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**BEWARE, THE USURPERS!**

**BY GEOFF ST. REYNARD**

# **The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Old Way, by Milton Lesser**

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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE OLD  
WAY \*\*\*

# **THE OLD WAY**



**By MILTON LESSER**

**A man could walk around the tiny asteroid  
in the space of a few hours. But Jerry had only  
minutes, to find and use—an invisible weapon!**

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Like I expected, the fairgrounds were crowded with thousands of the drifter-families waiting for the big blast-off tomorrow. They thronged about uncertainly, in anxious little knots, chattering friendly, meaningless things, making fast friends who would be forgotten in the bustle and competition, after blast-off.

Gramps stood apart from all this, and when he saw me he came running through the mob on spindly legs, waving his arms frantically so that I wouldn't miss him. As if I would. If there was anything more incongruous here on the Martian landscape, anything that seemed more out of place than did old Gramps, I didn't see it. Two hundred years ago in another homestead rush, maybe he would have fit. The only thing I know about that is what I read in books, but I could picture Gramps with his battered old corncob pipe and his wizened face, leading a team of mules or oxen or whatever animals they used.

"Hey, Jerry," he called. "Hey, kid, I got it!"

I'm no kid. I'm twenty-seven, six feet two, and I probably weigh twice as much as Gramps does, wringing wet. But that's the way he was.

"Where's Clair?" I asked him. I hadn't seen my wife in a month. She had gone to the Martian Fair with Gramps to put in a bid for one of the old derelict ships, and now I had come here to join them, with a dime, a quarter and a crumpled dollar bill hardly filling the emptiness of my jumper-pocket.

"That girl!" He whistled. "She's back at the ship now, cleaning and polishing, putting everything together with spit and string so you wouldn't know the old Karden Cruiser."

I felt something gnawing away, deep inside my stomach, and it wasn't just that I was hungry. "The *what?*" I demanded.

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Gramps smiled, and right then I could have seen him rocking on a chair on a little porch, with a garden full of rose bushes and crab grass. I could have seen him anyplace but here with Clair and me, on the eve of the great blast-off for the asteroid belt. "The *what?*" I said again.

"The old Karden Cruiser, Jerry. Neat little job. And cheap—they almost gave it away. You shoulda seen those durned fools. No one else bid for it, I had it all to myself, first bid."

I tried to be patient. "You didn't expect anyone else to bid for *that*, did you?"

He had a hurt look on his face. "Why not? A good ship, kid. When I was your age, younger, I went to Venus on one. I can remember—"

"That's it," I told him. "Fifty years ago the Karden might have been a good ship, but not now. Not now, Gramps. It's as obsolete as a pea-shooter. Will it run?"

"You're durned tootin' it'll run. What do you think I paid? Go ahead, guess."

Something was still gnawing at my stomach. Gramps had had three hundred dollars to purchase our ship and equipment. You could stretch three hundred dollars a long way if you bought wisely these days. "You tell me," I said.

"Hundred and fifty. 'Nother hundred and a quarter for supplies—"

There's some old saying about letting old dogs lie or not crying over spilled milk or some such thing, but anyway, I reminded him, "For another twenty-five or thirty dollars you could have got a Wilson '13, maybe even a twelve-bank Carpenter."

"Couldn't," Gramps said. "Kid, let me tell you, I saw the nicest *gui*-tar. One of them old Martian types with eight strings, you know. Twenty-five bucks...."

I looked at him a long time without saying anything. When you're down to just a few dollars in these depression years, everything counts, every last penny. But my folks had died in the panic and riots

of '24 and Gramps had reared me since almost before the time I could reach the wart on his knee.

"Let's go look at our Karden," I said.

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Gramps was beaming proudly. "There she is," he told me. "Section G, Row 14, Ship 7. Beauty, eh?"

As far as you looked, you couldn't see anything but the old ships, all lined up, row on row of them. Some glistening with new paint if they had been bought as early as yesterday and sprayed today, others still dull and cracked with caked jet-slag and the erosion of a dozen atmospheres, all with people scurrying in and out of them, getting new faces and new entrails for blast-off tomorrow.

The Karden squatted in row 14, a short, stubby grub-like boat whose jet-slag completely hid the original paint job. But I didn't want to say another thing about it. I just hoped the Karden could get us where we were going, even if it burped and hiccupped like a drunken driver all the way.

Clair opened the lock and I saw her red hair framed against the dark interior of the ship, and I hardly remembered Gramps was there. We'd been married two months, and separated for half that time, with me getting my last month's paycheck in New York so I'd have money for the liner-fare to Canal City.

Clair cried, "Welcome aboard ship. Captain Brooks, wel.... Umm-m, Captain, that was nice.... Umm-m, again...."

Gramps coughed. "You two gonna stand there mooning over each other all afternoon, or do we get some work done?"

"It's just about all finished," Clair told him. She snuggled up close once more and then skipped out of my arms, leading us through the lock and into the Karden.

It looked more like the inside of a packing crate than a spaceship. Ideally, the old Kardens were two-man cruisers, at a time when you

strapped yourself into a bunk and just about remained there until you hit atmosphere. Now Clair had readied three makeshift bunks, and our supplies stood piled tight against the bulkheads and as high as the ceiling in several places. I had to take Clair's word that the ship's old hull was sealed and could be pressurized—there wasn't enough space for me to see for myself.

The trip had left me a bit bleary, and Clair, who had worked all day, yawned a little while she opened a can of beans and bacon for supper. We sat around against the packing cases and we smoked. Then I checked a few things which remained to be checked, and I suggested we turn in. Clair nodded, but Gramps said no, he had a little unfinished business yet.

I needed sleep, every bit of it I could get, for the grueling run tomorrow. I leaned back and stretched out, with my feet sticking out a good half a foot beyond the edge of the bunk, and then I heard Gramps' unfinished business.

The nasal twang of the eight-stringed Martian guitar blended with the dubious qualities of Gramps' voice:

*He'll hug and he'll kiss you  
And tell you more lies  
Than the cross ties on the railroad  
Or the stars in the sky....*

---

At an hour before sunrise we tuned in our radio and heard Governor Eddington's voice cut through the static. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it is now exactly fifty-nine minutes and thirty-seven seconds until blast-off. Let me review the rules for you, to avoid any unpleasantness later.

"One. No ship is to leave before the signal. Any ship which does so is automatically disqualified, and your claim will not be recognized.



"Two. Any asteroid is fair prey, but the government strongly recommends that you consider two items. First, those asteroids which lie within the belt itself and which do not have overly eccentric orbits are preferable since the government supply ships will visit them much more frequently. Second, you will benefit by selecting an asteroid with one or more of the old abandoned mining domes, for two reasons. With slight repairs you can live within the domes, and also their existence assures you of profitable mineral material.

"Three. Vesta, the government base within the Belt, is not to be landed upon.

"Four. Each ship is restricted to one asteroid, and once your selection is made it must be a permanent one.

"Five. No more than one ship can claim a given asteroid, and the automatic chronometer within each ship will radio the moment of landing to Vesta, thus taking care of any priority claims.

"Six. Claim jumping will be considered by the Federal Worlds Government as an act of piracy and will be punished accordingly.

"Seven. In the event that an asteroid is abandoned for any reason, a new ship may claim it at once, and the departing ship can claim no other asteroid.

"If you have any questions, relay them to your Section Official in the fifty-five minutes which remain. Good luck to all of you...."

The rules were thorough, all right. This could turn out to be a two-way proposition which would help both the Government and the families, and the Government wanted it to be a rousing success. In the first place, there were literally thousands of families, all waiting tensely for blast-off. None of them had been earning sufficient income, thanks to the depression following the final East-West war on Earth, and now it was hoped that they could earn their keep by mining the asteroids.

Further, I knew that the Government had been forced to abandon its mineral deposits on all the asteroids except Vesta, and now it could use the extra wealth from the silent mines which waited on a thousand little worlds in deep space between Mars and Jupiter.

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I sat smoking cigarette after cigarette, until Clair reminded me that the supply wasn't infinite. She pored over our charts, studying the three or four asteroids which had seemed most promising, looking up with a smile now and then to watch Gramps strum his guitar and sing about a fly with a blue tail.

The radio barked, "Three minutes to blast-off!"

Outside, I could hear the roar of a thousand rocket engines tuning up, and a shroud of smoke and fire blanketed the field.

"Two minutes!"

"Hey, Gramps," I said. "Put down that banjo and strap yourself into a bunk. We're set to go—"

"It's a guitar," he told me. "A *gui*-tar. Okay, kid, plenty of time."

I stood up and helped Clair into her bunk, kissing her lightly on the lips. "I'm a little scared," she said.

"Don't be silly. Nothing to be afraid of, honey." I was glad she couldn't feel me trembling.

Gramps was next, and I saw to it that his straps were fastened properly, then I sat down again in the pilot-chair, buckling a heavy leather belt across my thighs.

"Thirty seconds!"

I remember wondering vaguely if the Karden could get us to the Belt in one piece, and not hours behind every other ship. Then a shrill whistle outside was going "beep-beep-beep!" and I pulled the firing lever back all the way.

---

I grinned at Clair. "How do you like weighing exactly nothing?"

"You always told me I was a little too skinny, Captain Brooks, sir!"

Gramps scowled darkly. "Aw, you two kids are just making fun of the Karden, that's all. So what if we ain't got any gravity to speak of?"

The Karden had been built before each ship had its own little gravity unit, and no one had ever bothered to refit her. Clair had set up the guide-ropes right after acceleration, and now we floated around the cramped little cabin of the ship if we weren't careful. I had to admit Gramps was right, however. A little inconvenience like this didn't really matter, and the important thing was the fact that I could look out the port and see all the little motes of the thousand other ships gleaming in the sunlight like tiny space-born fireflies. The Karden was definitely holding its own.

"She's built for speed," Gramps told us. "In the old days there was no such thing as gravity-equalizers anyhow. This soft new generation...."

I winked at Clair and said, "Go on. Go play your fiddle, Gramps, and leave astrogation to the soft new generation."

"It's a banjo," he said. "I mean a *gui*-tar!"

Through the fore-port there was a haze of milky white which in a few hours would separate out into the thousands of little planetoids, each a tiny mote following its predestined course around the sun. Actually, some weren't so small. There was the big bulk of Ceres, with a diameter close to five-hundred miles, Vesta, and some of the other big babies, but for the most part the asteroids were tiny cosmic specks, less than a mile across.

"Okay," Clair said, "which one?"

That was a good question. You had to consider several things. First, some ships sped through space faster than our Karden, and they'd claim the really first-rate asteroids before we even reached the Belt. Of the second-raters, you had to consider what sort of mineral deposits they had, which would be the simplest to mine, and so forth.

"How's about 4270?" I said.

She checked the charts. "Ummm-m. Diameter, half a mile. Eccentricity of orbit, .17. Tilted to the ecliptic, .08. Two deserted

mining domes, excellent condition. High-grade copper ore, no power tools needed. Sounds swell, Jerry."

Gramps stopped tuning his guitar. "Copper? Did I hear you say copper?" He snorted. "In my day men went prospecting for diamonds and other precious stones. Or for gold or pitchblend...."

"Ever find any?" I wanted to know.

"Well, no. But that doesn't mean I couldn't have. I was just too busy with the women on the outworlds—"

---

I looked at Clair and Clair looked at me. "4270," we said together, and when Clair checked the charts again she found that its present orbital position was just a few degrees off to the left.

"Two hours," I grunted. "Maybe three. If we're lucky, she'll be deserted...."

Clair smiled. "Two domes there, Jerry. Hah—a winter home and a summer home."

"Ain't no seasons on an asteroid," Gramps said very seriously. "Of course, if you two kids want, you can have one dome and I can have the other. Might be a good idea at that."

Clair told him not to be silly, that we couldn't get along without his guitar playing anyway, and then I was busy turning us the few degrees which would bring us into orbital conjunction with 4270. Ahead and all around us the little sparks which were spaceships fanned out in all directions, hurtling for their homesteads out here beyond Mars. It was nice to know that in just a few hours—if luck held—we'd be setting up home, living in our own place instead of the crowded barracks they set up for transient workers back on Earth. Nice? Hell, that's all we'd been thinking about since the announcement came through six months ago.

You really feel a small turn in an old Karden Cruiser rocketing outward at top speed. I could feel the gravity slamming me back

down against the right-hand cushions of the pilot-chair, and I heard Gramps muttering something under his breath. With Clair, he had remained out of his bunk so that he could watch us blast in toward the asteroid, and now I could picture each of them grasping stanchions for all they were worth, peering out of the port.

I couldn't turn around to watch, of course. This landing on a tiny asteroid is tricky business. You can't just come in and set her down as easy as all that, floating in on the cushion of a five-hundred mile atmosphere.

The Karden came in slowly, at right angles to the orbit, and I saw that 4270 was an amorphous hunk of greenish rock, craggy and mountainous, if you call a ponderously turning rough-hewn slab of stone less than three thousand feet across mountainous.

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I worked the studs slowly, feeling the breath go out of my lungs with each one, and soon we had executed a turn of almost ninety degrees, with 4270 tumbling along parallel to us now, just a few miles off in the void. You could feel its weak gravity, tugging like a child's fingers might tug at your overcoat as you ran in another direction.

I pulled up all the studs together, and I could breathe again. For a moment it seemed that 4270 wouldn't be strong enough to grab us and hold us, to reel us in slowly like a fisherman with a whopper at the end of his line. But her distance didn't increase, either—and we went spinning along through the void with her like a lopsided dumbbell, the tiny planetoid and the smaller Karden.

Soon 4270 grew in the fore-port, and quite suddenly she wasn't alongside us any longer, but down below. Every time you come in for planet-fall you get that sensation, but it never ceases to be strange—one moment you're heading toward something which is in front of you, the next you're hurtling down upon it headfirst.

Only with 4270's light gravity, we didn't exactly hurtle. It was more like floating, slowly at first and then faster, and then I decided I'd better give one short blast from our forerockets to brake the fall. I pressed the stud and waited. There was nothing. Momentarily, the fore-tubes had jammed. Of all the times....

I heard Clair calling my name, "Jerry, Jerry!" and then 4270's jagged tumbling surface expanded up all around us and the planetoid didn't look so small any more. It looked huge, it could have been Jupiter. There came a grinding bump, and I thought I could hear my safety strap snapping. The black-light dials of the instrument panel zoomed up at me from someplace far beyond 4270, it seemed, and I met them head first with a hundred rocket tubes snorting inside my skull.

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"Good morning," Clair said cheerfully.

"Good *what?*" I answered, not so cheerful.

"You slept for twelve hours, so now it's morning."

"And darn you," Gramps chimed in. "You made one hell of a mess out of that instrument board. Why don't you be a mite careful...."

"Hey!" I sat up suddenly, and the pinwheels began to go around in my head like at the Martian Fair. Only bigger. Brighter. "After that crash, did the chronometer radio our landing here to Vesta?"

Clair nodded. "I thought of that. I radioed Vesta for confirmation, and it came. But right after that the radio went blooie, so now any music we hear will have to come from Gramps."

"I can oblige," Gramps said, running for his guitar, but I shook my head.

"Hold it! We've got a lot of work to do."

"Yeah, sure," said Gramps. "Only what did you think we was doing while you slept peaceful like a baby? We wasn't playing or singing, I'll tell you that."



Clair explained, "We were exploring, Jerry, after we made sure you were all right. We're less than a hundred yards from one of the domes here, and it looks darned good. Of course, I don't know yet if it can be pressurized or if there'll be any leaks, but I think we can answer yes to the first question and no to the second."

"What about the second dome?"

"Just about like this one, half a mile around the planet. Living quarters in both, plenty of abandoned equipment. You also can do open pit mining until you burrow clean through the planet. Rich lode, too, I'd say."

"Good," I told her, and I stood up a bit shakily and took her in my arms. I kissed her soundly.

"Jerry. Come on, stop. How can we get any work done this way, Jerry?... Ooo, Jerry...."

A few moments later, we all donned our spacesuits.

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Effortlessly, we carried great stacks of supplies across 4270's crumbled, broken surface. The light gravity seemed hardly to exist at all, and I think I could have lifted the Karden Cruiser bodily if I desired. We made exactly two trips from the ship to the dome's airlock, our grav-plates clomping up and down soundlessly under the space-boots—ordinarily it'd have taken us a whole day to unload the Karden.

The horizon was a crazy distorted thing no more than three hundred feet away, where the planetoid's surface bent away almost at right angles, and right on the crest against the blackness of the sky rested our Karden. It looked pretty good on a place which Gramps told me Clair had called ghastly when they first stepped outside to explore, but the dome looked even better.

We stood within the lock now, and with a little squeal of delight which I picked up over our suit intercoms, Clair ran for one of the dull metal

structures.

"Look in here," she called back over her shoulder, and I entered through the doorway just in time to see her unscrewing her helmet.

I yelled something loud over the intercom, I don't remember what, and then I flicked off the grav-plate button in the glove of my left hand and dove at Clair.

I caught her just above the mid-section and we went down in a heap. I switched on my grav-plates again.

"Just to show me how strong you are," she pouted, "you don't have to come flying through the air and landing on my belly. Lucky you weigh less than a pound without the grav-plates. Only quit trying to be funny."

"Who's trying to be funny? There's only two things wrong with taking your helmet off now. First, we haven't warmed this place, and you'd have frozen your pretty little head off in half a minute. Second, there's less air here than in a vacuum tube, and even after we turn on the air generators I want to examine the dome for possible leaks before you go around taking off your helmet. See?"

"Y-yes." She suddenly looked frightened. "It's just that the place looks so warm and homey, Jerry."

It did. We were standing in a foyer and I could see a couple of bedrooms off on the left, comfortable, all metal and metal fibre construction. Further down the hall there was a pantry and when Clair opened the door we found it to be full of canned goods, all glued to the shelf lightly against the tricks which could be played by the negligible gravity. Beyond that, we found a first-class, compact kitchen unit, and you should have seen Clair's eyes light up. If there's anything that makes a girl sparkle all over, it's the first sight of a good kitchen over which she's to have domain. You can be anywhere—New York or here on 4270 or out on Pluto, it wouldn't matter. She hardly heard a word I said for the next ten minutes, as I patiently lined up the things we must do first. Three things, primarily. We had to start the heating units within the dome, do the same for the air generators, and check the dome itself for any leakage.

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Gramps took care of items one and two, and I felt an urge to take off my helmet without checking further. But that was silly. We had played the game right thus far, and it would be pointless to get into serious trouble over a thing like that.

So for the next fifteen minutes, Clair and I just knocked off our grav-plates and swarmed all over the inside of the dome like a couple of trained houseflies. From this height I could see almost half way around my side of the little planet, and Clair's line of vision probably came close to meeting mine someplace around the equator. And after a time I was satisfied that my side of the dome couldn't lose as much as a molecule of air.

"Tight as a thermos bottle," I called over the intercom. "How's yours, Clair?"

Her answer was a scream. It jarred me from my precarious hold on the under surface of the dome, and I went floating to the ground as light as a feather.

Clair still clung up on top yelling so loud that the intercom only reproduced the sound as garbled noise and static. And I couldn't do anything but float down slowly, with Gramps motioning me down with his arms, as if I could do anything to hurry.

Clair scrambled down her side of the dome and waited there next to Gramps, hands on hips, looking up at me like a vexed mistress might look at her lap dog when he didn't come to her call soon enough. But she looked more composed now, and she took off her helmet. The air situation, then, was all right, and I unscrewed my own fishbowl and let it float down beside me.

The air was a bit musty, but otherwise good, and I judged the temperature to be about fifty degrees now. Ever strip in mid air? I peeled off my spacesuit and watched it float down too, agonizingly slow, and finally I alighted in my leather jumper.

Clair said, "It's a—"

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She never finished the sentence. Something jarred the ground under me like a miniature earthquake, and I sat down hard.

"A ship," Gramps said. "Clair saw a ship coming in on the other side!"

"Now it's landed," Clair told us. It wasn't necessary. That jar could only have been produced by a ship or a man-sized meteor.

"So what?" I wanted to know. "So someone made a mistake and landed here. Our claim's already in. When their claim goes through, Vesta'll tell them."

"Sure," Gramps brightened.

Clair smiled too, as if to say, you're right, so what are we worrying about?

Only my enthusiasm didn't last long. My reasoning was tilted. It was warped. Crazy. "Uh-uh," I shook my head. "It isn't as simple as that. First place, Vesta was supposed to beam a broadcast all over the Belt, telling who landed where."

"Hmm-m," Gramps mumbled.

"Maybe," Clair said. "Maybe. And that ship, Jerry, it was too big. Much too big to be one of the family ships. One of those long, tapering, narrow-finned cruisers, brand new."

I was trying to digest this latest bit of information, when Clair popped her helmet back on her head and ran for the airlock. I called to her, but she couldn't hear me—she was going to see just who our visitors were.

"Fiery young thing!" Gramps snorted, but I hardly heard him. I zipped myself inside my suit as fast as I could and started to run for the lock. Only I didn't. I flew. I had forgotten to snap on the grav-plates, and once again I had that agonizing sensation of floating groundward.

I made it, cursing, then I tore through the lock, in record time. When I reached the Karden, Clair came darting around its other side and ran toward me, out of breath, half stumbling. We got back inside the dome, and I said:

"Well?"

"Oh, Jerry. Jerry!"

"What is it, hon?" Clair got excited easily, but not this way.

"Some men were out of the ship and I hailed them. Someone shot at me—"

"*What?*"

"Yes! He didn't say a word. He just lifted an ugly-looking gun and fired. A big column of rock disappeared right next to me, Jerry. Just like this." She snapped her fingers. "He shot at me with a disintegrator. A *disintegrator*, Jerry...."



I gulped. How would you feel being trapped on a rock less than half a mile across, without any weapons, with your radio shot to hell, without enough fuel in your ship to get you half way to any other asteroid, when you knew that around on the night side were maybe a dozen armed men, claim jumpers, ready to kill you on sight?

I gulped again.



"Take it easy," Gramps advised us. "Now, just you both relax. There has to be a way outa this, only we ain't found it yet."

The only part of his statement I could agree with was the very last, only I had to admit he had a point there. Just wasn't any use, as

Gramps would say, for Clair and me to go running around like a couple of chickens without their heads, the way we'd been doing for the past few hours.

"Okay," I said. "Let's look at this thing. Let's see exactly where we stand."

"More like it," Gramps nodded his head.

Clair said, "Whoever they are, they landed here illegally. And they want our copper...."

I brightened, but only for a moment. "No. I think you're off the beam, honey. If it's our claim alone they're after, why just this stinking little asteroid? There are lots bigger and lots richer, yet they chose this one. They want something else. But what?"

Clair said we'd come back to that later. "First," she said, "just what can we expect them to do? I mean now, or in the immediate future."

I considered. "Well, temporarily at least, they probably won't do a thing. Or will they?"

"You're durned right they won't," Gramps said. "They won't bust this dome up right away to get at us, nossir. First they'll see if they can get us without doing that."

It made good sense. Whatever their purpose, both domes could be a valuable asset, and maybe they'd play with us, cat and mouse, before they applied the disintegrators to our dome.

"Sure," said Gramps. "Just like the old days of the East-West war when it spread out to the planets. An army can't be everyplace at once, 'specially not all over the System. Right?"

"Right," Clair said, and I nodded.

"Hey," Gramps suggested, "you don't suppose they are Ruskies, do you?"

"No," I said, smiling. I reminded him that the war had been over before I was born.



"Hmm-m, yes. Did I ever tell you the time I was fighting near Gossena on Ganymede? I was a foot-soldier, y'know."

---

He had told us many times and I said so, but he didn't bat an eyelash. "Anyway," he said, "it was a war of nerves. We tried to scare them, and they tried to scare us, one way or another, and the side that did the most scaring won. Us."

Clair wanted to know what all that had to do with this.

"Easy, kid. Just hold your horses. These guys on the other side of 4270 will be using a war of nerves with us, a real simple one. They know it'll be maybe a month before the government ship comes—"

"What about the radio?" I said. "Won't they think we called for help?"

"Nossirree. Not if they're smart. If we did call for help they could hightail it out of here, pronto. The way Clair describes that ship, they could beat anything the Government has in the Belt, anything short of a battle-cruiser, and there ain't none out beyond Mars. No, if they're smart they'll have to figure that something went wrong with our radio, or we'd a called for help right away. It's an easy gamble for them to take—they can always zoom away."

Everything Gramps had said was beginning to make a lot of good sense, and I motioned him to continue.

"Sooo, their war of nerves is easy. They just wait for us to make the first wrong move, and then they get us. Blop! Real simple with a disintegrator."

He wasn't kidding. All you had to do was disintegrate a person, his ship, his belongings, and you'd have committed a pretty air-tight murder. Of course, the old legality about a corpse had been chucked out the window years ago when the first disintegrators were developed, but in a case like this, the only thing the government would have to go on was the fact that our landing here on 4270 had

been recorded. Not much. Pitifully inadequate. And I told them that now.

"Swell," Clair said. "Only please, Jerry, cut it out. You sound like you're crying at your own funeral. I'm scared...."

"Sure," said Gramps, "we ain't licked. We'll just have to figure out a war of nerves just a bit better than theirs. War of nerves, that's it. I can remember, outside Gossena.... The Ruskies employed Martian mercenaries, y'know...."

"That won't be easy," Clair reminded him. "Especially since we don't even know why that ship came here. We can't even find out."

I grinned. "Who says we can't?" I picked up my fishbowl helmet and plopped it ungently over my head.

"What the heck are you doing?" Clair asked me.

My voice must have sounded muffled from under the helmet as I said: "Simple. Our intercom can pick up theirs. As soon as some of them pop outside their dome and start talking, we'll know."

That much was true. The intercom could pick up any similar conversation on the entire tiny planet. It could do that, but it wasn't directional. In other words, you'd hear voices, all right, only you wouldn't know where they were coming from. One trouble, however, marred the idea: you couldn't tell how long it would be before some of our visitors decided to lift themselves up and venture outside the dome. Might be any time now, or it might not be for days, or it might be just once, and then briefly, for as long as it would take them to stroll to our dome, disintegrate the lock, march through, and turn us into three specks of molecular dust.

I sat grimly with the helmet over my head, waiting. All I got was static.

---

We took turns, and our hopes for a happy home life out here on 4270 were shot to hell. One of us would sit listening, head buried in

his helmet, another would bustle about, keeping the functions of the dome in order, and the third would sleep.

It was my turn to sleep, and I can remember the beginning of what would have been a corker of a dream. The visitors in the other spaceship weren't men at all, but hideous monsters from some nameless extra-Solar place, trying to decide where in the Solar System they'd like to live. They seemed ornery enough to decide on crowded Earth.

I never knew for sure. One of them was breathing down my neck, then poking me, and I sat up fast. It was Gramps, and he was scowling at me frantically inside his fishbowl helmet.

I didn't have to be told. My own helmet sat securely on my shoulders in a matter of seconds, and I listened. You could hardly tell the voices apart, but from the conversation you knew that there were two of them.

"... all over this planetoid. Aw, what's the use? The boss just had a wrong notion, that's all."

"I dunno. Can't be sure. This is a small place, yeah: but there's enough wrinkles and folds to keep you looking for months. We ain't covered nothing yet. Also, how's about inside the other dome. It could be there, eh?"

"Well, it better not be. If those guys in there find it before us...." I didn't know what "it" was but I liked this voice better. It was pessimistic, and the more pessimistic our visitors were, the better I'd like it.

"No, it ain't in the other dome." The rat, I thought. "It wouldn't be in either dome, stupid, or the miners here before the depression woulda found it. I was wrong—it's outside somewhere, all right."

Clair sat with us now, hunched over elbows on knees, listening through her own helmet.

"So we just march around this lousy rock until we find it."

"Yeah. But take it easy, stupid. It'll be worth it. A weapon like that, what power...."

"I don't know. We better find it soon. The wife's in Chawka City on Io, and there's a damn saloon-keeper there—"

"Haw, haw, haw! A family man, a regular family man, that's what we got with us. But don't worry, we'll find it. The Ruskie's left that thing here someplace, and don't worry, we'll get it. The boss ain't no dodo...."

"Well, I'd feel a lot better if we got rid of those guys in the other dome. It'd be a lot safer."

"Just shut up. When the boss tells us to do something, we'll do it. Otherwise, stop yammering."

So our pessimistic friend wanted us dead too? I hoped that his wife would commit the unpardonable crime with every man-jack in Chawka City. It would serve the rat right.

Then there was a lot of garbled static and no more talking. Evidently the two men had entered their dome again and had removed their helmets. No more talking, exactly as if they had ceased to exist. And after the one way contact had been established, it was almost eerie.

---

Gramps was jubilant. "There y'are, kids. Simple as that."

"As what?" I said.

"Kid, don't you read your history?"

"He goes in for lurid novels," Clair said.

"Waal, it's like this. Right at the end of the war it was rumored the Ruskie's developed a super-duper weapon. Something really hot, that would make the atom-bomb look like a kid's squirt gun. They didn't have a chance to use it, and when the war was over they hid it out here in the Belt somewheres, thinking maybe they'd get another chance. So them guys think this is the place. Hmm-m, maybe they're right, and if we could find that weapon before them.... Oh boy!"

I shook my head. It was a pretty little story, with one major flaw. "There's no such weapon," I said. "I remember the history part of it, all right. But I also remember what followed. Government sent out hundreds of ships, in ten years they combed the Belt. No secret asteroid. No Ruskie cache. No weapon. No nothing."

"Well, these guys are looking—"

I told him, "On Earth, people still look for Captain Kid's treasure, and for sea serpents, too. They just won't find either. There aren't any. Nope, Gramps—there's just a lot of copper on this asteroid, that's all. If we could convince our visitors of that, they'd get out quick."

"Well, we can't," Clair said. "You heard those two guys. Their boss is as sure of finding that weapon here as he's sure of anything."

I began to smile, and I think I even laughed a little, because they both looked at me queerly. "That's it," I said.

"That's what?" Evidently, my enthusiasm had not carried to Clair.

"The way we'll do it. We'll use Gramps' idea, the war of nerves...."

"Hot dog!" Gramps purred like an impossibly ancient kitten.

"We'll agree with them. Okay, there's a weapon here, a pretty awful thing. We'll talk over our intercom and let them know we know it too."

"Uh-uh," said Clair, definitely interested. "They'll probably be listening, just like us. Go on, Jerry, let's hear more."

"Sure. And we'll go a step further."

---

"I got you!" Gramps cried. "We'll really find the weapon." There just was no convincing a die-hard romantic who had fought in the last war.

"Yes and no," I said. "There is no weapon, none here and none anyplace else in the Belt. *Only we'll make believe that we find one.* A war of nerves, Gramps. Maybe we can scare them the hell off this planet."

"Hmm-m," said Gramps. "I knew you'd come around to my way of thinking."

Because we all liked the idea, we continued to speak of it for hours, and this is the way things boiled down.

Item. It had to be an awful weapon, something that would frighten a man and make the little hackles stand up on the back of his neck, and something which apparently could be applied most readily here on 4270. They were convinced that a weapon did exist, good: they'd believe almost anything we could concoct.

Item. This one I didn't like. Since our two talkative friends had intimated that their boss knew the weapon couldn't be within our dome, we'd have to go outside for the weapon and let them catch a glimpse or two of us prowling about. That could be dangerous, because they could pop us off with their disintegrators any time they got the urge. Which would probably be as soon as they saw something tangible at which to fire. We'd have to flit about like shadows. Less than shadows.

Item. We'd start "broadcasting" to them, and we'd pretend we didn't know we were doing it. The bigger the lie the better it would sound, and we'd have to start almost at once. This could be fun.

Item. We had nothing concretely in mind beyond that. But the important thing, as Gramps put it, was this: we'd be in the driver's seat, conducting the war exactly how we wanted, and they'd have to sit around guessing.

Gramps was chipper enough to strum a few notes on his guitar.

---

For three Earth days by the clock in our living quarters, we managed to stay out of trouble. And I think we were getting somewhere, too. Gramps would go outside with Clair, poking around amid the rubble, talking about how close they were coming. Then they'd let themselves be seen, just for the briefest moment, and they'd scoot back inside our dome, fast.



Probably, it was pretty safe at that. We could tell from what they said via intercom that our visitors were interested. And, if they thought we knew something, they'd be in no hurry to kill us. At the most, they'd want to take us alive and see what they could learn.

Gramps and Clair were outside, talking, and as I listened, I got an idea. If I went outside, too, our enemy would be confused into believing there were more of us. I could invent a few new voices and a few names and they might be led to believe we had a whole army here with us. So what if our ship was small? This could have been the last of several trips....

"Confuse 'em," Gramps had said once. "Get 'em on the ground and tramp all over 'em with a war of nerves. Bury 'em under a pack of terrible lies, that's what." I'd do it.

I stood atop a pinnacle of rock and made myself look busy. If they had any lookouts perched high within their dome, they wouldn't miss seeing me, and I was gambling everything on the fact that they wouldn't shoot because they wanted to learn something from us.

Then I popped behind my pinnacle of rock, out of their range of vision, and I hauled myself up the other side. I did this a few times, and they probably thought half a dozen of us swarmed all over the rock, exploring.

I said, "If this ain't the place, I'll eat my hat."

"Can't tell, George," I said in a higher voice. "Might be. Might not. But we're getting close, that's for sure. Good thing we found those old Ruskie charts."

Oh, I was having a glorious time. I said, for George, "We could blast those other guys out of their dome any time we want. So why are we waiting?"

I was getting cocky, and I used a deep bass this time. "You know the chief wants to have some fun with that weapon. 'No place better to try it,' he told me, 'than on our friends over there.' Just wait."

---

An inspiration hit me, all at once. I had our weapon. "Yeah," this was my George voice again, "but what an awful way to die. I wonder if those charts are really true; you press a button, and anyone around who happens to be in contact with iron or steel just gets broiled alive."

I poured it on in my middle-sized voice. "That's it, okay. The charts wouldn't lie. Can you imagine what those Ruskies could have done with that in the War?"

"Uh-huh. That woulda hit everyone. You carry a blaster, it's steel. Disintegrator, too. Wear a spacesuit, you also get broiled. Go near a radio, same thing. Man, it scares you: hope the chief knows what he's doing."

"He knows," my good new friend George said, and because I figured they had heard enough for now of my terribly selective yet horribly universal weapon, I marched off my pinnacle and made my way back over the rubble toward our dome. I chuckled softly to myself. Clair and Gramps had doubtlessly heard of my new weapon via their intercoms, and I thought they'd be mightily pleased. It had infinite possibilities in this war of nerves.

They were waiting for me outside the dome-lock, and I thought that was funny because I had expected to find them within the dome.

And then I ran. One, two, three figures stood within the dome, staring out solemnly at Gramps and Clair. I reached them and I tried the lock. I didn't have to—I don't think I could have entered with a blow torch.

I looked at Clair and Clair looked at me, and then we both looked at Gramps. He shrugged eloquently enough, and after taking one last angry look at the three men within our dome, we turned and walked away. The angry looks made them smile, as we left one of them even thumbed his nose at us. That gesture, too, was eloquent. It said, *suckers!*

We retreated to the base of my pinnacle of rock, where we couldn't be seen from either dome. What had happened was simple. In my enthusiasm I had left our dome deserted, and apparently our trio of

friends back there had found it that way. The dome-locks, of course, are manipulated from within, and there's no way to secure them from the outside. So the trio had walked in, closed the lock behind them, and we were stuck out on the cold, dark, airless surface of 4270.

I tried to scratch my head and nearly succeeded in cracking my helmet with a leatheroid glove. Gramps and Clair had gone out before me: they had perhaps an hour's air supply left. Maybe I had three, with luck.

The Karden didn't have enough air within its old hulk now to satisfy a lungfish in suspended animation, and by the time we could get its old generators working again, we'd be three asphyxiated corpses.

So, we could do two things. We could wait out in the open like sitting ducks and wait for the unknown enemy to take us, or we could just sit here near our pinnacle of rock and suffocate.

I cursed myself soundly, but I stopped and tried to comfort her when I saw that Clair was crying. It isn't easy, not through a spacesuit and not when you think you'll be dead in not much more than minutes.

Gramps felt the fear too, he was muttering to himself. Clair murmured. "Jerry.... Oh, Jerry ... I don't want to die!"

---

I had to think fast. I had to think faster than I ever thought in my life, and generally I like to explore my way around a problem, looking at it from all angles. But the air left for Gramps and Clair could be measured in minutes now, and mine wasn't much more.

I said, "What are you worrying about? George and Harry and the other boys will have that thing rigged up in a couple of hours, sure. We'll give those guys in both domes a little bit of hell. Won't be a one left alive." I tried to make the butterflies remain in my stomach, to have them go anyplace but in my voice. It almost didn't work.

Clair and Gramps looked at me like I might be crazy or something, and I raised a gloved finger up and tried to line it up in front of my

mouth to tell them to shut up.

Gramps said, "George and Harry?"

"Of course. They found it half an hour ago, and now they're setting it up. Just a matter of time, so relax."

I squatted down on my hands and knees, making the gesture for silence again. I found a jagged little rock and started to trace lines in the powdery pumice. It was messy, but they could understand it. I wrote:

GO TO THEIR OLD DOME AND GIVE UP. YOUR AIR WONT LAST. THEY WON'T KILL. SCARED. QUESTION YOU ABOUT WEAPON. REMEMBER WHAT GEORGE & HARRY SAID ABOUT WEAPON BEFORE, BUT PLAY A LITTLE DUMB. LEAVE REST TO ME.

I waited while I saw them reading it, then I rubbed it out. Clair shook her head. Her eyes told me plainly enough that she didn't want to die, but that she'd rather die out here with me than otherwise.

Gramps looked like he would rather be sitting someplace comfortable with his guitar, but he was trying to smile a little.

I crouched and wrote again, just three words:

PLEASE GO. NOW.

I erased the line with my boots and I waited, then I turned around for a long time and didn't look back at them. When I did, they were two tiny figures on the twisted, broken landscape, walking toward the second dome.

---

For a while I waited, and then I swarmed all over my pinnacle again, like George and Harry and anyone else who might have been around. They could come and get me, of course, but I figured they wouldn't. Then they might never find the weapon. That was their dilemma, not mine. Mine was to do something along the lines of Gramps' war of nerves, and do something good, before my air ran out.

I said, "Watch it, George. Take it easy. Don't you think the chief ought to be around before you try anything?"

I climbed off the pinnacle so no one could see me. "Naw," I made George say. "I know what I'm doing. F'r gosh sakes, what could happen? I got the charts right here. I wanta hurry and get back to the wife in Canal City. Some damn bus driver...." I'd make it sound like their own story, and maybe they'd believe.

"Well, okay," my Harry said dubiously.

George sighed. "There. That does it. Now—watch."

Silence. I watched thirty seconds tick off on my suit clock, then I made Harry scream:

"George! Good God, George.... Arrgh!"

I hoped the scream was a good one. Honest, it almost scared me. Poor George and Harry: I had killed them off quick enough. Now I had to invent new characters. For a brief moment I wondered what had happened to Clair and Gramps, but then I pushed them out of my mind. I couldn't afford to think of that now.

I let six minutes pass. It was agonizing, but I did it. Then I did my best to invent two new voices.

"So, here's the spot, Mike. Funny, I don't see them."

Mike had a high, squeaky voice. "Hah-hah, don't worry, chief. They'll be around."

"I don't find your humor amusing. So—Mike. Mike! Look...."

I let my voice trail off. If this wasn't so damned serious, it could have been amusing. I was really living the part.

Mike said: "God, chief, both of 'em. Shrivelled up like that, burned to a crisp. Chief—"

"What can you do? I told them not to play games with it until I came, and they just didn't know how to work the damper. Fools, they could have killed us all. Well, suppose we take care of those people in the domes."

"You mean like this, chief?"

"Certainly, like this. No one asked them to butt in here."

---

I didn't say anything else for a while. I could feel myself sweating under the helmet, and momentarily, at least, I had run out of things to

say.

Someone else came to my rescue. For the first time, one of the other party attempted direct intercom communication.

"Hey you out there," a voice said. "This is Reardon, in charge of this outfit." He sounded afraid. "Lay off or we'll blast these two prisoners I got...."

"You're telling me to lay off?" I demanded, trying to think of something to say. "You're telling me to lay off? That's rich."

"What do you mean?" The voice was still frightened, and I began to feel a little better. They had fallen for this so far all the way.

"What do I care what you do to those two? They're a couple of homesteaders who happened to barge in here, an old man and a girl. Go ahead, kill 'em. What's the difference, you'll follow in a couple of minutes."

That got him. "Wait," he said. "Hold it, please."

I yawned, loud enough for the intercom to pick it up. I hoped I wasn't overdoing it. "Mike," I drawled, "set that thing up so we can finish the job and get out of here, eh? Now, be careful. Connect that dampening rig like that, that's it. Careful. Just make sure the pole fits into that hole real snug. There you are. You did it...."

"You *sure* you wanta use this thing on them, chief?" I had Mike say.

"Why in hell not? Come on. Now!"

The voice over the intercom was almost a shriek. "Stop! For the love of heaven please stop! Cut it out, please. Don't roast us. We give up! We—"

I said, "Who cares if you give up or not? I just want to try out my weapon. No one asked you to poke your nose in here like this. You hear him, Mike? He gives up. That's funny."

Mike said, "It ain't so funny. If they give up, I say let 'em go. Hell, they won't give you any more trouble, chief."

The frightened voice was pleading now. "Listen to him, friend. Go ahead, listen. We give up, see? We're harmless. We'll go away. Anything. The weapon's all yours...."

"Well—"

"Go ahead, chief," Mike said.

"Umm-m. Well, okay. Hey you guys! All of you get into one dome, fast, and throw every gun you have outside. Your spacesuits, too. You'd better, because I don't exactly trust you. I'm going to give you five minutes and then I'm going to turn this thing on. Anyone has an ounce of iron or steel on him, he'll be broiled."

---

I waited, atop my pinnacle. I saw three figures running from the direction of our original dome, heading for the other one. In a moment, they disappeared over the close, jagged horizon. I said:

"That's about enough time, Mike. Turn it on."

I swaggered across the rubble-strewn asteroid. As I approached the dome I began to feel nervous, but I didn't stop my swaggering. Outside was a great pile of disintegrators, blasters, and heaters, plus a dozen spacesuits, assorted knives, pens, pencils, coins, pots, pans, flashlights, all sorts of tools—even a heap of leatheroid jumpers, because someone must have realized the stitching was of steelite fibre, which it was.

I picked up a couple of the heaters and tried the outer airlock door. It swung in easily.

I stood inside the dome with my two heaters and the reaction set in. I started to laugh. A dozen big strong men sat about, half naked and afraid in their underwear, and over in a corner stood Gramps and Clair, also down to their scanties.

The biggest of the twelve men said, "I'm Reardon. Thank you. Thank you, sir...."



"Shut up," I told him. I waved my heater and he shut up.

"We've had to do it, too," Clair said, running into my arms, pulling off my helmet and kissing me. I threw one of the heaters to Gramps, and Clair was speaking again, "I almost laughed and spoiled the whole thing, but Gramps and I took off our jumpers, too, to make it look good. In fact, Gramps gave them the idea."

Good old Gramps....

---

Gramps donned his spacesuit and so did Clair, and Reardon, still not comprehending, mumbled his thanks. I explored the inside of the dome thoroughly, making sure there were no hidden weapons. Then I stepped through the lock with Clair and Gramps, and I closed the outer door. I notched my heater to low intensity and fused the door and the dome into one piece. They'd need a heater or a disintegrator to get out, and they didn't have either.

Clair was smiling happily, now. But Gramps had a frown on his face.

"So what do we do with 'em?"

"Simple," I replied. "We wait for the government ship. It'll be here in a few weeks. They're not going anywhere in the meantime."

Gramps continued to frown. "You think we oughta report what they was lookin' for? The Ruskie weapon, I mean...."

I laughed. "That won't be necessary, Gramps. We'll do even better than that. We'll tell them what the weapon is."

Clair looked at me dumbfounded and I found myself grinning at both her and Gramps.

"Jerry! You can't be serious—we didn't really find the weapon!"

"We not only found it, we used it, hon," I told her. "I did some fast thinking while I was up on the rocks before. In a way I was in the same boat the Ruskies were when we beat them. I had to use

desperate means—anything I could, and mainly something that would start fear, a panic...."

"But I don't see—" Clair was confused.

"The Ruskies had a powerful weapon, all right," I replied. "The only trouble was they used it too late. Fortunately for us we still had time—and our opponents weren't too bright mentally anyway. If they had been it might not have worked. Matter of fact, that's the big thing that licked the Ruskies. We were a bit too shrewd for them. Our military leaders saw right through their weapon."

Gramps stamped his foot angrily. "Now look here, Jerry! Stop ramblin' around like that! Just what weapon you talkin' about?"

"Propaganda, Gramps. Propaganda, the greatest weapon in the universe—if used right. Now what do you say we get down to work and mine some copper?"

We were all laughing as we made our way to the other dome.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE OLD WAY  
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