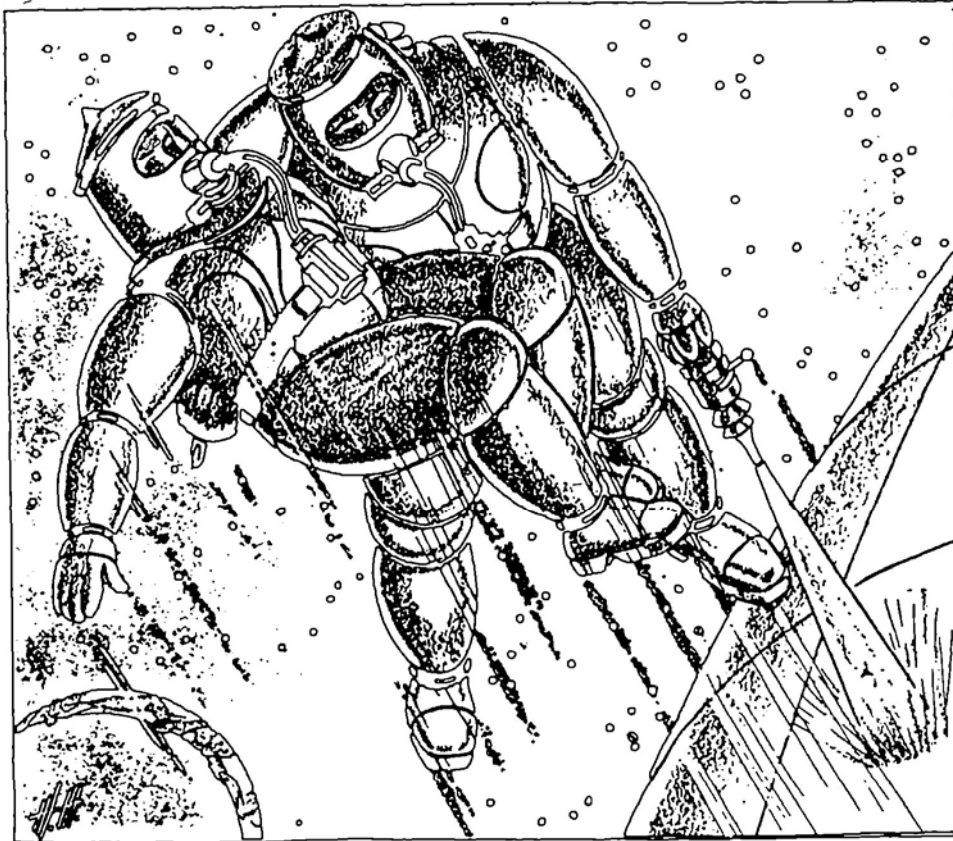


# EARTH-VENUS 12



by Gabriel Wilson

**Y**OU'VE never seen Nona Guelph?"

"No," I said. "I never have seen the lady."

"Well, here she comes. If she isn't a beauty, I'm a motor oiler."

From the forward turtle deck, under the glassite dome of the *Starlight Arrow*, I peered down to the landing stage where the arriving passengers were crowding. It was *Interplanetary Starways*, Earth Venus Voyage Twelve.<sup>[1]</sup>

Nona Guelph was beautiful. Tall and slender, with hair like spun gold piled in a cone upon her head. A long dark cloak enveloped her as she came with armed guards from the escalator.

In the shadows of the turtle deck just beyond the blue glare of the Morrel tube lights young Walter Wilson stood beside me.

"A beauty? Am I right?"

"No argument on that," I agreed.

As she came up the boarding incline her cloak parted, disclosing her slender form, brief kirtle of blue, with a golden tasseled belt, and her limbs like pale pink marble. Wilson's

<sup>1</sup> Starlight Arrow, Great-New York to Grebbar, Venus, August 2036

leather jacket hid the little Banning heat gun which he held alert in his hand. This daughter of the President of the World Federation was surrounded by uniformed guards. Young Wilson, Federal undercover man, was an added precaution, assigned for this voyage which was taking Nona Guelph, traveling alone, to Grebbar to be guest of the young daughter of the President of the Venus Free State.

She reached the deck, and Wilson stepped forward. "Miss Guelph? I am Wilson—Federated Newsgatherer."

I saw a look pass between them. The uniformed guards had remained on the dock. One secret bodyguard, as everyone knows, is more effective than ten in blatant uniform. Wilson's leather togs, and the Federated Newsgatherer's insignia on his peaked cap, was an effective disguise.

She knew he was her guard, of course. Her smile was gracious. Radiant. It made my heart thump as though I were an isolated tower timekeeper who had never seen a beautiful girl before.

"Federated News?" she said. "Even in space must I be interviewed?"

"I'll be generous," Wilson grinned. "Not till we pass the moons of Venus will I ask you a question. Meet Ken Masters—"

I gripped her cool slim hand. Her blue-eyed gaze roved my white linen, gold braided uniform—the insignia of my rank striped on my sleeve.

"Third officer?" she said. "I am honored." Then suddenly her smile faded. Her hand went to Wilson's arm. Her voice was low, furtive. "That Venusian down there. See him? His name is Felah Bartano."

**WE** saw him. A gigantic fellow, for a native of Venus. Black hair, long to the base of his neck, with a red leather thong binding his forehead in Venus fashion. He was starting up the boarding incline, a passenger

this voyage.

"You—watch him, Wilson," Nona murmured. "I'm afraid of him. I have—"

"Easy!" I warned. "Eavesdroppers—"

Wilson had a detector in the palm of his hand. No hostile eavesdropping ray was upon us. But Nona abruptly added,

"After the evening meal come to my deckchair." Her gaze included me; and then, as Captain Davis was approaching to welcome her, she turned from us.

For a time my duties as Third Officer of the Starlight Arrow [<sup>2</sup> The personnel of Voyage Twelve, by official records, was officers and crew—18; passengers, 41—the latter the usual mixture of Earth and Venus people, with a few Martians.] kept me busy. We left the Great New York stage at 5 P.M. Earth E.S.T. The sun was setting at the western horizon; but it rose with us as we slanted westward in our climb through the atmosphere. An hour's ascent, with our rocket tails streaming like a comet behind us; then we shut them off, with the gravity plates set for Earth repulsion and the Moon to pull us on the first leg of the flight.

The usual number of passengers suffered from pressure sickness—the inevitable changes of temperature and air pressure, despite Captain Davis' skill in handling the Arrow's mechanisms. But everything was all right once we passed the

<sup>2</sup>The Starlight Arrow was a cylindrical alumite hull a hundred feet long and forty feet at its central breadth. Upon the turtle deck, a fifty foot superstructure, ten feet high with a narrow deck space around it, housed the public rooms and the passengers' cubbies. Upon the superstructure roof was the radio room; the officers' quarters forward; and facing the bow peak, was the big circular control room. Over the whole of this was the glassite dome, a convex, transparent cover from stem to stem.

In the hull were the crews' quarters; the galley: pneumatic mechanisms operating the plate shifters of the hull's gravity plates; the pressure equalizers; chemical air renewers; ventilators—all the intricate mechanisms necessary to the navigation of space.

stratosphere and entered interplanetary space.

For an hour or two that evening the sunlight raked us full. Then, with course shifted, we headed for the Moon and plunged presently into Earth's conical shadow. Glorious black firmament with blazing white star dots; the Moon a glowing white disc and Venus a blazing point of light far off to one side, over our port quarter.

I did not see Nona Guelph during the dinner hour. Her cubby was in the superstructure forward, almost under the control turret, with a little segment of the side deck under the dome roped off for her exclusive use. Nor did I see young Wilson.

The Venusian, Felah Bartano, went directly to his cubby and stayed there. But I saw him again briefly as he came to the deck to stare at the firmament through a side bull's-eye—a fellow as tall as myself; thirty years old perhaps. Grey skinned, like all Venusians, his erect, muscular form robed in a long dark cloak. A commanding figure.

At 7 P.M., ship's routine, I was momentarily free of duty. I saw Nona come to her little deck space and seat herself in a chair. The white glaring moonlight was on the other side deck. The shining starlight bathed the girl's blue clad figure with a silver sheen. She saw me, and beckoned me forward.

Her smile was radiant. Anyone observing us would have said that she was a young girl intrigued by my so-called handsome figure and gold braided uniform. But her tremulous voice belied that radiant smile.

"Where is Wilson?"

I answered her smile; and as I sat in the chair beside her suddenly I felt as though unseen eyes must be watching us.

"I don't know," I murmured. "I haven't—"

Then abruptly, like a materializing apparition, Wilson appeared, coming from a nearby corridor doorway of the superstructure.

He sat smilingly on the arm of my chair.

"My business is to watch you, Miss Guelph," he said softly. I saw the little detector in the palm of his hand. He said, "Tell us now what you meant—"

"That man Bartano," she said hurriedly. Then she told us that when the daughter of the President of the Venus Free State had visited her in Washington last conjunction they had talked of the revolution in the Dark Country of Venus, which was threatening her father's government. That revolution had grown to be a real menace now. Its leader was demanding Earth recognition of his government—an important thing, for with it would come the legal right to import munitions of war from Earth—those diabolical electronic Earth weapons which the scientists of Venus and Mars never have been able to duplicate.

"THIS man Bartano," Nona was saying vehemently, "I'm sure it is the same man who was watching us that day in Washington. A native of the Venus Free State—but a traitor—a spy of the Dark Country."

"You think so? Well, I'll report it to Captain Davis. We'll—"

"Easy," Wilson said. "Now look here, Miss Guelph—"

"And did you know," the girl added, "that on this voyage our cargo is supposed to be the usual freight, but in reality it's weapons of war for the Grebbar government to use against the Dark Country revolutionists?"

That confounded us. I knew it, of course, but that this girl should know it was startling—though reasonable enough, for she had heard it from her father.

"Well, I'm a motor oiler," Wilson swore. "You tell us that, so openly. You're not very discreet, young woman. It's lucky no eavesdropping ray—"

Suddenly he was staring at the little

detector in his palm, jaw dropping. Wilson wasn't to blame any more than myself—the beauty of this girl had distracted us both. The needle of the detector stirred! Eavesdropping vibrations were upon us—someone was electrically listening to our murmured words!

In that shocked instant we all three sprang to our feet. Wilson had his little heat gun in his hand.

"Someone—forward," he murmured. The needle of the detector, registered the direction—toward the triangle of the bow deck where, fifteen feet from us, ladder stairs led downward into one of the hull corridors. The moonlight glared on the ladder kiosk. No one in sight there.

I went with a leap, and Wilson was after me. The blue lit descending ladder was empty. Then suddenly, in the shadows under the kiosk, I saw a blob. It moved. Wilson's Banning gun spat its bolt of electronic heat. But I had knocked up his wrist so that the invisible stab hissed harmlessly against the metal kiosk roof with a shower of tiny red sparks and the smell of burning paint. He was being too impulsive.

And in that second I had the crouching culprit by the throat. He tried to toss his eavesdropper away, but I seized it.

"What's the idea?" I demanded. "Don't you know this is illegal?"

"Y-yes, Mr. Masters. But I didn't mean any harm."

He was one of our crew, a young American born fellow named Brown. This was his second or third voyage with *Interplanetary Starways*.

Then Wilson grabbed him. "You were listening to us?"

"Y-yes, sir." He was thoroughly frightened, white and chattering. He gasped, "I didn't mean any harm."

"Oh, you didn't? You heard what we said—"

"Yes—no, sir. You caught me too

quick."

"Just curious?" Wilson said ironically. "For no reason?"

"Yes, sir."

I took a look out the kiosk opening. On the dim side deck Nona was standing, staring forward to where Wilson and I had vanished from her sight. There had been no alarm. The man in the control room evidently had thought nothing of our dash for the hull ladder. The forward lookout, gazing through his telescope, had not seen us.

I turned back to Wilson and his prisoner, who was gasping.

"Stop, please, you're hurting me!"

"You don't want to talk, eh?" Wilson was twisting his wrist and cuffing him in the face with the Banning gun. "Well, there are shortcuts."

Wilson fumbled at the equipment belt under his shirt. The young deckhand stared.

"W-what are you going to do?" he chattered.

"Gonna hang your tongue in the middle and wag both ends."

Brown's eyes bulged as he saw the hypodermic. "You—you—"

"Your tongue will loosen all right," Wilson said grimly. "Hold him, Masters. Just a jab in his arm."

**T**HE serum went in. Within a minute the panting Brown sank to the floor grid, with Wilson kneeling beside him.

"Now—you're all right?"

"Yes—I'm all right. You said—"

"I didn't say anything. You're the one who's got to talk."

"Me? Sure. Everybody talks. Only they told me I mustn't. I said I wouldn't and I won't. Because they said if I didn't talk I'd be rich. We'll put the passengers off on an asteroid—Serena, it's called. Its orbit is sloping out—a flat elliptic—I guess the passengers will starve—"

“Wait a minute. Let’s get one thing at a time. Who told you you’d be rich?”

I stood for that minute or two, listening to Wilson’s tense questions and Brown’s babbling answers. Rambling truth, but we could piece it together very easily. Nearly half our crew had been bought by the Venus revolutionists! A mutiny impending now—the *Starlight Arrow* to be seized by Felah Bartano—officers and loyal members of the crew to be killed. Passengers to be marooned, the *Arrow* taken to the Dark Country of Venus, its cargo of scientific weapons invaluable to the revolutionists, who soon were to attack Grebbar. Half of our crew members, plotting this brigandage now! And among the passengers, nine armed Venusians, all capable of handling the *Arrow* under Bartano’s leadership! Wholesale murder, awaiting Bartano’s signal!

I gasped. “Why—good God, Wilson—we must tell Captain Davis!”

Too late! From the kiosk doorway I saw Nona still standing, peering toward us. There was a sudden tinkle of breaking glass on the deck near her. A darkness bomb! Its liquid, anti-chromatic gas sprang into a diffusing vapor, with a puff of inky darkness enveloping all that segment of the deck. Nona’s figure vanished, blotted out in the blackness. But her scream sounded; scream of terror, suddenly muffled as though a hand had been clapped over her mouth.

Then hell broke loose all over the ship.

The details of what happened during that terrible half hour on the doomed *Starlight Arrow* can never be told. There is no one to tell them. For myself, I recall that I leaped into the blackness of the light absorbing gas, toward where I had heard Nona scream. But there was no one; nothing ponderable here save the solidity of the side bull’s-eye into which I bumped with my wild rush. The impact all but knocked the breath from me, so that I stumbled and fell.

From the blackness there was a chaos of sounds. Running footsteps, panic-stricken voices, screams of terror, and screams of agony; the hiss of heat bolts, the sizzling of electronic hand rays. Then above all the near, and the distant turmoil, the *Arrow’s* danger siren suddenly was screaming—shrill, ascending electrical whine, like a giant in anguish.

Within a second or two I was again on my feet. Wholesale murder everywhere. I could hear it. In the control room above me there was fighting. A flash. A wildly aimed Banning stab of heat sizzled down past me, so close that I could feel its torrid radiance. Above the din came Captain Davis\* voice from the control room, shouting orders—and defiance at the mutineers.

“Back, you hyenas! Down from there, or I’ll drill you!”

And then he was roaring: “Masters! Ken Masters! Go below! The engine room! The lower controls!”

THE gas around me was dissipating a little. I could dimly see the captain on the turret balcony, with a weapon in each hand. Suddenly his bulky figure slumped forward, hung for a moment over the rail—then fell and crashed almost at my feet.

“Go below the controls!” The instinct to obey made me whirl. I was unarmed. In the dead captain’s hand was a Banning gun. I seized it. Half a dozen men dashed by me in the gloom. Friends or enemies? I could not tell. I did not fire.

It was futile to look for Nona in all this turmoil. For a second I thought I saw her; but it was Mac, the ship’s surgeon. He seized me.

“Ken—good God!”

“Ordered below!” I gasped. “Come on.”

We leaped for the little kiosk. But a heat stab drilled Mac and he plunged to the deck. I bent over him.

“Mac—”

“I’m—finished—” The blood of a drilled aorta gushed through the burned hole in his chest and he was gone.

At the kiosk a man plunged into me—and, friend or enemy, I drilled him; leaped over his body.

Brown was here, still babbling.

I plunged down the stairs looking for Wilson. Overhead I heard someone slam the iron door of the kiosk. The main hull corridor was like a catwalk—narrow suspended metal grid, with low rails. Doors opened into the side cubby compartments.

I stood for a moment peering into the blue lit gloom. The stirring air currents were fresh, of normal pressure. I could hear the swish of the circulating fluids in the double shell of the hull—the Erentz pressure equalizers, absorbing our inner air pressure, without which the alumite hull would have exploded, our air puffing out into the vacuum of space.

All the vessel’s mechanisms still were working. Silence down here, with only the dim muffled sounds of the overhead turmoil floating vaguely down.

No one here. I passed a body, lying on the catwalk. A steward. His throat was slashed. Then as I ran toward the big central control room I heard a soft call: “Masters!”

It was Wilson, Panting. Disheveled. Banning gun still in his hand.

“Masters!” He gripped me. “What became of Nona Guelph? That darkness bomb—”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t find her. Captain ordered us down here—”

“I thought I saw someone dragging her into the kiosk. I came down—nobody here—alive—I was wrong. She must be still on the deck—”

“I’ve got to get to the lower control room,” I gasped. “I was ordered—”

I ran, with him after me. The catwalk

terminated at the control room door. It was ajar.

“I was here,” Wilson panted. “Nothing—just—”

We burst in. A blue lit interior, twenty feet square. Hydraulic pressure tanks, levers for emergency operation of the gravity plates, dials, levers and switches in banks around the walls. Our chief engineer and his assistant should have been in charge here.

They lay sprawled on the grid floor, unconscious.

“No sign of her here,” Wilson said. “What’s aft? I don’t know the layout of this damned place. You’ll have to show—”

In all the turmoil Wilson’s mind was only on the girl he was hired to protect. He whirled from me as an audiphone here on the wall buzzed its shrill signal.

“I’ll take it,” I said. I seized it. “Hello? Ken Masters—lower controls.”

It was Spellman, the radio man, calling from his tiny cubby amidships on the roof of the superstructure. He could see all the upper section of the vessel from there. The brigands were in full control. He gasped when I told him that only Wilson and I were alive down here.

“They’ve closed every hatch, Masters. You’re trapped down there. They’ve got the decks—the turret control room—passengers all herded aft—what’s left of them.”

“Spellman—you send a call for help. I’ll shift the plates, head us back to Earth—”

“Can’t send a call—radio’s smashed—” Through the audiphone I heard a whizz as though a heat bolt had sizzled up there in the radio cubby. And Spellman gasped, “Almost got me. I’m the—only one left fighting. They’ll—”

His voice faded back; I heard his defiant shout.

I called into the instrument: “Don’t fight! Surrender—no use in getting killed—”

**B**UT he did not hear me. At my side, Wilson stood tense.

“They’ve got the ship?”

“Yes. Only us—”

Suddenly there was a blob moving here in the blue lit dimness of the mechanism room. A crouching man at the doorway. Wilson’s gun and mine spat their heat bolts. But too late! The man in the doorway flashed a tiny bolt of radiac-electrons. Wilson fell; electrocuted, his clothes and his flesh blackened, with a ghastly smoking stench. The impact knocked me sideward, with my Banning gun clattering away! Then I leaped; and the crouching man rose up, hurled his empty weapon. It missed me.

Then we locked together; fell on the grid floor, rolling. It was one of the new crew members—a small, grey skinned Venusian. No match for me. I caught his thin throat. Choked until he went limp; then I lifted him, bashed his head against one of the steel vacuum tanks until his skull cracked; and with a wave of nausea sweeping me I flung away the body.

In the sudden silence I stood panting. Alone here in the bloody shambles of the mechanism room. The audiphone to the radio cubby still was open. I called,

“Spellman! Spellman—”

I could hear vague sounds up there. Then Spellman came.

“Masters?”

“Yes! I’m here.”

“Finished me—drilled—”

“What about Nona Guelph—where—”

“In the—turret control room. That Bartano—he’s got her in the turret. I’m—finished—Masters—”

His gasping voice faded back. I heard the thump of his body falling.

Then silence. I stood panting. What could I do? Yield to these brigands? Or set the gravity plates here into combinations which would swing us back toward Earth? Of what

use? Bartano’s men would come down here after me. Perhaps I could hold out for a time; kill a few of them.

Or should I rush up to the deck? The hatches were barred; but suppose I could find one open? All futile. I’d be killed the moment I reached the deck.

Then from down the catwalk I heard voices—Venusians of the brigand crew—half a dozen of them. Coming down to take possession of the mechanism room. Of what use to try and fight them?

I ran aft through the mechanism room. From the aft catwalk a metal ladder led downward to the base of the hull. A pressure-port exit down there. A little cubby with emergency apparatus.

What I might do flashed to me. Wild, desperate plan, but I could think of nothing else. I heard the tramp and the voices of the brigands in the mechanism room now; the buzz of the audiphone as Bartano called down to them from the control turret. Like a cat I went down the little ladder.

The pressure-port was in the keel—a ten foot cubical room, with an upper sliding trap door. I dropped into it; slid the door closed over my head. Emergency pressure suits were here in racks on the wall. I seized one of the largest, donned it. Strapped the chemical air-renewers around my waist; clamped on the helmet.

**T**HE suits were racked into small bundles. I took a second one under my arm; and in my gloved hand I held a cylinder of the emergency repulsion ray.

The pressure-port here had a sliding outer trap in the hull base. I did not stop to exhaust the air in the little room; I merely slid the trap open an inch or two. The air went out with a whining hiss. Then I slid the trap wide.

Amazing void here at my feet! Black firmament of space. Blazing points of light from stars far down. Sternward, I could just

see a limb of Earth—gigantic crescent segment of disc, stretching yellow red, half across the firmament.

For an instant I paused; and then I leaped. Weird sensation. It was like thrusting myself into water! The force of my leap sent me downward perhaps ten feet. Sluggish, slackening fall, with my body slowly turning. Then the gravity of the bulk of the *Starlight Arrow* drew me back. I struck the hull; clung there with a tenuous hold as though I were a wafted feather.

Inch by inch I crawled up the hullside. Up? There was neither up nor down. The hull was a convex surface under me; the black firmament and the stars were everywhere else. I came, like a crawling fly, to the glassite dome. Would the brigands notice me?

The dome was translucent, but transparent only at the bull's-eyes, and, I kept away from them. The deck, tilted sideward, was a blur under me. Then I was on the dome top. The control turret merged with the dome; there was a tiny pressure-port cubby, big enough for one or two people at a time.

I reached the outer slide. Still no alarm. Through the tiny bull's-eye. I could see the cubical space under me now. The inner trap was closed. I opened the outer one. The cubby air came out. Then I dropped down; closed the slide over me. The turret was directly under me now. Ten foot, windowed, circular room. The trap beside which I was crouching was in its ceiling; a drop of fifteen feet down to its floor. There was no bull's-eye in this trap. I could see nothing but a blur through the translucent glassite.

Very cautiously I slid it the merest fraction of an inch. The turret air came hissing to fill my tiny cubby. Would the hiss, or the upward air current, be noticed? I crouched tense, unarmed save for the steel hook welded into my glove.

Still no alarm. In a moment my cubby was filled with air. I doffed the helmet; shut

off the suit mechanisms. At once I heard voices from below. Bartano's voice, gloating:

"You look so frightened, little Earth bird!" he said suavely.

"Those passengers," Nona panted, "are you going to—keep on killing them?"

"Oh, no. I killed no one—except when it was necessary. They will be marooned—but not you, little Nona. You are too valuable to me—a hostage, so that your government will recognize our Dark Country. We need Earth's help—"

I slid the panel a little wider. I could see the huge Bartano now, standing at the main control switches. And Nona across the room, backed against the wall, with eyes blazing, her face pallid, her golden hair a disheveled mass on her shoulders.

Then abruptly Bartano moved toward her. "Your beauty fascinates me, little Nona. I am master here. Master of everything—even you—"

His huge arms went around her. She struggled; screamed, but his hand clapped over her mouth. In that second, I dropped.

**W**HAT followed was a blur of chaotic horror. It may be that in the terror of his death, the murderous Bartano had only the wild thought of taking everyone else into oblivion with him. Or it may have been an accident.

For myself, I only know that as I dropped, I saw Bartano cast Nona away and lunge at me. I swung my arm. The pointed steel hook of my glove struck his neck, sank deep as I twisted and wrenched. Then it came free, bringing with it the flesh and the arteries of his throat—and a torrent of his blood.

He staggered, but still for an instant kept his feet. I stood staring, numbed by the grisly sight of him. And in that second, he lurched, half fell upon the main control table, deluging it with his blood, his arm making a wild flailing sweep, scattering the fragile glass



controls....

There was a flash. A hiss of deranged, short-circuited current. Spreading derangement. A hiss here. Then with the flashing speed of electricity, an explosion down on the deck where now the brigands were shouting in horrified amazement.

Another second. An explosion, dim and muffled came from the hull. The doomed little *Starlight Arrow* burst outward.

I saw through the turret window that the dome over the bow peak of the deck was buckling, cracking, a rift with outward rushing air. Brief seconds of chaos—men screaming now—the hiss and surge of escaping air, mingling with their screams.

Bartano's body lay in a welter on the wrecked controls, with the blue aura of free electrons streaming from it.

I seized Nona. "Hurry! This ladder—"

A ladder lead up to the overhead port from which I had dropped. I got the girl up it. The air was thinning; we gasped; choked in the electrical fumes and the stench of Bartano's burning body.

"Hurry—hold your breath, Nona! These fumes—"

I suppose within a minute I had her garbed and helmeted. I saw, in those last seconds, the whole bow peak of the dome

explode outward, with a litter of human bodies and wreckage hurtled into space.

I flung open the cubby slide. The air blew us out—two bloated figures, clinging together. Gravity would have brought us back, but I flung the stream of repulsive electrons from my hand cylinder, turned them toward the wrecked vessel so that we were shoved away from it. Slowly at first, then with accelerating speed.

We clung together, bloated helmeted figures, almost weightless in the void. The great crescent limb of Earth seemed below us. The wreck of the *Starlight Arrow* was above our heads, half a mile or more now, and rapidly receding.

Ghastly derelict of space! It lay broken, slowly turning; and around it, myriad little satellites slowly revolved—fragments of wreckage, and human bodies. Then presently the derelict was only a tiny gleaming speck of stardust. And then it was gone.

Earth's gravity was pulling us now. Soon we would be falling like meteors. But in the stratosphere the repulsion electrons of my hand cylinder checked us, so that at last, through the atmosphere we wafted gently down.

Sole survivors of Earth-Venus, voyage 12.