

CLASSICS TO GO

# AMAZING

STORIES  
VOLUME 41



ROBERT EMMET MCDOWELL

# **Amazing Stories**

**Volume 41**

**Robert Emmet McDowell**

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# Red Witch of Mercury

**Death was Jaro Moynahan's stock in trade, and every planet had known his touch. But now, on Mercury, he was selling his guns into the weirdest of all his exploits—gambling his life against the soft touch of a woman's lips.**

On the stage of *Mercury Sam's Garden*, a tight-frocked, limber-hipped, red-head was singing "*The Lady from Mars*." The song was a rollicking, ribald ditty, a favorite of the planters and miners, the space pilots and army officers who frequented the garden. The girl rendered it with such gusto that the audience burst into a roar of applause.

She bent her head in acknowledgment so that her bronze red hair fell down about her face. There was perspiration on her upper lip and temples. Her crimson mouth wore a fixed smile. Her eyes were frightened.

The man, who had accompanied the singer on the piano, sat at the foot of the stage, his back to the crowded tables. He did not look up at the singer but kept his pale, immature face bent over the keys, while his fingers lightly, automatically picked out the tune. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck, plastered his white coat to his back. Without looking up, he said: "Have you spotted him?" His voice was pitched to reach the singer alone.

The girl, with an almost imperceptible gesture, shook her head.

The night was very hot; but then it is always hot on Mercury, the newest, the wildest, the hottest of Earth's frontiers. Fans

spaced about the garden's walls sluggishly stirred the night air, while the men and women sitting at the tables drank heavily of Latonka, the pale green wine of Mercury. Only the native waiters, the enigmatic, yellow-eyed Mercurians, seemed unaffected by the heat. They didn't sweat at all.

Up on the stage the singer was about to begin another number when she stiffened.

"Here he is," she said to the pianist without moving her lips.

The pianist swung around on his stool, lifted his black eyes to the gate leading to the street.

Just within the entrance, a tall, thin man was standing. He looked like a gaunt gray wolf loitering in the doorway. His white duraloes suit hung faultlessly. His black hair was close-cropped, his nose thin and aquiline. For a moment he studied the crowded garden before making his way to a vacant table.

"Go on," said the pianist in a flat voice.

The red-head shivered. Stepping from the stage she picked her way through the tables until she came to the one occupied by the newcomer.

"May I join you?" she asked in a low voice.

The man arose. "Of course. I was expecting you. Here, sit down." He pulled out a chair, motioned for the waiter. The Mercurian, his yellow incurious eyes like two round topazes, sidled up. "Bring us a bottle of Latonka from the Veederman region, well iced." The waiter slipped away.

"So," said the red-head; "you have come. I did not think you would be in time." Her hands were clenched in her lap. The knuckles were white.

The man said nothing.

"I did not want to call you in, Jaro Moynahan." It was the first time she had used his name. "You have the reputation of

being unpredictable. I don't trust you, but since...."

She stopped as the waiter placed glasses on the table and deftly poured the pale green wine. The man, Jaro Moynahan, raised his glass.

"Here's to the revolution," he said. His low voice carried an odd, compelling note. His eyes, light blue and amused, were pale against his brown face.

The girl drew in her breath.

"No! Mercury is not ready for freedom. Only a handful of fanatics are engineering the revolution. The real Mercurian patriots are against it, but they are afraid to protest. You've got to believe me. The revolution is scheduled to break during the Festival of the Rains. If it does, the Terrestrials here will be massacred. The Mercurians hate them. We haven't but a handful of troops."

Jaro Moynahan wiped the sweat from his forehead with a fine duraweb handkerchief. "I had forgotten how abominably hot it can be here."

The girl ignored the interruption. "There is one man; he is the leader, the very soul of the revolution. The Mercurians worship him. They will do whatever he says. Without him they would be lost. He is the rebel, Karfial Hodes. I am to offer you ten thousand Earth notes to kill Karfial Hodes."

Jaro Moynahan refilled their empty glasses. He was a big man, handsome in a gaunt fashion. Only his eyes were different. They were flat and a trifle oblique with straight brows. The pupils were a pale and penetrating blue that could probe like a surgeon's knife. Now he caught the girl's eyes and held them with his own as a man spears a fish.

"Why call me all the way from Mars for that? Why not have that gunman at the piano rub Hodes out?"



The girl started, glanced at the pianist, said with a shiver: "We can't locate Karfial Hodes. Don't look at me that way, Jaro. You frighten me. I'm telling the truth. We can't find him. That's why we called you. You've got to find him, Jaro. He's stirring up all Mercury."

"Who's putting up the money?"

"I can't tell you."

"Ah," said Jaro Moynahan; "so that's the way it is."

"That's the way it is."

"There isn't much time," he said after a moment. "The Rains are due any day now."

"No," the girl replied. "But we think he's here in the city."

"Why? What makes you think that?"

"He was seen," she began, then stopped with a gasp.

The lights had gone out.

It was as unexpected as a shot in the back. One moment the garden was glowing in light, the next the hot black night swooped down on the revelers, pressing against their eyes like dark wool. The fans about the walls slowed audibly and stopped. It grew hotter, closer.

Jaro Moynahan slipped sideways from the table. He felt something brush his sleeve. Somewhere a girl giggled.

"What's coming off here?" growled a petulant male voice. Other voices took up the plaint.

Across the table from Jaro there was the feel of movement; he could sense it. An exclamation was suddenly choked off as if a hand had been clamped over the girl's mouth.

"Red!" said Jaro in a low voice.

There was no answer.

"Red!" he repeated, louder.

Unexpectedly, the deep, ringing voice of Mercury Sam boomed out from the stage.

"It's all right. The master fuse blew out. The lights will be on in a moment."

On the heels of his speech the lights flashed on, driving the night upward. The fans recommenced their monotonous whirring.

Jaro Moynahan glanced at the table. The red-headed singer was gone. So was the pianist.

Jaro Moynahan sat quietly back down and poured himself another glass of Latonka. The pale green wine had a delicate yet exhilarating taste. It made him think of cool green grapes beaded with dew. On the hot, teeming planet of Mercury it was as refreshing as a cold plunge.

He wondered who was putting up the ten thousand Earth notes? Who stood to lose most in case of a revolution? The answer seemed obvious enough. Who, but Albert Peet. Peet controlled the Latonka trade for which there was a tremendous demand throughout the Universe.

And what had happened to the girl. Had the rebels abducted her. If so, he suspected that they had caught a tartar. The Red Witch had the reputation of being able to take care of herself.

He beckoned a waiter, paid his bill. As the Mercurian started to leave, a thought struck Jaro. These yellow-eyed Mercurians could see as well in the dark as any alley-prowling cat. For centuries they had lived most their lives beneath ground to escape the terrible rays of the sun. Only at night did they emerge to work their fields and ply their trades. He peeled off a bill, put it in the waiter's hands.

"What became of the red-headed singer?"



The Mercurian glanced at the bill, then back at the Earthman. There was no expression in his yellow eyes.

"She and the man, the queer white one who plays the piano, slipped out the gate to the street."

Jaro shrugged, dismissed the waiter. He had not expected to get much information from the waiter, but he was not a man to overlook any possibility. If the girl had been abducted, only Mercurians could have engineered it in the dark; and the Mercurians were a clannish lot.

Back on the narrow alley-like street Jaro Moynahan headed for his hostelry. By stretching out his arms he could touch the buildings on either side: buildings with walls four feet thick to keep out the heat of the sun. Beneath his feet, he knew, stretched a labyrinth of rooms and passages. Somewhere in those rat-runs was Karfial Hodes, the revolutionist, and the girl.

At infrequent intervals green globes cut a hole in the night, casting a faint illumination. He had just passed one of these futile street lamps when he thought he detected a footfall behind him. It was only the whisper of a sound, but as he passed beyond the circle of radiation, he flattened himself in a doorway. Nothing stirred. There was no further sound. Again he started forward, but now he was conscious of shadows following him. They were never visible, but to his trained ears there came stealthy, revealing noises: the brush of cloth against the baked earth walls, the sly shuffle of a step. He ducked down a bisecting alley, faded into a doorway. Immediately all sounds of pursuit stopped. But as soon as he emerged he was conscious again of the followers. In the dense, humid night, he was like a blind man trying to elude the cat-eyed Mercurians.



### *Jaro Moynahan*

In the East a sullen red glow stained the heavens like the reflection of a fire. The Mercurian dawn was about to break. With an oath, he set out again for his hostelry. He made no further effort to elude the followers.

Once back in his room, Jaro Moynahan stripped off his clothes, unbuckled a shoulder holster containing a compressed air slug gun, stepped under the shower. His body was lean and brown as his face and marked with innumerable scars. There were small round puckered scars and long thin ones, and his left shoulder bore the unmistakable brownish patch of a ray burn. Stepping out of the shower, he dried, rebuckled on the shoulder holster, slipped into pajamas. The pajamas were blue with wide

gaudy stripes. Next he lit a cigarette and stretching out on the bed began to contemplate his toes with singular interest.

He had, he supposed, killed rather a lot of men. He had fought in the deadly little wars of the Moons of Jupiter for years, then the Universal Debacle of 3368, after that the Martian Revolution as well as dozens of skirmishes between the Federated Venusian States. No, there was little doubt but that he had killed quite a number of men. But this business of hunting a man through the rat-runs beneath the city was out of his line.

Furthermore, there was something phony about the entire set up. The Mercurians, he knew, had been agitating for freedom for years. Why, at this time when the Earth Congress was about to grant them self-government, should they stage a revolution?

A loud, authoritative rapping at the door interrupted further speculation. He swung his bare feet over the edge of the bed, stood up and ground out his cigarette. Before he could reach the door the rapping came again.

Throwing off the latch, he stepped back, balancing on the balls of his feet.

"Come in," he called.

The door swung open. A heavy set man entered, shut and locked the door, then glanced around casually. His eyes fastened on Jaro. He licked his lips.

"Mr. Moynahan, the—ah—professional soldier, I believe." His voice was high, almost feminine. "I'm Albert Peet." He held out a fat pink hand.

Jaro said nothing. He ignored the hand, waited, poised like a cat.

Mr. Peet licked his lips again. "I have come, Mr. Moynahan, on a matter of business, urgent business. I had not intended to

appear in this matter. I preferred to remain behind the scenes, but the disappearance of Miss Mikail has—ah—forced my hand." He paused.

Jaro still said nothing. Miss Mikail must be the red-headed singer, whom at different times he had known under a dozen different aliases. He doubted that even she remembered her right name.

"Miss Mikail made you a proposition?" Albert Peet's voice was tight.

"Yes," said Jaro.

"You accepted?"

"Why, no. As it happened she was abducted before I had the chance."

Mr. Peet licked his lips. "But you will, surely you will. Unless Karfial Hodes is stopped immediately there will be a bloody uprising all over the planet during the Festival of the Rains. Earth doesn't realize the seriousness of the situation."

"Then I was right; it is you who are putting up the ten thousand Earth notes."

"Not entirely," said Peet uncomfortably. "There are many of us here, Mercurians as well as Earthmen, who recognize the danger. We have—ah—pooled our resources."

"But you stand to lose most in case of a successful revolution?"

"Perhaps. I have a large interest in the Latonka trade. It is—ah—lucrative."

Jaro Moynahan lit a cigarette, sat down on the edge of the bed. "Why beat about the bush," he asked with a sudden grin. "Mr. Peet, you've gained control of the Latonka trade. Other Earthmen are in control of the mines and the northern plantations. Together you form perhaps the strongest

combine the Universe has ever seen. You actually run Mercury, and you've squeezed out every possible penny. Every time self-government has come before the Earth Congress you've succeeded in blocking it. You are, perhaps, the most cordially-hated group anywhere. I don't wonder that you are afraid of a revolution."

Mr. Peet took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "Fifteen thousand Earth notes I can offer you. But no more. That is as high as I can go."

Jaro laughed. "How did you know Red had been kidnapped?"

"We have a very efficient information system. I had the report of Miss Mikail's abduction fifteen minutes after the fact."

Jaro raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps then you know where she is?"

Mr. Peet shook his head. "No. Karfial Hodes' men abducted her."

A second rapping at the door caused them to exchange glances. Jaro went to the door, opened it. The pianist at the gardens was framed in the entrance. His black eyes burned holes in his pale boyish face. His white suit was blotched with sweat and dirt.

"They told me Mr. Peet was here," he said.

"It's for you," said Jaro over his shoulder.

Mr. Peet came to the door. "Hello, Stanley. I thought Hodes had you? Where's Miss Mikail?"

"I got away. Look, Mr. Peet, I got to see you alone."

Albert Peet said, "Would you excuse me, Mr. Moynahan?" He licked his lips. "I'll just step out into the hall a moment." He went out, drawing the door shut after him.

Jaro lit a cigarette. He padded nervously back and forth across the room, his bare feet making no noise. He sat down on the edge of the bed. He got up and ground out the cigarette. He went to the door, but did not open it. Instead, he took another turn about the room. Again he came to a halt before the door, pressed his ear against the panel. For a long time he listened but could distinguish no murmur of voices. With an oath he threw open the door. The hall was empty.

## II

Jaro returned to his room, stripped off his pajamas, climbed back into his suit. He tested the slug gun. It was a flat, ugly weapon which hurled a slug the size of a quarter. He preferred it because, though he seldom shot to kill, it stopped a man like a well placed mule's hoof. He adjusted the gun lightly in its holster in order that it wouldn't stick if he were called upon to use it in a hurry. Then he went out into the hall.

At the desk he inquired if any messages had come for him. There were none, but the clerk had seen Mr. Peet with a young fellow take the incline to the underground. Above the clerk's head a newsograph was reeling off the current events almost as soon as they happened. Jaro read:

*"Earth Congress suspends negotiations on Mercurian freedom pending investigation of rumored rebellion. Terrestrials advised to return to Earth. Karfial Hodes, Mercurian patriot, being sought."*

Jaro descended the incline to the network of burrows which served as streets during the flaming days. Here in the basements and sub-basements were located the shops and dram houses where the Mercurians sat around little tables drinking silently of the pale green Latonka. The burrows were but poorly lit, the natives preferring the cool gloom, and Jaro

had to feel his way, rubbing shoulders with the strange, silent populace. But when he reached the Terrestrial quarter of the city, bright radoxide lights took the place of the green globes, and there was a sprinkling of Colonial guards among the throng.

Jaro halted before a door bearing a placard which read:

"LATONKA TRUST"

He pushed through the door into a rich carpeted reception room. At the far end was a second door beside which sat a desk, door and desk being railed off from the rest of the office. The door into Albert Peet's inner sanctum was ajar. Jaro could distinguish voices; then quite clearly he heard Albert Peet say in a high girlish tone:

"Stanley, I thought I left you in the native quarter. Why did you follow me? How many times have I told you never to come here?"

The reply was unintelligible. Then the pale-faced young man came through the door shutting it after himself. At the sight of Jaro Moynahan he froze.

"What're you sneaking around here for?"

Jaro settled himself warily, his light blue eyes flicking over the youth.

"Let's get this straight," he said mildly. "I've known your kind before. Frankly, ever since I saw you I've had to repress a desire to step on you as I might a spider."

The youth's black eyes were hot as coals, his fingers twitching. His hands began to creep upward.

"You dirty ..." he began, but he got no further. Jaro Moynahan shot him in the shoulder.

The compressed air slug gun had seemed to leap into Jaro's hand. The big slug, smacked the gunman's shoulder with a



resounding thwack, hurled him against the wall. Jaro vaulted the rail, deftly relieved him of two poisoned needle guns.

"I'll get you for this," said Stanley, his mouth twisted in pain. "You've broken my shoulder. I'll kill you."

The door to the inner sanctum swung open.

"What's happened?" cried Albert Peet in distress. "What's wrong with you, Stanley?"

"This dirty slob shot me in the shoulder."

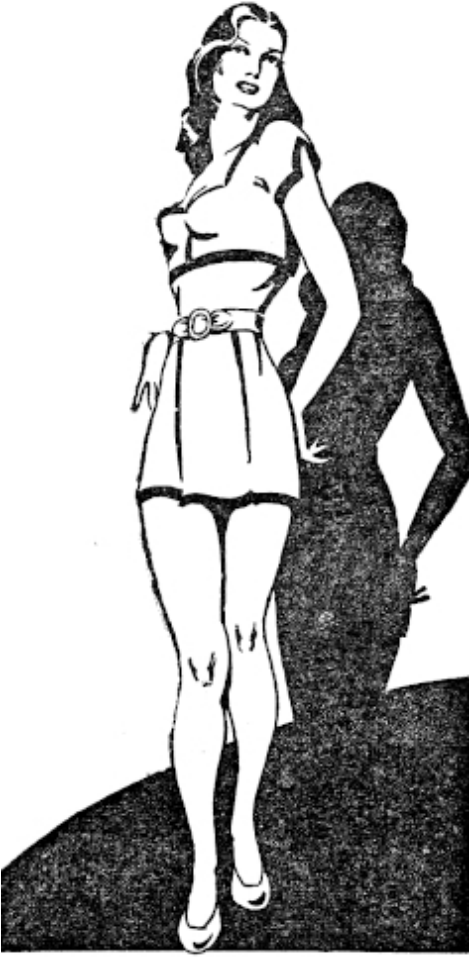
"But how badly?" Peet was wringing his hands.

"Nothing serious," said Jaro. "He'll have his arm in a sling for a while. That's all."

"Stanley," said Mr. Peet. "You're bleeding all over my carpet. Why can't you go in the washroom. There's a tile floor in there. If you hadn't disobeyed this wouldn't have happened. You and your fights. Has anyone called a doctor? Where's Miss Webb? Miss Webb! Oh, Miss Webb! That girl. Miss Webb!"

Stanley climbed to his feet, swayed a moment drunkenly, then wobbled out a door on the left just as a tall brunette hurried in from the right. She had straight black hair which hung not quite to her shoulders, and dark brown eyes, and enough of everything else to absorb Jaro's attention.

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Webb as she caught sight of the blood staining the carpet.



*Joan Webb*

"There's been an—ah—accident," said Mr. Peet, and he licked his lips. "Call a doctor, Miss Webb."

Miss Webb raised an eyebrow, went to the visoscreen. In a moment she had tuned in the prim starched figure of a nurse seated at a desk.

"Could Dr. Baer rush right over here? There's been an accident."

"Rush over where?" said the girl in the visoscreen. "These gadgets aren't telepathic, honey."

"Oh," said Miss Webb, "the offices of the Latonka Trust."

The girl in the visoscreen thawed like ice cream in the sun. "I'm sure Dr. Baer can come. He'll be there in a moment."

"Thank you," said Miss Webb. She flicked the machine off, then added: "You trollop."

Mr. Peet regarded Jaro Moynahan with distress.

"Really, Mr. Moynahan, was it necessary to shoot Stanley? Isn't that—ah—a little extreme? I'm afraid it might incapacitate him, and I had a job for him."

"Oh," cried Miss Webb, her brown eyes crackling. "Did you shoot that poor boy? Aren't you the big brave man?"

"Poor boy?" said Jaro mildly. "Venomous little rattlesnake. I took these toys away from him." He held out the poisoned dart guns. "You take them, Mr. Peet. Frankly, they give me the creeps. They might go off. A scratch from one of those needles would be enough."

Mr. Peet accepted the guns gingerly. He held them as if they might explode any minute. He started to put them in his pocket, thought better of it, glanced around helplessly.

"Here, Miss Webb," he said, "do something with these. Put them in my desk."

Miss Webb's eyes grew round as marbles. "I wouldn't touch one of those nasty little contraptions for all the Latonka on Mercury."

"Here, I'll take them," said Stanley coming back into the room. He had staunched the flow of blood. His face was even whiter, if possible. Jaro eyed him coldly as with his good hand the youth dropped the dart guns back into their holsters.

"Act like you want to use those and I'll put a slug in your head next time."

"Now, Mr. Moynahan." Mr. Peet licked his lips nervously. "Stanley, go into my office. The doctor will be here in a moment. Miss Webb, you may go home. I'll have no more work for you today."

Albert Peet led Stanley through the door. Jaro and Miss Webb were alone. With his eye on the door, Jaro said:

"When you go out, turn left toward the native quarter. Wait for me in the first grog shop you come to."

Miss Webb raised her eyebrows. "What's this? A new technique?"

"Look," began Jaro annoyed.

"My eyes are practically popping out of my head now," she interrupted. "Another morning like this and I take the first space liner back to Earth." She jammed her hat on backward, snatched her bag from the desk drawer.

"I'm not trying to pick you up. This is...."

"How disappointing."

Jaro began again patiently. "Wait for me in the first grog shop. There's something I must know. It's important." He cleared his throat. "Don't you find the heat rather uncomfortable, Miss Webb. But perhaps you've become accustomed to it."

Mr. Peet came back into the room.

"Why, no, I mean yes," replied Miss Webb, a blank expression in her eyes.

"Goodbye, Miss Webb," said Mr. Peet firmly.

Jaro grinned and winked at her. Miss Webb tottered out of the room.

As the door closed behind the girl, Albert Peet licked his lips, said: "Mr. Moynahan, I suppose my disappearance back at

your room requires some explanation. But the fact is that Stanley brought an important bit of news." He paused.

Jaro said nothing.

"You might be interested to know that Miss Mikail is quite safe. Karfial Hodes has her, but Stanley assures me she will be quite safe." Again he paused. As Jaro remained silent, his neck mottled up pinkly.

"The fact is, Mr. Moynahan, that we won't need you after all. I realize that we've put you to considerable trouble and we're prepared to pay you whatever you believe your time is worth. Say five hundred Earth notes?"

"That's fair enough," replied Jaro.

Albert Peet sighed. "I have the check made out."

"Only," continued Jaro coldly, "I'm not ready to be bought off. I think I'll deal myself a hand in this game."

Mr. Peet's face fell. "You won't reconsider?"

"Sorry," said Jaro; "but I've got a date. I'm late now." He started to leave.

"Stanley!" called Albert Peet.

The pale-faced young man appeared in the doorway, the dart gun in his good hand. Jaro Moynahan dropped on his face, jerking out his slug gun as he fell. There was a tiny plop like a cap exploding. He heard the whisper of the poisoned dart as it passed overhead. Then he fired from the floor. The pale-faced young man crumpled like an empty sack.

Jaro got up, keeping an eye on Albert Peet, brushed off his knees.

"You've killed him," said Peet. "If I were you, Mr. Moynahan, I would be on the next liner back to Earth."

Without answering, Jaro backed watchfully from the room.

Once Jaro Moynahan had regained the street, he mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. Whatever was going on, these boys played for keeps. Warily he started down the passage toward the native quarter. At the first basement grog shop he turned in. His eyes swept the chamber, then he grinned.

At a corner table, a tall glass of Latonka before her, sat Miss Webb. Her hat was still on backwards, and she was perched on the edge of her chair as if ready to spring up and away like a startled faun.

"*Bang!*" said Jaro coming up behind her and poking a long brown finger in the small of her back.

Miss Webb uttered a shriek, jerked so violently that her hat tilted over one eye. She regarded him balefully from beneath the brim.

"Never a dull moment," she gritted.

Still grinning, Jaro sat down. "I'm Jaro Moynahan, Miss Webb. I think Albert Peet forgot to introduce us. There's some skullduggery going on here that I'm particularly anxious to get to the bottom of. I thought you might be able to help me."

"Yes," replied Miss Webb sweetly.

A native waiter, attracted no doubt by her scream, came over and took Jaro's order.

"All right," Jaro smiled, but his pale blue eyes probed the girl thoughtfully. "I'll have to confide certain facts which might be dangerous for you to know. Are you game, Miss Webb?"

"Since we're going to be so chummy," she replied; "you might begin by calling me Joan. You make me feel downright ancient."

"Well then," he said. "In the first place, I just killed that baby-faced gunman your boss had in his office."

"*Awk!*" said Joan, choking on the Latonka.

"It was self-defense," he hastened to assure her. "He took a pot shot at me with that poisoned dart gun."

"But the police!" she cried, as she caught her breath.

"There'll never be an investigation. Albert Peet will see to that. I was called here on what I supposed was a legitimate revolution. Instead I was offered ten thousand Earth notes to assassinate the leader of the revolution."

"What revolution? I'm going around in circles."

"The Mercurians, of course."

"I don't believe it," said the girl. "The Mercurians are the most peaceable people in the Universe. They've been agitating for freedom, yes. But they believe in passive resistance. I don't believe you could induce a Mercurian to kill, even in self-protection. That's why Albert Peet and the rest of the combine had such an easy time gaining control of the Latonka trade."

"Score one," breathed Jaro, "I begin to see light. Miss Webb—ah, Joan—I've a notion that we're going to be a great team. How do you happen to be Albert Peet's private secretary?"

"A gal's gotta eat. But the truth is, I was quitting. The Latonka Trust is almost on the rocks. Their stock has been dropping like a meteor."

Jaro Moynahan raised his oblique brows but did not interrupt.

"Albert Peet," she continued, "has been trying to sell out but nobody will touch the stock, not since it looks as if the Earth Congress is going to grant the Mercurians their freedom. Everybody knows that the first thing the Mercurians will do, will be to boot out the Latonka Trust."

"What about this Karfial Hodes?" said Jaro. "I've heard that he's inciting the Mercurians to rebellion. The newscaster had



a line about the revolution too. The government has advised all Terrestrials to return to Earth."

"It's not true," Joan flared. "It's all a pack of lies invented by the Latonka Trust. I know."

"But I should think rumors like that would run down the Latonka stock."

Joan shook her head. "It doesn't add up, I know. But Karfial Hodes is a real patriot. He wouldn't advocate a bloody revolution. That's not his way."

They both sipped their wine. Joan's eyes were narrowed thoughtfully but Jaro's features were impassive.

"Well," he said at last, "I wouldn't give a Venusian kapek for Karfial Hodes' life right now."

"Why?"

Jaro shrugged. "They wanted me to find him and kill him. Stanley, that little rattlesnake, is captured by Hodes' men and escapes, then Albert Peet doesn't need me anymore. What would you say?"

The girl's eyes widened. "They know where he is?"

"Exactly."

"But he's such a gentle old man. Surely they wouldn't murder him."

Jaro said nothing. He sat facing the entrance. From time to time he flicked his eyes to the girl's face but for the most part, he watched the doorway like a cat at a mouse hole. For some minutes past he had been unobtrusively studying a plump, bald-headed man who had entered and was loitering about the door. The plump man's hand disappeared inside the breast of his gray coat. When it reappeared there was the glint of metal in his fist.

Without a word of warning, Jaro seized the edge of the table, upended it with a crash of glass. In the same movement, he slipped to the floor, using the table as a shield. Joan was left sitting in her chair, a foolish expression on her face.

"For heaven's sake," she hissed, "get up! Everybody's staring at us."

Jaro shifted the slug gun to his left hand, grabbed the girl by one shapely ankle, yanked her to the floor.

"*Oof!*" she gulped as she lit with a solid smack. Her hat slid to the back of her head.

"Stay down!" said Jaro impassively.

The plump man in the gray suit was circling the table warily. Jaro took a pot shot at him over the top of the table. The plump man spun around as if jerked by an unseen hand. The occupants of the other tables simultaneously dived for the door which was at least ten feet too narrow to accommodate them all. The plump man was sitting on the floor, his back to the wall, a surprised expression on his face. His poisoned dart gun lay a dozen feet away.

"Come on," said Jaro yanking the girl to her feet as abruptly as he had tumbled her down. "This joint should have a back exit."

Joan clapped her hand to her hat as they dashed around the bar and through a door. They came out into a narrow, devious alley which paralleled the main passage.

"What happened?" Joan gasped when she caught her breath.

Jaro slipped the slug gun back in its holster. "Give me a slug gun any day. It's got a kick like a rocket tube. When you hit a man with it, he says down. Knocked that gunman right off his feet. Did you see him?"

"No," said Joan bitterly. "I'm not accustomed to being thumped around like a sack of flour. I didn't see anything,

after bouncing off the floor, but stars."

"One of Peet's men tailed me into the grog shop," he explained, "and took a shot at us."

"Us?" she gulped. "But why?"

"We know too much."

They had emerged into a well-lit, well-traveled passage. Jaro looked at the girl seriously, his light blue eyes unreadable.

"What can I do with you?"

"Must you do anything? I'm really a very frail girl. You play too rough."

He ignored the interruption. "You'd better come to my room." He took her arm, started off toward the native quarter.

"Please, Mr. Moynahan," she protested trotting along beside him.

"Now, listen," said Jaro patiently. "I didn't kill that gunman. When he lets Peet know that we were together your life won't be worth anymore than Karfial Hodes'."

"Oh," said Miss Webb. Then increasing her pace she repeated with rising inflection: "Oh! Well let's not loiter along like this. Let's get there!"

### III

At his room, Jaro locked the door under the girl's suspicious eyes.

"If I were to listen to my better judgment," she remarked dryly, "I would leap out the window right now."

"And probably get sunstroke before you hit the street," he supplemented. "I'm hungry enough to eat a cow, hoofs, horns, and tail." He went to the telescreen and ordered dinners to be brought to the room.

"Am I going to spend the rest of my life here?" she asked.

"Heaven forbid."

Joan stood in the middle of the floor like a skater on thin ice. Jaro went over to the bed, sat down, lit a cigarette. He flipped the match out the window.

"Sit down," he said abruptly. "Unless, of course, you can rest on your feet like a horse."

Joan sank primly into a chair across from the bed. "What are we going to do?"

He shrugged. "We're in a spot. Albert Peet probably has another gunman after us by this time. We might have lost his men when we ducked out the back of that bar, but I doubt it. He has a very efficient spy system. Karfial Hodes' men have been tailing me since last night. Actually Miss Webb—uh—Joan—we're in a state of siege. There's something big afoot. So big they can't afford to let us escape."

Joan gulped, her eyes big as saucers. "But what do we know?"

"Well," he replied seriously; "we know first that Peet is hiring a bunch of gunmen to rub out Karfial Hodes—and incidentally, us."

"Us? What's incidental about that?" Joan interrupted vigorously. "Maybe you consider having gunmen take a pot shot at you incidental, but as far as I'm concerned it's the nub of the whole nasty business."

Jaro ignored the interruption. "Furthermore, we know that the Latonka Trust is almost on the rocks because the Earth Congress is about to grant the Mercurians their freedom. And this time Albert Peet and his combine haven't been able to block it. Not yet anyway."

"Don't forget the revolution," said Joan.

"I'm not. A revolution would burst open the Latonka Trust like a ripe watermelon. Peet would be lucky if he got away with his pants. But...."

A discreet knocking at the door interrupted him. Miss Webb clapped her hand to her mouth as if to stifle a scream.

"Don't open it," she hissed loud enough to be heard on the next floor.

Jaro drew his slug gun, threw off the latch, then with a swift cat-like movement yanked open the door.

Just outside stood a serving wagon loaded with food. The native waiter looked up, startled at the sudden opening of the door, and found himself staring down the barrel of Jaro's slug gun. His yellow eyes popped out like agates and he almost completed a back somersault.

"Bring it in," said Jaro sheathing the gun.

With a reproachful glance the waiter set the dishes on the table and retreated hastily. The serving wagon took the curve into the hall on two wheels.

Suppressed giggles rocked Joan's body. "Oh, if you could have seen yourself." She burst out laughing. "The mother bird defending its young." She rocked back and forth in the chair.

"You'd better come eat," said Jaro stiffly, "before the food gets cold."

Joan stifled her laughter, wiped the tears out of her eyes, pulled up a chair.

"I'm not a bit hungry," she protested; "but what a lovely steak." She attacked it with vigor. "Um, um," she said between mouthfuls. "Delicious." There were half a dozen other dishes. Her strong white teeth wrought havoc with their contents. Jaro, a light eater, picked at a salad, but for the most part he watched the girl with growing interest. From