stretch a hellova lot farther.”

“You all set?”

His companion gave an affirmative wink. “Remember, let the captain clean house first, then we take over.”

The mate now scurried through the rooms with a tray of coffee, handed a cup to Stephens, who drank it at a gulp. Peterson drank his; Keller dubiously, poured his cup down the waste chute.

Keller returned to Stephens disgusted “Watch ’em or they’ll throw out your gold teeth. Those copper rocks you picked up for souvenirs for your blonde—”

“What about ’em?” Stephens blustered.

“Someone’s tossed them down the waste chute.”

“I’ll run down to the crags and jet some more.” Stephens snapped. “I promised her—”

“If I were you I wouldn’t set a foot off this ship,” said Keller in a low warning voice.

“Hell, if it’s a matter of ounces, I’d toss out my boots—”

The captain thrust his head in at the door. “Okay, lad. If you want to trade your boots for rocks, go ahead. You’ve got ten minutes.”

STEPHENS went into action on impulse. He raced out of the ship as fast as heavy gravity would permit. But by the time he reached the nearest copper-red outcropping of rocks a strange sleepiness seized him.

Peterson was watching from the porthole, and suddenly he began to mumble incoherent words. He wasn’t aware that he yawned, or that his face was a mixture of drowsiness and fright. All he knew was that Stephens, fifty or sixty yards beyond the shadow of the ship, had taken off one boot, lain down, and apparently fallen asleep.

“I’m going to bring him back.” Peterson snapped.

Keller caught Peterson by the shoulders, shook him. “Are you sure they didn’t get you with those knockouts?”

“I’m okay,” Peterson snorted. “Lemme go.”

“Make it fast!”

Then Seller was watching Peterson race away; but the farther the fellow went the more his race became an unsteady tottering. He reached Stephens, started to pick him up, couldn’t.

Keller’s heart sank as he watched from the porthole. He saw Stephens shake his head

groggily. Then both men lay relaxed on the ground as if nothing in the world mattered except sleep.

Keller sprang out of his room, leaped to the fore end of the corridor, through the arched opening into the control room.

“*Hold that take-off, Branaugh!*”

“Take it easy, fellow,” came the captain’s reply, suave as a nutmeg grater. Captain, mate, two guards, and a potential Jupiterian stowaway were all huddled near the window watching the two men who had gone outside.

“In the name of God, Branaugh,” Keller shouted. “Those men will die if you leave them there. It’s miles to a water hole—”

“Then they’ll die. This freighter kicks off in five minutes, ten seconds. Everything’s ready—almost.”

The “almost” was too obvious to need any explanation, but Captain Branaugh didn’t mind being specific.

“You’re overloading me, Keller!” he snapped, his face white with brutal determination. “*Get out!*”

Keller ducked under the captain’s out thrust arm, flung himself at the instrument board, groped for something he could jerk or turn or smash—anything to throw a monkey-wrench in the takeoff. But the captain flew at him, slammed him back against the wall, struck a thudding blow at his head.

Keller came up with his eyes flashing, delivered a jarring uppercut, dodged a return blow, then tore loose with a dozen champion punches.

Now they were fighting down the corridor, guards, mate, and Jupe following in their wake.

“Three minutes, thirty seconds, captain!” the mate shouted. “Shall I switch it off or let it go?”

The captain, staggering backward, ignored the question. “Guns, you damned

guards!”

THE pistols came up, Keller froze before them. He was stopped, all right, but he could still talk.

“Okay, you’ve got me, Branaugh. But I’ve got you, too. You murdered old John Heen. I’m damned sure of it. I’ve seen the skeleton—and now I’ve seen you.”

The captain gave a brutal laugh, answered through his puffing breath. “Accident. I pushed a box over. He happened to be under it. What a wallop I got outa you boys searching the desert for him. You birds and that native woman would have spent a year at it if we hadn’t been chased off in our lifeboats.”

“*Your* boatload died,” said Keller accusingly.

“Your load has all died since—I’ve seen to that. They’re all dead but you. I’ll let the desert take care of you, Keller. Save splashing my ship with blood.”

The mate called, “Three minutes.”

The captain swabbed his face and began barking orders furiously.

“Jupe, get that red star door rolled shut—tight—that’s it. Now down with the bars. Okay. Now—”

Jupe’s voice broke in. “I ride with you? Yes?”

“We’re loaded,” Branaugh growled, “but we’ll make room. Throw this man out and we’ll let you ride. Make it quick. Be back in sixty seconds. We’ll wait.”

Jupe came at Keller grinning. His huge steel arms locked over the workman’s chest, almost cutting off the hard breathing.

They whirled out through the locks together. Then instead of releasing Keller and chasing back to the ship, Jupe carried him on toward the two sleeping men several yards beyond. Mentally Keller was trying to count off those last minutes. They must be nearly

gone—

Peterson was mumbling, “... leaving us here to die ...”

“I know,” Stephens answered groggily. “Damn, what’ll that little blonde think? I promised her I’d—”

“*You go back with her!*”

The strange outburst came from Jupe. The two men roused up sleepily. Keller stood beside them, gazing at the hand that clamped, vise-like, on his wrist. Practically he gazed at the engraved gold ring that adorned the little finger of that hand.

“Jupe!” Keller exploded. “What does this mean?”

The Jupiterian pointed to the engraving. “It say Keen. Just like me.” He lifted his left elbow and revealed some small blue letters tattooed on the inner side of his arm. “Heen—my father’s name. My name too. My mother you call Jupiter, she tell me before she die.

“You’re John Heen’s son?”

Jupe nodded, his husky face fairly bursting with smiles. “I find your Captain Branaugh is man who kills my father, steals his goods—”

“Yes, you darned louse, and you stand there and grin about it.” Keller poured out his words with the bitterness of gall. “What a mess you’ve made. If you had had an ounce of your father’s honor in you, you’d have avenged that murder. We’d have helped you. But, instead, you frame us for mutineers, and the captain plays the whole bunch of us for suckers. As a son, you’re blasphemy on the name of John Heen—”

“But what I have *done*—”

“What you have done!” Keller smeared the words with his sickening disgust,

“To the *ship!*” Jupe protested, his smile stiffening into something intense and purposeful. “I have fix the door to break, the boxes to slide and kill, the power to go

pwoof!"

"You've—*what?*"

Brrrowrrrrrr — BLAMMMM!

LIKE an explosion clattering through steel boilers came the thunder of rockets. The space freighter leaped from its sandy bed—*leaped and fell.*

It happened almost with the swiftness of gunfire. In the instant of movement it had jumped through a quartet of a mile of space, tearing up a tremendous cloud of silver sand. Now it lay motionless. The sand sifted down like rain.

Jupe caught Stephens and Peterson by the hands and made strides toward the silent ship, Keller hurrying alongside.

The closer they came the prouder Jupe grew and the more amazed the other three men became. The rocket carriages, unbolted, had fallen off. A trail of unexploded rocket cartridges had spilled along the quarter-mile stretch.

When they finally got through the air locks to the central corridor they saw the unhinged red star door. Steel boxes had avalanched the whole corridor and smashed the lower control room.

Landsliding cargo is no respecter of persons, and mictorite proved to be no exception. There was no breathing left among what, a few minutes before, had been a murderous captain, his accomplicing mate, and two conspiring guards. There were only masses of bones and flesh and soaked clothing, mingled indistinguishably with crushed furniture and control instruments and pistols.

"Extra upstairs controls are left for us," Jupe announced, after making a crawling survey of the damages. "We have work to fix.

I keep all parts I unfasten. You, Keller, can make ship go?"

"Right," said Keller. "If we can get things rearranged, I'll fly you back to the earth."

"You *would*, let me ride too?" Jupe asked, beaming.

Keller and the others laughed. "I should say we will. In fact, we better make you captain, seeing that the cargo is yours—not to mention the head-work."

"The cargo I am glad to share," said Jupe.

"I hope," said Keller, earnestly, "you'll forget all those things I said. John Heen would be proud—"

"It is all right," Jupe laughed. "You earth men not always understand."

"I'm still a little dizzy," said Peterson. "Why did you pull that trick to get us in bad with the captain?"

Jupe paused, swinging a steel box effortlessly in his arms. "I weighed all the cargo. I learned the ship was too heavy. Someones would be left. So I do tricks to get good men out of way, before I make things go crash." Jupe turned his laughter on Keller. "Then you, Keller, throw fists. Almost nearly make us too late."

"Well, there'll be plenty of time now," said Keller. "Before that lifeboat of guards comes back to look for us we'll be on our way—eh, Steve?"

Stephens came out of his thoughts with a jerk. "Ugh? I was just thinking—when we take Jupe back to the earth, you suppose I oughta let him see my blonde? Kinda risky, considering she goes for the strong and handsome."

"It is all right," said Jupe with a merry twinkle. "You bring her me for souvenir."