



The Weather on Mercury

WILLIAM MORRISON

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By WILLIAM MORRISON

www.saptarshee.in

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Phone:02188-299295

Email:saptarsheepublishan@gmail.com

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I

The first thing McCracken did was shoot a Mercurian native. But then McCracken, although he had powerful muscles, was never supposed to be very strong in the head.

The expedition was in the Twilight Zone, naturally, at the time. Without special clothing, which no one had, both the perpetual night of the Cold Side and the furnace heat of the Hot Side were out of the question. The Twilight Zone at this point was about forty miles wide, and the *Astrolight* had been skillfully brought down smack in the middle of it. Two hours after the landing, having ascertained that the air was as breathable as Kalinoff had reported, McCracken went out and aimed his explosive bullet at the Mercurian.



If it hadn't been for Carvalho, who accompanied him, the rest of the group would have known nothing of the incident. It was Carvalho who reported what had happened to Lamoureux, captain of the expedition.

McCracken, of course, burst into vigorous denials that he had shot a native. "You don't think I'd be fool enough to go around looking for trouble, do you?"

Lamoureux thought he would, but didn't say so. "You did shoot at something. We heard the report."

"I tried to hit a dangerous bird."

"What sort of bird was it?"

"Kind of like a penguin, I'd say, but with a broader face. No bill to speak of—"

"Then don't speak of it," snapped Lamoureux. "Did you score a hit?"

"I think the explosion caught it in the shoulder. It got away."

"Thank God for small favors," said Lamoureux. "That bird, you pigeon-brain, was a Mercurian. How do you expect intelligent inhabitants of other planets to look? Like you? They'd die of mortification."

"Damn it, how was I to know?"

"I told you not to shoot unless you were attacked." Lamoureux scowled. "Kalinoff is somewhere in the Twilight Zone and we were supposed to find him with the help of the Mercurians. It may interest you to know that, while you were out at target practice, some of them came around here and began to behave as if they wanted to be friendly. Then they suddenly disappeared. I imagine they got news of what you had done. A fat lot of help they'll give us now."

"We'll run across Kalinoff without them," said McCracken confidently.

Carvalho, who had a habit of looking for the dark side of every situation, and finding it, suggested, "Suppose the Mercurians attack us?"

McCracken said, "They haven't any weapons."

"How do you know?"

"Kalinoff didn't mention any."

Lamoureux emitted a laugh that sounded like an angry bark. "Kalinoff wouldn't know. *He* was friendly with them. He did report that they were an intelligent race. It'll be too bad if they use their intelligence against us."

McCracken thrust out his jaw. There was a streak of stubbornness in him, and he was not going to take too many dirty cracks lying down. He growled, "I think you're making a mountain out of an anthill."

"Molehill," corrected Lamoureux.

"Whatever it is. What if Kalinoff did say the Mercurians would help us? You can't take his word for it. Everybody knows what Kalinoff is."

Lamoureux frowned. "Kalinoff is a great man and a great explorer."

"They call him the interplanetary screwball."

"Not on this expedition, they don't, McCracken. You will please keep a civil tongue in your head."

"There's nothing wrong in what I'm saying. Kalinoff *is* a screwball, and you know it, Captain. He's always playing practical jokes. Look at how he got that Martian senator into the same cage with a moon-snake, and locked the door on him. The senator had a fit. How was he to know the snake was harmless?"

"You don't think Kalinoff would play jokes when his own life was at stake, do you?"

"Once a screwball," insisted McCracken firmly, "always a screwball."

Lamoureux lost patience. "Once an idiot, always an idiot. Get over to the ship and help with the unpacking. And remember, if we don't find Kalinoff, it'll be your fault, and God help you."

Having, he hoped, left McCracken feeling properly ashamed of himself, Lamoureux walked away. The responsibility was beginning to weigh him down. The other nineteen men in the expedition thought they were merely trying to rescue an intrepid explorer for the sake of human life, which was supposed to be sacred. They didn't know that, behind his screwball surface, Kalinoff was as shrewd as they came. He had made some valuable discoveries—and promptly staked out a claim to them.

He had run across large quantities of stable isotopes of metals whose atomic numbers ranged from 95 to 110. These had remarkable and useful properties.

They were, to begin with, of unusual value as catalysts in chemical reactions. For example, element 99, in the presence of air, was a more powerful oxidizing agent than platinum or palladium was a reducing agent, in the presence of hydrogen. And the oxidations could be controlled beautifully, could be made to affect almost any part of a complicated organic molecule at a time. Element 99 was recoverable, and could be used again and again. A few hundred grams of it alone might very well pay for the cost of the entire expedition.

Add the value of a few kilos of elements 101 to 110, and Kalinoff had discovered enough to make him and a few other people rich for life.

Lamoureux wanted to be one of those other people. He had three kids he wanted to send through Lunar Tech; he had a wife with expensive tastes in robot servants; and he had relatives. Let him get Kalinoff off this God-forsaken planet, where he had been marooned for the past year, and even an interplanetary screwball might be expected to show some feeling of gratitude. Combine this feeling of gratitude with a reasonably fair contract already printed, and needing only the explorer's scrawl to give it validity, and Lamoureux could almost feel the money in his pocket. If only McCracken had not spoiled everything by his stupidity—

Lamoureux shuddered to think that by the time they got to him Kalinoff might be dead, and they would have to do business with his heirs—heirs who had no sense of gratitude to impair their business judgment. He felt suddenly poor again. But he put the gloomy thought out of his head, and went on with his work.

Unpacking would be finished in a couple of hours at most. Meanwhile there was some preliminary exploring to be done. The neighboring ground must be surveyed, and landmarks noted, so that they would have a suitable base from which to start their search. Kalinoff had talked about two mountains with a saddlelike ridge joining them. Those two mountains shouldn't be too difficult to recognize—if ever the expedition ran across them.

McCracken, obeying orders, was lending a hand at the unloading. What with Mercury's low gravity, and his own strength, he had no difficulty in wrestling around the five hundred pound crates in which their supplies had been packed. However, he

was of little help in getting the work done. With what Lamoureux decided was characteristic stupidity, he seemed to be mostly in everyone else's way.

Lamoureux called, "McCracken!"

"Yes, sir."

"Let go those crates. The others will handle them. I want you—"

Lamoureux stopped suddenly. A distant sound had come to his ears—the explosion of a bullet.

There was a sudden silence that was so absolute, Lamoureux could hear his men breathe. Another bullet exploded, then another—and silence again.

Somebody whispered, "The natives don't have guns. It must be Kalinoff!"

"What luck to find him this way!"

Lamoureux had run for his own gun. He fired ten shots into the air and waited. But there was no reply.

Lamoureux spat out his orders with machine-gun speed. "McCracken, you, Carvalho, and Haggard set out to the right. The shots seemed to be coming from that direction. But we'll take no chances. Gronski, Terrill and Cannoni, go straight ahead. Marsden and Blaine, to the left; Robinson and Sprott, to the rear. Spread out fast and keep your eyes peeled. Don't go any further away than the sound of a bullet. Uncover every damned white-bush, and tear up every desert-cat hill, but don't come back without Kalinoff. Now get going!"

The men started on a run. Lamoureux, waiting impatiently, walked up and down in growing excitement. He had come prepared for a three months' search, expected it. He had pictured himself and his men, exhausted by a long trek across the planet, coming upon the startled Kalinoff, striking a magnificent attitude, and saying, with characteristic Tellurian modesty, "Dr. Livingston, I presume." And, instead, he was going to find Kalinoff in less than a day. He ran into the ship, got out the printed contract, and read it hastily.

All was in order. He'd have Kalinoff's signature that day.

A half hour passed, and Lamoureux fired ten more shots. Haskell, the cook, was looking at the sky with a troubled expression on his face. He approached Lamoureux apologetically. "Say, Captain—"

"What is it, Haskell?"

"Does it ever rain on Mercury?"

"Never. No rain, no snow, no hail. No man who has ever set foot on the planet has come across any sort of bad weather. Kalinoff emphasizes that fact."

"Well, that's what I seemed to remember. But just now I thought I felt a drop of rain."

"Impossible, Haskell. Some bird—"

Lamoureux stopped abruptly. He, too, had thought he felt a drop of rain.

Haskell held out a hairy paw. "I thought I felt another one." His eyes fell on the brown rocks. "Say, here's a big drop that splashed."

The brown rocks were being slowly spotted with black. And, as Lamoureux stared, he felt his head grow wet. There was no doubt about it. It was raining.

His mouth dropped open. "But it doesn't rain on Mercury!"

The sky was a dull gray now, and the patter of rain drowned out his words. He realized suddenly that he was becoming soaked.

Haskell was running for the ship. Lamoureux followed him and slammed the door shut. The men who had not been sent to search for Kalinoff were already inside. The rain rattled on the hull of the *Astrolight*, and on the parched ground.

Lamoureux stared through the side port and repeated blankly, "But it doesn't rain on Mercury!"

Fortunately, the noise of the rain was so loud that no one heard him say it.

II

It was six hours before the first of the search parties Lamoureux had sent out returned. The men were soaked, but they had seen no trace of Kalinoff. They had faithfully tried to follow Lamoureux's directions, but in a downpour where it was impossible to see more than fifty feet ahead of them, they stood little chance of rescuing anyone. Most of the six hours had been spent finding their own way home.

The other search parties drifted in slowly, until all had returned. Lamoureux checked them off one by one, and discovered, with practically no surprise, that McCracken was missing.

"Where is the idiot?" he growled.

"McCracken separated from the rest of us," replied Carvalho. "He thought he could catch a glimpse of those mountains Kalinoff described."

"When was this?"

"Just before it started to rain."

"He's probably within a few hundred yards of the ship right now, but can't find us because of this rain. I hope he has sense enough to dig up a white-bush and get some shelter."

"We can never be sure how much sense McCracken has. Anyway, Captain, it can't go on raining like this for very long."

But it could, and it did. The men sat around in the ship, stretching lazily, and took life easy. They had not had time to unpack many of the five hundred pound crates, and what materials were exposed to the rain would not be spoiled. There was no harm in leaving them where they were.

A vacation of this sort would have been welcome, if the trip through space to Mercury had itself not been so largely a vacation. After a day, Lamoureux saw plainly that his men were sick of inactivity. So, for that matter, was he. He had come to take part in a strenuous and dangerous expedition, not to sit on his fanny waiting for the rain to go away.

Twenty-four hours after everyone else had returned to the ship, McCracken made a sensational reappearance. With that independence of thought that Lamoureux was beginning to recognize, he had found his own way of coping with the bad weather. He had stripped off his soggy and unpleasant clothing, and had meandered around for the past day clad in nothing but his shorts, with his rifle, his one remaining possession, held firmly in the crook of his right arm. The rain was fairly warm, and outside of giving him his usual ravenous appetite, his outing had done him no harm.

Lamoureux got one of the crew to dig up an extra suit of clothes to cover McCracken's manly beauty. "Where did you sleep?"

"I didn't."

"You wandered around all this time shocking the natives without rest?"

"I'm no sissy," grunted McCracken. "I'm not even tired."

He yawned, and caught himself. "I didn't see anything of Kalinoff. But I got a good look at those mountains he described. The pair with the saddleback ridge between them."

"Where are they?"

McCracken scratched his head. "I think I lost my sense of direction. But they're not far from here. No, sir, they're not far. Kalinoff is as good as found. The screwball."

His eyes closed while he was talking, and Lamoureux had him led to his bunk and deposited there. Two minutes later, McCracken's snoring was competing successfully with the noise of the rain.

There was little sense in looking for the mountains until the rain let up. Lamoureux waited, and waited in vain. The downpour kept on until its monotonous sound had become an integral part of their life. They learned to talk without paying any attention to it, and without even hearing it. But not without, now and then, cursing it.

After it had been raining for a week, Lamoureux noticed that the temperature was falling. It probably signified that on this part of the Twilight Zone the Sun was dropping further behind the horizon. As if he didn't already have troubles enough. He cursed Mercury; he cursed the Twilight Zone; he cursed the rain; he even cursed the Sun. A few hours later, he also cursed the snow and the hail.

Such weather was absolutely incredible. There was nothing to explain it. As he had told Haskell, the cook, no previous explorer had ever seen a sign of rain, snow, or hail. Kalinoff had not reported such phenomena, and Kalinoff got around.

The men were going crazy with inactivity. Worst of all, to Lamoureux, was the way they looked at him. They seemed to feel that, as leader of the expedition, he was responsible for the weather. Lamoureux almost found himself agreeing with them.

On the tenth day, he could stand it no longer. He called the men together and made a short speech. "Men, this rain seems able to go on forever. We can't stay here waiting for it to clear up."

Somebody cheered hopefully, and the others, for the sake of exercising their lungs, joined in.

Lamoureux held up his hand. "McCracken has reported that he saw the mountains we were looking for, with the saddleback ridge between them. Rain or no rain, we're going to find them."

Somebody yelled, "Three cheers for Big Muscles McCracken!" The three cheers were roared. Then there came, "Three cheers for our brave and heroic captain!" and, "Three cheers for the mountains!" and even, "Three cheers for the lousy rain and snow."

Lamoureux began to feel uncomfortable. This was too much like a high school football rally, with burlesque overtones, to suit him. The men were bursting with pent-up energy, and it had to get out somehow.

"I'm leaving only a half dozen of you behind to stay with the ship. The rest are coming with me. Any volunteers?"

He had expected what followed. They all volunteered. He made his choices rapidly. McCracken went along because he had actually seen the mountains. Carvalho would make an intelligent assistant. Gronski, Marsden, Sprott—he reeled off the names rapidly, and in less than a minute had his group, leaving a disgruntled half dozen who would have nothing to do but continue to sit around the ship.

Lamoureux himself carried a two-way radio transmission set capable of receiving intelligible signals over a distance of 12,000 miles. He gave another of the sets to McCracken, and ordered the man to hang on to it no matter what happened. In the rain, it would be their only way of maintaining communications with the ship. He put McCracken and the radio in the second squad under Carvalho, and himself took charge of the first. The two squads would stick together unless some emergency demanded that they separate.

When they set out in the snow, wearing the heaviest clothing they had, the men were singing. McCracken's voice, like the croaking of a huge bullfrog, supplied an unharmonized but ear-filling bass. It sounded so impressive to Lamoureux that not until McCracken had reached the third song did he perceive that the man didn't know any of the melodies at all. He just oom-pahed as the spirit moved him, evidently feeling that, on Mercury, noise and good spirits were more important than any tune.

They had been marching for a half hour when Gronski exclaimed, "Well, I'll be damned to Venus and back!"

"What's wrong, Gronski?"

"It isn't snowing so hard, Captain."

It wasn't. Carvalho said hopefully, "Maybe it'll stop."

Sprott was so overwhelmed with delight that he scooped up a huge pile of snow, pressed it together, and popped McCracken on the nose with it. McCracken threw him down and poured snow down his back.

Lamoureux said angrily, "Stop that, you fools! You're not a bunch of kids."

The horseplay came to an abrupt halt. They marched on a little more soberly, and in a few minutes the snow had stopped falling altogether. Instead of being as happy as Lamoureux had expected, McCracken seemed puzzled. He scratched his head and scowled.

"What's wrong, McCracken? Termites?"

"It's this snow, Captain. We walk two or three miles and it stops. It don't make sense."

"It's got to stop sometime."

"The point is, Captain, it didn't snow here at all. There's none on the ground. It just snowed around the ship."

It cost Lamoureux an effort to admit it, but McCracken was right. He was not as stupid as he had seemed.

It was Lamoureux's turn to scowl. He got in touch with the ship. "Haskell!"

"Yes, sir?"

"How's the weather where you are?"

"Are you joking, Captain?"

"I'm serious, Haskell. Is it clear?"

"It's still snowing, Captain, just as it was less than an hour ago when you left."

Lamoureux grunted. "You may be interested to know that it hasn't snowed here at all."

He cut off Haskell's astonished voice, and turned to the others, who now seemed a little uneasy. The unexpected changes in the weather were a little too much for them.

"Now that it's cleared up, we should be able to find that mountain. We'll spread out just a little, but not too far. For all we know, it may start to snow again. Carvalho, you take your group off to the left—"

Sprott whispered, "Captain!"

"Yes?"

"Isn't that a Mercurian?"

Lamoureux stared where Sprott had pointed. About a half mile away, a small gray creature, looking, as McCracken had reported, like a penguin, but with a broader face and no bill to speak of, was standing motionless.

"Sprott, you and Marsden go over to that thing. Be as friendly as you know how. Smile, grin, stand on your head if you have to, but don't scare it away. Try to induce it to follow you here. Maybe we'll finally get some of that information about Kalinoff we're looking for."

Sprott and Marsden were approaching the Mercurian cautiously. Several hundred yards away, they stopped and spread their arms in what was evidently meant to be a gesture of good will.

The Mercurian remained motionless. Not until the men had come within thirty feet of it did it give a sign of life. Then it took a step toward them.

As Lamoureux watched, the two men spoke a few words. The Mercurian did not respond, but when they turned around and moved away, it followed slowly.

Seen from close at hand, the Mercurian did not so greatly resemble a penguin. To begin with, it had no wings, and no arms either. It lacked a bill altogether, but had instead a small mouth that seemed crammed with teeth. Its two eyes were slanted, which gave it an appearance of slyness. There were two round tufted ears. It moved forward not by waddling, but with a smooth rollercoaster gait that was the result of its moving its four legs forward one after the other.

Sprott reported, "It seems hurt."

There was, in fact, a grayish wound on the Mercurian's chest. Lamoureux didn't know enough about Mercurian physiology to hazard a guess as to what would be the best treatment; and, therefore, decided to leave well enough alone. But, according to Kalinoff, the Mercurians were intelligent. He wondered if the screwball explorer had taught this one any of the Earth languages.

"Can you speak English?"

The Mercurian stared at him with its sly expression and said nothing.

"Parlez-vous français? Sprechen sie Deutsch?"

The men were grinning now, and Lamoureux felt his face growing warm. He must look like a fool, trying to carry on a conversation with a bird.

He asked, "Anybody here know Russian? Polish? Spanish?"

His men supplied him with phrases in the languages he asked for, but the Mercurian remained unresponsive.

McCracken ventured, "He don't look very bright to me, Captain. I can't understand why Kalinoff said they were intelligent."

"Maybe," suggested Sprott, "it's because they just stand there looking wise and don't say anything."

Lamoureux shook his head. "Kalinoff wouldn't be impressed by anybody's just looking wise. And he wouldn't be impressed by anybody's not saying anything. He didn't go for either stuffed shirts or strong silent men. That's why I believe that this thing must have a language of its own, and a fairly decent brain."

The Mercurian closed its two eyes slowly, like a sleepy cat, and opened them again. Then it poked one of its four feet out from under its body and scratched on the ground.

"He's nuts," decided McCracken. "Just scrabbling around."

"Hold it," ordered Lamoureux, "I'm beginning to get this."

The Mercurian had scratched nine parallel lines, only a few of them visible on the rocky ground. Now it scratched other lines, perpendicular to these.

Lamoureux barked, "A checkerboard! That's what it is! Has anybody got one?"

Marsden had a pocket chess set. He took it out. The Mercurian's eyes brightened. It sat down suddenly on the hard ground.

"I'll be damned," said Lamoureux. "He wants to play a game. Go ahead, Marsden. Entertain our guest."

The men were grinning again. Marsden squatted down on the ground and began to set up the men. The Mercurian stretched out two of its paws—three-fingered affairs, the fingers almost human—and seized one white chessman and one black. It hid the paws behind its back, then held them out again.

Marsden chose the white, and moved forward the queen's pawn. The Mercurian countered and the game was on.



It was Kalinoff who must have taught this creature the game, and, if it did nothing else, the incident showed that the explorer was just as screwy as ever, and probably alive somewhere on the planet. Or did it merely show that he *had* been alive? Lamoureux, undecided, watched the curious battle of wits.

Half an hour later, Marsden, thoroughly beaten, demanded, "Who says this thing isn't intelligent?"

III

The Mercurian was sitting up, wagging its head from side to side as if waiting for approbation. But Lamoureux, quite sure now that it wouldn't or couldn't talk, wouldn't have given a damn if it had beaten every champion on Earth. In addition, he was bothered by the fact that it was snowing again.

The flakes had just begun to fall, large and feathery, and Lamoureux himself soon had a powdered look. Most of the other men were still gathered around the Mercurian. But one of them, Sprott, came over to Lamoureux and glanced up at the sky as if puzzled.

"It's following us around, Captain."

"What is?"

"The snow, sir."

"Don't be silly, Sprott. We just happen to have run into a streak of bad weather."

Sprott went on stubbornly, "It looks funny to me. First it rains and snows for ten days around the ship. But it doesn't rain, or at least it doesn't snow, here. An hour after we get to this place, though, it starts coming down."

Lamoureux brushed some of the white flakes off his shoulders. "All right, Sprott, suppose you are right. It *is* following us around. That's no reason to alarm the other men, is it?"

"I guess not, sir.... I won't say a word. But there's something else I wanted to speak to you about, sir. It's McCracken."

"You believe he's responsible for the snow?"

Sprott looked astonished. "I don't mean that, sir. I don't see how he could be."

"I do. He shot a Mercurian. I have an idea that they're the ones who are causing the peculiar weather we've been having."

"Why would they do that, sir?"

"Well, Kalinoff didn't mention seeing any weapons among them, so we've always assumed they had none. But suppose the weather was their weapon. It's a very effective one, Sprott. They've made things damnably unpleasant for us."

"How can they make rain where there isn't any, Captain? I know that rainmakers on Earth have had some success. But all they do is get the rain to fall near where it would have fallen anyway. They may make it precipitate a few hours before it would have otherwise, but that's all. Here there weren't any clouds to start with."

Lamoureux admitted, "I don't know how the trick is done, Sprott. But I agree with you that the snow is following us around, and I'm sure that the trick *is* done."

Sprott was silent a moment. Then he said, "And you think, sir, it's all because McCracken shot one of them?"

"They evidently believe in the principle of the rain falling on the just and unjust alike. And the same thing goes for the snow."

Sprott said doubtfully, "I'm not sure about that, sir. But I do know that McCracken is up to something. He's been getting some queer noises on his receiver."

"Such as Haskell singing lullabies from the ship?"

"Nothing as unpleasant as that, Captain. They're just a series of sounds, some a little longer than others. Da, da, da-a-a, da—that sort of thing."

Lamoureux asked, "When did you hear them?"

"About ten minutes ago. McCracken doesn't know anything about chess, and neither do I, so we both wandered away after the first ten minutes. McCracken said he had an idea where those mountains were."

Lamoureux's eyes narrowed. "Those noises are undoubtedly a message. I seem to remember that some centuries back there was a code invented by a man named Morris. That's it, the Morris code. But where could such a message have come from?"

Sprott shook his head. "I couldn't say, sir. There's supposed to be no one but Kalinoff on Mercury, and his radio set doesn't work. Could the message have been sent from Earth?"

"Impossible, Sprott. That set will hardly get more than twelve thousand miles."

Sprott looked uncomfortable. "Then maybe what I heard wasn't a message at all, sir."

"I think it was. Does McCracken know you overheard him?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"Then don't let him know that we suspect anything wrong. Come to think of it, McCracken never seems to act quite as stupid as he pretends to be. I shouldn't be surprised if, when he shot that Mercurian, he understood very well what he was doing."

"You believe, sir, that he deliberately tried to cause trouble? Why would he do that?"

"I don't know," said Lamoureux slowly.

That wasn't the whole truth. He didn't know, but he certainly could make a shrewd guess. All along, his chief reason for fearing delay on this expedition had been that Kalinoff might die before he could get to him. Now there was another reason for fearing delay. Suppose there were another expedition on the way to rescue Kalinoff. And suppose McCracken was secretly in the pay of the people behind that expedition, and doing everything possible to sabotage this one.

Lamoureux nodded to himself. That was probably it. The first thing, then, was to get the radio set from McCracken.

Big Muscles, as the other men had nicknamed McCracken, was a few hundred feet away, staring off into the distance. What else he could see besides snow, Lamoureux couldn't guess. He yelled, "Hey, McCracken!"

"Coming, Captain."

McCracken took a few tentative steps, broke into a short run, and then made a leap that carried him seventy-five feet through the air, past where Lamoureux was standing. He ended up at attention, his hand raised in a military salute.

Lamoureux frowned. Knowing what he did about McCracken, this attempt to seem carefree, childish, and perhaps a little stupid impressed him unfavorably. He said, "McCracken, I'm taking you out of Carvalho's group and putting you into my own. I may need some strong-arm work and you're just the man for it."

"I sure am, Captain."

"Seeing as I already have a radio, you may as well turn yours over to Carvalho."

McCracken seemed a trifle less eager. "It's rather heavy, Captain. If you'd like, I'd carry it for you just the same."

"I prefer to have my own where I can get at it whenever the need arises. Turn yours over to Carvalho, McCracken."

"Yes, sir. Meanwhile, I want to report, sir, that from where I was standing when you called to me, I think I could see those mountains."

Lamoureux had his doubts, but he kept them to himself. "Good," he said briefly. "We'll get going."

He called the men together again and gave them their marching orders. Whether the Mercurian understood what he said, Lamoureux didn't know. At any rate, it went along willingly.

They reached the place where McCracken had been standing, and Lamoureux stared where Big Muscles pointed. There were two mountains rising off in the distance, barely visible through the snow, and there was certainly a saddleback ridge between them. The only trouble was that one of the mountains was almost twice the height of the other. Kalinoff had reported them as approximately the same height.

"That doesn't fit Kalinoff's description."

McCracken said, "Maybe he looked at them from a different angle, sir. Then they might have seemed the same height."

"If he looked at them from a different angle, the ridge would no longer seem saddlebacked."

"That's true, sir. But then you know, sir, Kalinoff is a screwball—"

Lamoureux found this a little hard to take from a man he suspected of quietly trying to stab him in the back. But he continued to hide his feelings. "That's as may be, McCracken, but he's not cockeyed. These aren't the mountains he described. Still, we may as well approach them. We may be able to get a good view from the top of the taller one."

They moved onward again. A quarter of an hour's marching took them to the edge of the falling snow. As they walked further, the air became completely clear, and Lamoureux could see the mountains without straining his eyes. There was no doubt about it. They were *not* the mountains Kalinoff had described.

The Mercurian horizon was not so far away as the more familiar horizon of Earth, and it was a little difficult for Lamoureux to estimate distances. Still, the foothills of the mountains could not be more than twenty miles away. For the past day, little more than the rim of the Sun had been visible above the horizon, and while the peaks were ablaze with scarlet and golden colors, only the higher one was out of the shadow to any considerable extent. The saddlebacked ridge itself was a vague outline of dull black.

The snow did not catch up with them until four or five hours later, when they stopped to prepare a meal and rest. Then it began to fall gently after they had been in the same place for three-quarters of an hour. By now, Lamoureux was sure that it was the Mercurians who were to blame. He still wondered how they did it.

The one they had come across had remained with them, and Lamoureux found it harder than ever to regard the creature as intelligent. All the thing had done was walk and play chess. Lamoureux had a low opinion of chess players, even when they were fairly human. He had an even lower opinion of trained animals. This Mercurian fell, in his estimation, somewhere between.

They were no more than a mile or two from the foothills of the larger mountain by now, and the saddlebacked ridge loomed several hundred feet into the air. Unfortunately, the snow was between it and them, and prevented them from gaining too clear a view. Lamoureux wondered if the snow would keep up even at the top of the mountain, and damned McCracken again for shooting that Mercurian. And then he discovered that McCracken's feats of arms were not yet ended. McCracken was at that very moment aiming at some target that Lamoureux could not see.

Lamoureux sprang to his feet. "Don't shoot, you fool!"

He was a little too late. The noise of the explosion rang out. McCracken said, "Sorry, sir, I didn't hear you until my finger had already squeezed the trigger. But I wasn't trying to hit anything that was alive. There was something that looked like a rock on that ridge—"

The words died away in his throat. Lamoureux lifted his eyes and saw something hovering in front of them, high in the air. It had eyes and a mouth and, from these features, he knew that it was a huge head, as large as a fair-sized house. There was a long, interminable stretch of neck behind it, and somewhere in the rear he felt sure was a monstrous body. But he wasted no time searching for that.

The eyes were staring at the men unblinkingly. These eyes alone were bigger than the men were. Then the neck stretched out and the head came poking down.

Lamoureux turned and ran. It had been years since he had done much physical exercise, but he made up for them now. Then, too, as the captain of the expedition, he felt that the men might expect a certain amount of leadership from him; it was with some dismay that he discovered that all the rest were ahead of him. Picking up speed, he passed Sprott, then Marsden, and then Gronski. Ahead of him someone stumbled, and Lamoureux wasted a precious second helping the man to his feet.

The huge head opened, and a roar that almost knocked out his eardrums vibrated through Lamoureux's body. The ground shook under him. That meant that the whole creature, whatever it was, was coming after them. Gronski and Sprott passed him as if someone had stuck a needle into them, and Lamoureux, sobbing for breath, tripped over a rock and plunged headlong.

The ground beside him trembled as if it were being rocked by a series of quakes. A deep shadow fell over him, and Lamoureux tried to dig his prone body into the ground and not breathe. From far ahead, a scream of terror split the air.

Then the quakes and the shadow had passed, and Lamoureux dared to lift his head. Far ahead, he could make out the gigantic neck stretching into the air, its outline already vague through the falling snow. A few feet away from him lay Gronski, and a little further on McCracken.

None of the other men were in sight.

The valiant McCracken, his rifle still clutched to him, was aiming at the vanishing figure. Lamoureux said, "Don't bother, McCracken. You've already done enough harm."

"I just thought I'd get a shot at him, sir, while he was excited. He wouldn't know where it came from."

"He knew the first time. Don't bother, I say. You can't hurt him, and he can do plenty to you."

"All right, Captain."

Lamoureux brushed some of the snow off him and tried to catch his breath. "McCracken, if you're really anxious to play with your gun, you may fire into the air. Five times."

"Yes, sir."

McCracken fired, and they waited. Lamoureux said, "I hope nobody was hurt. I don't think any of them, if they're alive, are too far away to hear those shots. We'll wait for them to assemble here and then start out for those mountains again."

"Yes, sir. Except, Captain, that it may be a little difficult—"

"What'll be difficult?"

"Finding those mountains. They just don't look the same."

Lamoureux stared. The mountains stretched into the air exactly the same as before, the same scarlet and gold colors glowing on their peaks, the same shadows on their sides. But the saddlebacked ridge between them—

Lamoureux looked again. The entire ridge was gone.

IV

The snow fell as steadily as ever while Lamoureux waited for the men to assemble. Only two were missing now—Terrill and Carvalho. McCracken had fired again and again into the air, but these two had not returned.

Lamoureux decided finally, "It looks as if they're not coming. Gronski, you take over for Carvalho. You'll stay here in charge of his group while the rest of us climb the mountain."

McCracken said, "You want me to come with you, don't you, Captain?"

"I certainly do. I'm curious to know what in hell way of ruining this expedition you'll think of next."

"Aw, now, Captain, that isn't fair. How was I to know that whole ridge was one big animal? You wouldn't have believed it yourself. Something over five hundred feet high, with a neck even longer. We're not used to them that big on Earth. Here the gravity's less, so it's okay. But even Kalinoff—"

"Don't talk to me about Kalinoff," said Lamoureux fiercely. "He's as bad as you. That screwball!"

"We're still trying to find him, aren't we, Captain?"

"Sure, we're trying to find him, but how can we expect to do it?" Was it his imagination, or did McCracken seem pleased? Lamoureux didn't care. He went on, very bitterly, "He starts off by telling us that the Mercurians are intelligent. You saw how intelligent they were. Where's that specimen we had?"

"He got lost in the shuffle," reported Gronski.

"It's just as well. Kalinoff tells us of a landmark—two mountains with a saddlebacked ridge between them. The ridge runs away, and our landmark isn't a landmark any more. Then there's the weather—no rain, no hail, no snow. Nothing but pure fresh air and nice clean sunshine." He kicked at a snowdrift. "What's this thing supposed to be, a mirage?"

McCracken said, "I know how you feel, Captain. But about this mountain now—do you really think we ought to climb it?"

"Why not?"

"You can't see the top from here on account of the snow. It's coming down in bigger flakes than ever now. That means you can't see here from the top. And as the only reason we want to climb it is to take a look around—"

"We'll climb it anyway. Maybe it isn't snowing as hard on the other side."

They started off then, with Lamoureux barely keeping a tight enough grip on his feelings to prevent his talking to himself. The mountain was steep, but the gravity here being low, it was easy enough to climb. McCracken demonstrated how easy it was by running up it full speed. Lamoureux let him go, hoping that he would break his

neck, but McCracken's luck was too good. All he did was start a gentle landslide that almost buried everybody else.

As they rose, they got more and more of the Sun's rays and the temperature went up slightly. The snow turned to rain, drenching them to the skin, and they climbed all the faster, anxious to get the job over with.

At the top, the rain had died down to a faint drizzle. Lamoureux, looking off into the distance, could see as through a veil a range of sky-piercing mountains, their peaks gleaming in the Sun, their roots cleft with deep shadowed valleys. Between almost every pair of mountains was a saddlebacked ridge.

"Landmarks," commented Lamoureux sourly. "To hell with them."

"I told you it would be a waste of time, Captain."

"Not in the least, McCracken. After all, you *might* have broken your neck."

They started down again, and in a half hour were back at the line where the rain changed to snow. Another hour took them to Gronski again.

Lamoureux shook his head. "No sign of Kalinoff."

"What do we do now?"

"We go back to the ship and carry on from there. I don't know what steps we'll take after that, but at least we'll get back to shelter, out of this snow."

"Which way is the ship?"

"That," said Lamoureux, "is one question we can find the answer to." He spoke into his radio. "Haskell!"

Haskell was alert. "Yes, Captain."

"Keep your radio beam going. We're depending on it for direction."

"Sure, Captain."

Lamoureux snapped off the sending set. "Now let's get moving, before we freeze to death."

The return trip was a slow one. Their spirits were all low, even McCracken's. Lamoureux pictured the return to Earth, the eager, and then disappointed, reception, and the wave of ridicule that would follow their account of the difficulties they had encountered.

They stopped once to eat. Lamoureux estimated that they had supplies for another two and a half months left in the ship, not counting what would be needed for the return journey. They might as well stay here until those supplies were used up. They might possibly find Kalinoff during those two and a half months, although, with the Twilight Zone of the whole planet to look in, and no decent clues, not to mention the difficulties caused by the snow, the chances were none too bright. Nevertheless, they would have to do their best.

The meal came to an end, and they started off again. They had gone only a few hundred yards, when Lamoureux noticed something wrong.

"Haskell!"

There was no reply. Haskell's radio beam had been shut off.

This was a little too much. Lamoureux let loose a streak of profanity that had even McCracken staring at him in awe. Then they started out again, trying, through the falling snow, and over the rocky ground, to keep in as straight a line as possible toward the ship. Lamoureux managed to sustain his spirits only by thinking of what he would do to his cook.

Two hours later, he had an opportunity to put his plan into practice. For out of the snow there emerged Haskell, and the men who had been left with him at the ship. Haskell started to run toward Lamoureux the moment he caught sight of the other group.

"Here we are, Captain! We came as fast as we could!"

Lamoureux's eyes were almost as cold as the snow. "How thoughtful of you."

"Who else is hurt, Captain?"

"Nobody's hurt, but somebody is going to be."

Haskell looked surprised. "I don't get it. You told me to come as fast as I could, and you said that eight of the men were badly injured."

"I told you?"

"Yes, sir. I thought you were hurt yourself, sir. Your voice sounded hoarse."

Lamoureux's jaws were clenched together so tightly in his effort to maintain his self-control that his teeth hurt. He unclenched them. "I don't quite understand you, Haskell. My voice is as melodious as ever. Something else is strange, too. You ask who *else* is hurt."

"Yes, sir. We ran across Terrill a little while ago. He got brushed by the tail of some animal and was walking around in a real daze."

"How do you suppose we're walking? At any rate, I'm glad you found him. See any signs of Carvalho?"

"No, sir. We left the radio beam on to guide you—"

"What's that? You're sure you left it on?"

"Positive, sir."

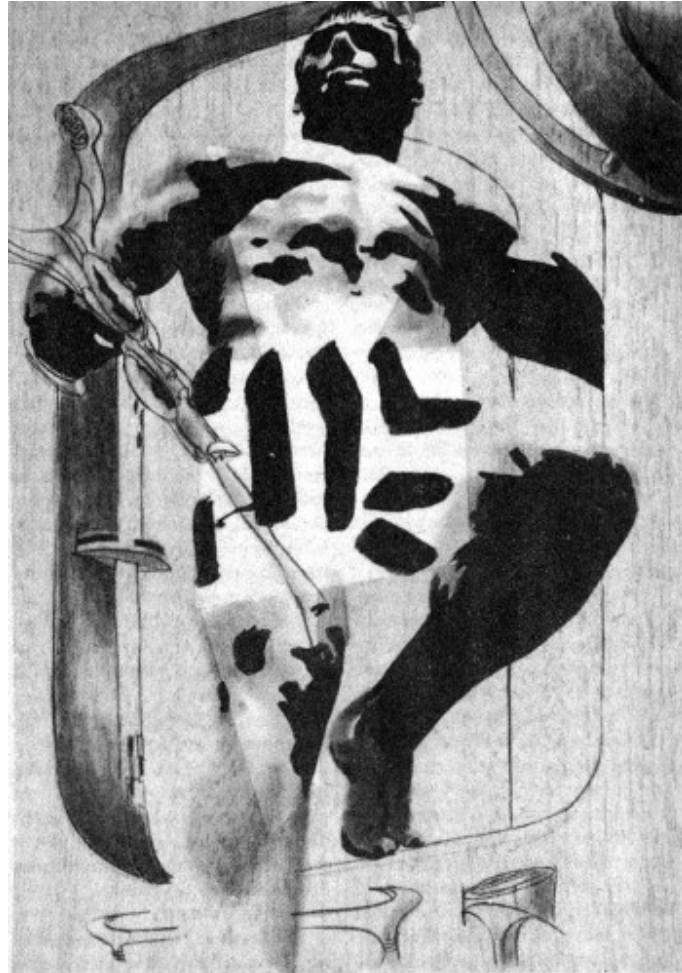
"Well, someone has turned it off! Someone—Oh, my God!"

It was so damn simple, and he had never even thought of it. Carvalho was the man. Carvalho was shrewd and quiet, a man who could keep his intentions to himself and wreck an expedition without so much as being suspected. Subconsciously, Lamoureux hadn't quite believed in McCracken's guilt, despite the seeming evidence against him. McCracken had too genuine a love of horseplay, and of childish showing off.

These things were hard to pretend. You didn't put snow down somebody's back when you were plotting to leave him marooned on a deserted planet. And you didn't impress people by making a seventy-five foot broad jump when you could impress them much more effectively by condemning them to slow death.

Once he had thought of it, Lamoureux couldn't doubt. Carvalho had turned off the radio beam at the ship. By now the *Astrolight* was probably somewhere in space,

possibly proceeding to some rendezvous with a rival expedition. Carvalho wouldn't dare appear back on Earth as the lone passenger returning on Lamoureux's ship. But he wouldn't have to. He could set the *Astrolight* adrift, be "rescued" by the people who had employed him, and come back to tell of the dangers he had braved on Mercury.



It all fitted in. Carvalho had been the one who had tried to hamper their work from the moment they had landed. When McCracken had shot that Mercurian—

Lamoureux asked, "What happened then? Try to remember."

McCracken scratched his head vigorously. "I think Carvalho saw this Mercurian and started to yell and run. I thought he was scared. That's why I shot."

So Carvalho had really been responsible for the shooting. Lamoureux asked, "Why didn't you report that Carvalho started to yell and run?"

"Well, Captain, you don't expect me to go around telling you things like that about another guy?"

The words, "You fool," had been on Lamoureux's lips, but he bit them back. After all, who had been the bigger fool, McCracken or he himself, who had insisted that Carvalho get the radio? There was no doubt about the answer to that one.

As for the occasion when the radio had begun to emit its mysterious code signals, the explanation for that was simple enough, too. The people who were in contact with Carvalho had sent their messages, not knowing whether strangers might be listening in, but not caring either. No one could make head or tail of the mysterious sounds but Carvalho. McCracken had, in fact, considered the noises a new strange form of static that had interfered when he tried to talk to Haskell.

Lamoureux felt like asking McCracken to kick him in the pants. As that would have been bad for discipline, he substituted an order to get started back toward the ship. There was the faintest of chances that Carvalho had delayed, or had been forced by some accident to delay, his departure back to Earth.

It was snowing harder than ever now, and it was difficult for Lamoureux to see more than fifty feet ahead of him. The rim of the Sun was blotted out so thoroughly that it was almost as dark as on a moonless night. Nevertheless he pressed on doggedly.

It was not until six hours later, after he and the men had been wandering around aimlessly for a long enough time to have reached the ship and returned, that he admitted to himself that they were lost.

V

Not that it mattered a great deal. Lamoureux realized perfectly well that by this time the *Astrolight* was on its return journey to Earth. All the same, it was disheartening to know that he was so completely unable to find his way about on this planet.

The question now was what to do. They had little enough food, and not too much in the way of other supplies. They would have to live off the planet until some kind of rescue expedition had been organized to save *them*. If Kalinoff had done it, they could, too. Lamoureux's face burned as he pictured himself striding over to Kalinoff, staring at the man solemnly, and uttering those historic words, "Dr. Livingston, I presume." That was one scene that would never take place.

It was growing colder by the hour. That meant that they would have to move over toward the Hot Side before the Sun sank beneath the horizon altogether.

McCracken, the most cheerful of the lot, had a glum face as he asked, "What do we do now, Captain?"

"First we eat, McCracken. Then we move toward the Sun. Just one word, McCracken. You like to shoot?"

"Yes, sir."

"Save your bullets. I have an idea we're going to need them before this little adventure of ours is finished."

Then Lamoureux sat down on a snowy rock, leaned back, and thought everything over. It was improbable now that any of his kids would ever get to Lunar Tech. Well, that wasn't anything to be sorry about. The life of ease and luxury of the place had ruined more than one promising youngster. His wife would have to get along with a single robot. It would do her good to wait on the family for a change. As for his relatives—to hell with them. Let them find somebody else to sponge on.

He was busy with these cheerful reflections when he heard McCracken shout, "Hey!"

A figure loomed out of the snow ahead.

The figure paused and stared at Lamoureux.

McCracken yelled, "Hey, Captain!"

The figure came forward, bowed, and showed its teeth. "Mr. Stanley, I presume?"

Looking back at it later, Lamoureux decided that this was the most mortifying moment of his life. He had been sent to save Kalinoff.

Instead, Kalinoff had saved him.

It was the screwball explorer, of course. Lamoureux recognized him at once. Kalinoff was a shrimp, a fraction of an inch below five feet in height, and he had a

face like a monkey's. Having taken a good look at him, Lamoureux felt, "My God, is this what we've been trying to rescue?"

Kalinoff was not alone. He was accompanied by a pair of penguin-like Mercurians, who looked just as sly and acted with as little intelligence as the one they had previously encountered. Lamoureux had no idea how Kalinoff had managed to get along with them.

Kalinoff, it seemed, was angry. "Why in hell," he demanded, "didn't you have sense enough to return to the ship?"

Lamoureux stared.

"You mean the *Astrolight* is still here?"

"Of course it's here. And the radio beam is on."

"You're sure—the beam is on?"

"Of all the nitwits to let loose on an unfriendly planet, you're about the worst. I've just told you it's on, haven't I? It's been on for the past two hours."

Lamoureux swallowed hard. "And Carvalho?"

"There's a man who I assume is Carvalho. He's tied up. I've got a couple of friends watching him to make sure he doesn't get away."

"Friends?"

"Like these." Kalinoff indicated the Mercurians. "Come on. I'd like to get back to Earth. There's a girl I've got to see."

"But who—what happened to Carvalho?"

"He seemed anxious to leave, so I pushed my fist down his throat. Incidentally, there was a radio going, with a code message."

"Short distance, radio?"

"Interplanetary. The ship's hull acted as a receiver, naturally. You could get the message anywhere on the planet by arranging a short distance automatic re-broadcast."

"So that's what Carvalho did."

"If I'm late this time," said Kalinoff worriedly, "she and I are finished. She's willing to put up with dates six months in advance, but there's a limit, and I've been late too often. And she's too nice to lose. Get a move on, quick."

Lamoureux, in a daze, complied. They were only an hour's journey from the ship, and, under Kalinoff's urging, they made it in forty minutes. Carvalho, looking terrified of the two Mercurians who were standing over him with their teeth showing, yelled, "Help!"

"Never mind him," Kalinoff ordered. "Hop into the ship."

"But what are we going to do with him?"

"Well, what's he been up to?"

Lamoureux explained briefly, and Kalinoff grunted. "You fellows are a bunch of screwballs, setting out on an expedition like this without proper equipment and proper information about Mercury." At the word "screwballs," Lamoureux winced,

but remained silent. Maybe it *was* deserved. Kalinoff went on, "As for Carvalho, that's simple. Leave him behind. He intended to maroon you, didn't he? Maroon him instead. But first let him send one interplanetary radio message to his friends."

"In code? We won't know what it is!"

Kalinoff grinned. "We'll leave his punishment up to him. Suppose he reports you've found me. Then his pals won't come for him, and he's going to stay here indefinitely."

"What if he reports you *haven't* been found?"

"Then they come for him, discover he's a liar, and there's hell to pay. Either way, he's in for a lousy time."

"They'll murder him."

"Oh, no. We'll let them know that we're reporting the facts of the case to the Interplanetary Commission. They'd never dare commit murder."

Lamoureux objected doubtfully, "Wouldn't the Mercurians kill him?"

"If he treats them right, they'll treat him right. They're not as intelligent as I thought at first—maybe you've discovered that—but they have their points."

"They're wonderful chess players."

"Fair," said Kalinoff critically. "Only fair. I always beat them, but then, naturally, I'm very good. Maybe that's why they admire me. They have great mathematical abilities, and they can visualize well, but their language is primitive and in some ways they're halfwits. There have been plenty of mathematical prodigies on Earth just like them—wonders at calculating, and fools at everything else. To hell with them. Let's get started."

"Wait a minute, Kalinoff. What about those huge beasts? Won't they be dangerous to Carvalho?"

"Oh, them." Kalinoff chuckled. "I certainly gave you some off-beam instructions before that radio of mine went on the blink. I really thought at first that those two mountains I described with the saddlebacked ridge between them would make a good landmark. Two days afterward, I discovered that the ridges were living creatures. The things have a habit of sheltering themselves from the Sun between a pair of mountains. They wrap their necks around their bodies, tuck their heads beside them, and you'd never know they were alive. They don't move for days at a time."

"But when they *do* move—"

"Leave them alone, and they leave you alone."

The Captain asked, "What about the rain and snow?"

"I may as well clear this up once and for all. The rain and snow were my doing. After I had told you to rely on the Mercurians and described the landmark, I discovered that the Mercurians were nitwits and the landmark a false alarm. That meant that, once you landed, you'd never find me except by accident. That put it up to me to find you."

"As you may have heard, normally there's no such thing as rain or snow on Mercury. But there is water. And there is a continual process of transfer going on. The water flows through subterranean channels to the Hot Side, evaporates, and is carried over in the air to the Cold Side. There it deposits on the ground eventually as ice, melts, and goes through the whole process again."

"Why doesn't it rain?"

"Because there's no dust in Mercury's air. The absence of a rapidly alternating day and night means that the air doesn't circulate on the same scale as on Earth. Practically no wind, combined with little erosion, means little dust. The water-laden air cools off and becomes super-saturated at the Twilight Zone. But there are no clouds, and there's no precipitation because the water needs either dust or ions to condense on. In a Wilson cloud chamber, an experimenter furnishes it with ions. Here on Mercury I furnished it with dust.

"I gave the Mercurians rifles and explosive bullets, and taught them to shoot into the air. It was quite a job, but they learned. The explosion spreads a cloud of dust, the water condenses, and you have rain or snow, depending on the temperature. I impressed it upon their brains, such as they are, that the presence of human beings calls for a Fourth of July celebration—shooting into the air. And there you are. I had the occurrence of rain and snow reported to me, moved toward wherever the snow was thickest, and found the ship."

"Another thing—"

"I've talked enough. That dame won't wait forever. Which will it be, Carvalho, the Lady or the Tiger?"

They listened in curiosity as Carvalho, tight-lipped, tapped out a short message in code. They didn't ask him what it was.

As the *Astrolight* drove upward away from Mercury, Lamoureux had one last glimpse of the Mercurians shooting into the air. The snow was coming down in enormous flakes two inches across, and Carvalho, staring after the ship, was shivering and cursing. After they reported the facts to the Interplanetary Commission, a ship would be sent to pick him up—but it might take some time.

"Let me tell you about this dame," said Kalinoff.

Lamoureux listened patiently, got out his contract, and waited, with pen ready, for the interplanetary screwball's signature.