

THE RETURN OF THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT

BY HARRY HARRISON



"You are the only one who can save us, diGriz! Say that you will do it, I beg of you...."

The words were music to my ears. I try to be humble in my own simple way, but it is very hard. People keep telling me how great I am. They know that I have saved the universe — twice at least — so they feel, rightly enough I suppose, that I can do anything.

"...please help. Four men have died already, that is why we need you...."

His words dropped me from the heights of elation into the abyss of despair. I snapped at him.

"So that's what you need me for. To be corpse number five. You think I'll look good in a coffin?"

There it was, of course. You get a reputation and you have to live up to it — even if you die in the attempt. I rose from my chair and paced the length of the room, trying to ignore the delegates grouped uneasily against the wall. Why should I listen to them? Why me, James Bolivar diGriz, the Stainless Steel Rat? Outcast of society — yet still a hero of society? A lifetime criminal who was now being called upon for help by the very people I preyed upon. It wasn't fair.

"Not fair!" I cried. "I should be robbing you blind, not doing you favors." They nodded eagerly at this.

"Rob us, Jim, rob us! We don't mind. Only finish this little job first!"

I sighed deeply. There is no escaping one's destiny. "Before I decide, would someone mind telling me just what the hell this is all about?"

All they needed was the starting whistle. In an instant they had a hologram projector up and running. A halo of a satellite station sprang into existence before me, soft music played and a deep voice began speaking.

"This is the orbiting satellite, Stanyan VI. It is the port of call of all the deep spacers approaching the Stanyan System." The spidery form of a spacer drifted up to the image and docked to drive home the point. "Cargo is then transhipped to the thirteen planets that comprise this solar system. The operation is successful, safe and speedy." Violins swelled up in the background playing successful, safe and speedy music. I began to doze off — but a crash of brass and tympany woke me up.

"But everything has changed!" the announcer gasped. "It all began when this passenger shuttle went out of control...."

THE FAMILIAR EGG-SHAPED FORM of a shuttle swam into view, drifting towards one of the satellite's docking bays. It was completely under computer control; accidents were an impossibility, the retarding jets would fire and ease it into place. Then the impossible happened. Instead of the breaking jets being activated, the stern jets flared full on — sending it hurtling forward. It was over in an instant. The shuttle crashed into the solid steel of the docking port and burst open like a silver egg hurled against a wall. Air puffed out and froze instantly. Maimed bodies were hurled free — but unhappily did not freeze as fast as the air had done. I could not take my eyes away from this gruesome scene as the narrator continued in a hushed voice.

"Thirty-seven people were killed in this accident. Which proved to be no accident at all. When the mechanic went to examine the malfunctioning navigational computer, he found that a ten thousand volt current had been shorted through the metal door of the computer room...."

The halo of the space station puffed out of existence and was replaced by a life-size image of the mechanic who had tried the handle on the hotwired door. I turned away.

"I've seen a fried corpse before, thank you," I said. "Can I have the rest of this nasty story straight without the sensational visual effects?"

The scene shifted back to the satellite again and the voice continued remorselessly. "It soon became obvious that the navigational computer was not at fault. It had been overridden by the Central Control computer. This is the Galaxy grade, Mark 2500 model, absolutely reliable and never known to malfunction before...."

"There's a first time for everything," I shouted, trying to be heard over the booming voice and backup orchestra. "Will someone kindly switch off this ghastly holo show! Enough is enough."

The music died with a gasping rattle and the halo popped out of existence; the lights came back up. I turned and stabbed a finger at the cowering delegates.

"Now just bring me up to date without the special effects. You have a nutsy computer that has already polished off a lot of people. And it is a Mark 2500 which probably handles hundreds of flights a day, controls thousands of operations, along with hundreds of thousands of subfunctions as well — that must be one smart computer. If it has gone gaga it won't really like anyone coming near it. The four men who were killed — they tried to turn the thing off?"

The delegates all nodded together gloomily. I nodded as well. "I thought so. Have you evacuated the satellite?" At this they shook their heads even more gloomily. The leader of the delegation spoke.

"It won't let us. The Mark 2500. All of the ports are sealed and we can't get near the satellite. And there are over three hundred passengers trapped inside. You must save them, diGriz! Their lives are in your hands...."

"Not yet they're not! They are still in your hands which is why you are here — and why you are worrying so. You're all sweating — and I think I know why. This delegation represents the corporation that owns the satellite?" Reluctant nods. "And you also represent the insurance company that insures the satellite?" Heads nodding like crazy now. "So not only do you have a humanitarian interest in those poor souls trapped inside your hunk of space ironmongery — but you have a financial interest as well." Chins dropped to chests and a wave of financial despair sighed through the room. I smiled and shook my clenched fists over my head.

"Despair not gentlemen — diGriz will save you! I will turn off your kooky computer and save your prisoners!"

I waited until the cheers and shouts of joy had died down before I put the boot in.

"But, like you, I am a businessman as well as a humanitarian. My reasonable and very low fee for the job will be the miserly sum of two million credits...."

I turned away and lit a cigar while their moans of pain and cries of anguish echoed from the chamber walls. Then I puffed out expensive smoke and raised my hand for silence.

"For shame," I chided. "You'll get that sum back within a few days of operation." My voice grew cold. "But if you don't get back into operation and if the relatives of the people you have allowed to be destroyed by that mad machine decide to sue you...." Temporary interruption by walls of despair. "...why, you will have to pay out billions. You have sixty seconds to decide. The fee will be payable one million on signing and one million upon delivery of the main fuse from the crackpot computer. Fifty-five seconds."

"How will you do it?" someone called out.

"I'll tell you as soon as you have paid. A computer with sick circuitry is as nothing to the man who saved the universe. Twice." Which meant that I had no idea how I was going to do it, but that was my business and not theirs. Just as their business was earning money and mine stealing it. "Thirty-one seconds."

"It's robbery — but we agree. We have no choice."

NOR DID THEY. Which was why I had made the fee so large. As soon as the money had been credited to my account, I threw them all out and spread out the technical reports. This was not going to be easy. I forced away the nagging realization that it was not only hard but completely impossible. Never say die! The Rat marches on. There had to be a way!

Except that three weeks later, in a shuttle floating in orbit about the insane satellite, I still hadn't found it. Nor was the captain of the shuttle any help.

"You're number five," he said, in an exceedingly gloomy voice. "You'll never make it either. Croaked or crunched like the other four. That cockamamie computer will let you aboard all right. Like a fly into a web. Then...."

"Then it is my worry. And I can do without your pep talk. I'm sitting up now and I want to be launched as soon as this ancient machine of yours comes up with the orbital calculations that I asked for."

"Suicide..." was the last word I heard as I sealed shut the helmet of my modified suit. Modified in that all of the metal parts had been sprayed with insulating foam. The Mark 2500 was very free with its shortcircuits and two of my predecessors had been electrocuted. I had no desire to be fried for my efforts — even before I was inside the renegade satellite.

My plan for getting aboard the thing was simple-enough, although once I was sitting alone on the nosecone of the shuttle I began to have doubts about it. Because to make the plan work I had to trust the computer aboard the shuttle. And I was not very happy about computers at the moment. I felt

the ship stir behind me, then the steady pressure on my back as it accelerated. This lasted a few seconds — then ended as the braking jets close beside me puffed out clouds of gas. The shuttle decelerated. I didn't. The spaceship fell behind me as I continued on in what I hoped was the correct orbit. Aiming for the spot in space where the satellite would be. Optimistically launched not only in the direction of Stanyan VI, but also moving outward in a course that would bring me down right on top of an emergency exit. I hoped.

But it worked. Despite my fears I watched the satellite get closer and closer until it filled the entire sky. I knew the thing had no missiles or guns — but it could use its deceleration fields to launch something heavy in my direction. That's how one of my predecessors had bought it. But I was coming in on the side away from the landing bays. I hoped.

The seconds ticked by and I had my thumb poised over the button of my braking jets. The computer back in the shuttle was supposed to give me the signal to brake — but as I said I was not trusting computers very much these days. Closer and closer, larger and larger the metal wall grew. And I knew I would splatter myself all over it in a few seconds more. Where was the signal? The computer had blown a fuse. I was good as dead! Yet if I braked too soon I would miss the station completely and float out into space. I couldn't wait any longer....!

"Fire now," the emotionless voice of the computer said. It did not have to repeat itself. My thumb clamped down, clouds of gas billowed out and around me. I couldn't see a thing! The firing ended and the gas cleared — and there was the side of the satellite just ahead of me.

I hit, tumbled, bounced away again — and grabbed an antenna mast just before I vanished back into interstellar space. After that I just held on for awhile, waiting for the air scrubber to evaporate the perspiration from my forehead — and from the misted up helmet in front of my eyes as well.

"You know, Jim," I said, ignoring the quaver in my voice, "you're getting a little old for this kind of romp. Time to retire, some quiet little planet, rob a bank or two when you get bored. Leave this interstellar suicide to the kids."

But, even as I muttered to myself, I was hard at work. It's okay to bitch as long as you are doing something constructive at the same time. I hauled myself down from the pole and kicked off in a neat arc that ended over the emergency exit. Which was labeled,

by some moronic civil servant no doubt, EMERGENCY EXIT. Fine for me, but of little use to anyone on the inside trying to find their way out. There was a large handle in the center of the door labeled PULL. I did. It swung open neatly and I drifted into the airlock beyond. Entrance effected, troubles over.

Others might think that — but not me. I'm not called the Stainless Steel Rat for nothing. No sir. I know how to get through stainless steel walls and come out on the other side alive. Just ahead of me was an inviting, shining metal lever. Pull that once, the outer door would close, air would rush into the lock, and when the pressure was equalized the inner door would open automatically. Very simple. And very suspicious. Floating in the center of the airlock, touching nothing, I opened the toolbag on my hip and took out a multimeter. I jammed one prod into the handle — then touched the other to the wall close by.

There was a colorful display of sparks and the readout displayed 25,000 volts. Very interesting. Mark 2500 was expecting me.

I PUT AWAY THE METER and extracted a thick pad of insulation. Electricity in this quantity should be treated with respect. I wrapped the pad around the handle and tugged. The door slowly opened. I waited until it gaped wide before triggering a blast on my suit rockets. A strong one. Because as soon as I was past the door I would be in the grip of the satellite's gravity field.

This shot me forward — and I began to drop as I came into the ship. But I hit the deck well away from the entrance and did a shoulder roll, coming up on my feet, fists clenched, ready for anything.

"Are you the new troubleshooter?" a voice said. I spun about to face a gloomy looking man dressed in a soiled boilersuit.

"No," I said, smiling warmly. "I am Santa and I'm here just in time for Christmas."

He just grunted at that, a serious type, his expression one of darkest gloom. He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "They're waiting for you in the rec hall. Got a message you were coming. This way." He turned and, almost as an afterthought, called back to me. "My name's Corona. Tech fifth class."

"My pleasure," I said, but if he heard me he gave no answer. I was really beginning to feel welcome. I peeled off the spacesuit and trotted after him.

Things were much better in the rec hall. There were about a dozen people waiting there and they burst out clapping when I entered.

"You're welcome indeed," I said inclining my head up in a courtly manner. "As you have heard, I am here to save you." My voice hardened. "I would also like to know how you heard I was coming — since the kooky computer controls all of the radio circuits in this satellite."

A handsome woman with gorgeous red hair held up a portable radio. "With this," she said. "If we put it in front of a viewport we can receive signals from the rescue ships out there. We just can't answer."

"You can now. I have a souped-up transceiver with me. Might I ask your name?"

"Trina. Deputy Commander of the station."

"And where may I ask is the Commander?"

She looked at me and her nostrils widened. "Didn't you do your homework? He was in the shuttle that crashed and started this whole mess."

"I know only what I am told." My nostrils flared to match hers. "Now would you mind introducing me to whoever is in charge now?"

"An emergency committee of three. Myself, Dr. Putz here, and Commander Stark. Dr. Putz is Assistant Science Officer, while Commander Stark is Second in Command of security on the satellite."

"Assistant, Second in Command," I miffed. "I don't usually deal with the hired help. Where are their bosses?"

"Our superiors were killed in the same crash of the shuttle," Commander Stark growled. "What you see is what you get, dIGriz."

"There is no time for petty squabbles," I told them. "I am here to save you. So you will give me all the help I need. Is that correct...?"

The emergency committee drew to one side and muttered to each other. They reached agreement quickly enough and Trina spoke for them all. "Agreed. You will pass your instructions through Technician Corona."

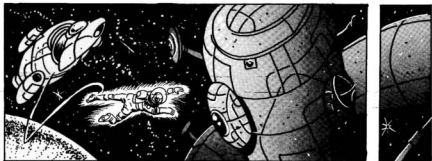
Corona's grunt hopefully indicated agreement. I nodded sagely. "A wise decision. The first thing I will need is a deck plan of this satellite."

"That's what they always ask for first," Corona said gloomily. He passed over a thick and dog-eared volume of plans. It was burned a bit at the edges and splattered with something that might have been blood. I had a dark suspicion. "Been used before?" I asked.

He nodded. "Four times." There was little humor in his smile. "Maybe five will be lucky."

"Thanks." I flipped through the pages. "You don't happen to remember how the other attempts on the computer were made, do you?"

"Sure do." He took the volume from me and flipped through it. He had a good, if morbid, memory and quickly indicated the various routes my predecessors had taken. Through the storage bays or radio room,



power central, food supplies, oxygen scrubbing, every way possible. Good intelligent plans — and all of them had failed.

"Any idea how you are going to go?" he asked, handing the plans back. I had none — but I wasn't going to admit this to the hired help.

"I have an idea, but I must perfect it. First some more information. See if you can pry the good Dr. Putz away from that five liter glass of beer and ask him he would be so kind as to join me for a moment."

"You wanted to see me?" Putz asked, wiping foam from his moustache with the back of his hand.

"If you would be so kind. As Assistant Science Officer you should know a thing or two about the Mark 2500 computer — shouldn't you?"

"Of course. In theory that is. I had nothing to do with the day to day operation."

"Even better. Would you then be kind enough to explain to me how a computer, which is nothing but a great big adding machine, could possibly go insane?"

"A good question," he said, pawing his jaw in deep concentration. "I have given that much thought and come up with a possible answer. The Mark 2500 series have a memory capacity in excess of ten to the fourteenth power. That is rather large. As I am sure you know, the human brain has a memory capacity of ten to the twelfth..."

"Which means the computer is far smarter than a human being?"

"Not in the slightest. I said memory, not intelligence. A computer is just a complex machine programmed for certain functions. But with that capacity for memory it is certainly capable of intelligence. Perhaps some internal shortcircuiting took place. This is just speculation, mind you. If the same accident that saw intelligence rise in animals billions of years ago, if that accident occurred in a machine brain..."

"I follow your point. There is the possibility that it could grow, learn, develop a personality. A machine mind without morals, love or hate. Coldly efficient..."

"This is just speculation, mind you!"

"I realize that, Dr. Putz, and appreciate the help. But it is almost academic as well. I think it is more important to know just what the machine can do, not why it is doing it."

"It can do anything it wants aboard this satellite. It controls every function, every operation. If it wanted it could shut off our air, poison our food, destroy us in a hundred different ways."

"But it hasn't?"

"No. And that is most interesting. It has sealed the major airlocks and will allow no one in or out. It has cut off our radio communication. But other than that it has made no attempt to harm us. Though, of course, it has defended itself by killing those who were sent against it."

"Aren't you forgetting the landing shuttle that it wiped out?"

"I meant since that time. There was, perhaps, a good reason for destroying the shuttle." He looked around nervously. I leaned close and lowered my voice.

"You wouldn't care to expand on that point, would you, doctor?"

"Again, just a theory. The three senior officers in command of this satellite were on that shuttle. If the computer wished to take charge that would certainly be a good way to start."

"It would indeed," I said, my brain whirling with thoughts. Pieces were beginning to fall into place. "Now, if you don't mind, Dr. Putz, I am a little tired after my adventurous journey here. I intend to lie down and study these plans and will confer with you all in eight hours time. Will you please convey that message to your associates? Thank you."

I spun on my heel and exited. Corona was waiting by the door.



"We'll meet here in eight hours. I'll have a plan by then and I'll let you know what I need. All right?"

"You're the boss," he said, shambling off, then calling back over his shoulder. "Plenty of empty transit passenger cabins on M deck if you want to shut your eyes while you are making your plans."

"Just what I had in mind." I picked up my spacesuit and the rest of my equipment and headed for the elevators. I punched for M deck, exited there — and went straight to the emergency stairs.

"Well done, Jim," I congratulated myself, since no one else was there to do this job. Nor did I want anyone there at this moment. "As Dr. Putz said, this computer is a smarty. It must be eavesdropping on everything said in the public rooms."

It might also be eavesdropping on me in the stairwell I realized. And shut up. It should have a hard job listening to my thoughts. Corona had revealed that all of the previous attempts on the computer had been known by him. So they must have been discussed, planned in public. And been overheard. Well, that wasn't going to happen to Slippery Jim diGriz, not for nothing named Slippery! I had slipped away, the computer would not be expecting an assault yet. By the time it woke up to what was happening I would have put it to sleep forever. But how?

I SAT DOWN ON THE METAL STAIRS and flipped through the deck plans. The central computer was located, as you might very well imagine, in the center of the satellite. Which was ideal for the computer, but not so good for anyone trying to sneak up on it. I

traced the various courses the other hopefuls had taken. All very imaginative. And all ending in the same way. And all complex. There had to be simple and quick way to get near the thing. But there wasn't. Instead of all the doors, hatches, floors and entrances, I wanted to get directly to it. Bore a hole straight down with a super laser? Good idea. Only I didn't have a super laser. I started to throw the plans aside — then pulled them back when something caught my eye. Of course! The hole was already there!

Drilled right through the satellite. From top to bottom. Passing right by the computer room. I permitted myself a chuckle of admiration and pleasure. You're a bright boy, Jim! I traced the opening with my finger.

The elevator shaft.

Nor would I make any attempt to reach the computer by elevator. That would be suicide. It was the shaft alone that I wanted. The magnetized boots on my spacesuit would get me there. To think is to act. Fast and smooth, that's the Stainless Steel Rat's motto.

I pulled on the spacesuit, checked my equipment, then went down the stairs to the lowest deck. The deckplans came in handy then because this was a machinery level. I slipped between the humming generators and clattering machines, working my way towards the bottom of elevator shaft 19. It was there, right where it was indicated on the diagram, with its number painted directly over the inspection hatch. All going according to plan!

I unclipped the hatch and lowered it gently to the deck, then poked my head through. Darkness. My light flashed up the shaft and I was aware of the bottom of the elevator far above. The way was clear to computer central. I did not stand around pondering the dangers, but went instantly into action — climbing inside and raising my boot and pressing it against the wall where it clung to the steel with magnetic cohesion. The gravity here was oriented towards the base of the shaft which made it difficult. But not impossible. I hung head downwards from the boots, uncomfortable but necessary. I switched off the current in the bottom boot and shifted it above the other. Current on, magnetized, stuck there. Then the other boot, repeating the process over and over.

And slowly, one clumsy step at a time I rose up the shaft.

It was hard work and tiring work. I was perhaps halfway there and panting loudly when I had to rest. I hung from the boots, gasping in air — when I heard it. A humming sound. What did it mean? With sudden and horrified realization I pointed my light upwards.

The computer had detected my presence in the shaft.

It was sending the elevator down to crush me!

I permitted myself one instant of panic, to promote the flow of adrenaline, then clamped down hard with my mental control. No panic, Jim! You've been in tight spots before. Think — don't react blindly.

I couldn't retreat and reach the bottom

of the shaft in time. I would be crushed if I tried. Could I force open one of the doors and get out at a different level? An unknown; I had no time to make experiments. So if I couldn't go down, or out the side — there was only one direction left. Up! I would have to tackle the elevator itself!

Which was easier said than done. Everything depended upon perfect timing rather than on speed. No panic, Jim. You know what must be done. My mind was calm as I leaned back and coolly examined the bottom of the dropping elevator. Closer now. Power off on my left boot, that's it. Hang backwards from the other boot and raise the left one over my head. The elevator dropped, appearing to go faster and faster. Right on top of me....

It was bang, crunch — and it almost killed me. As the metal bottom of the elevator hit my upraised boot I magnetized it and turned off the other one. My knee buckled at the impact and I slammed against the bottom of the elevator — then dropped back to hang, dazed, from the single boot.

There was no time for this kind of suicidal behavior. Despite my muddled head I raised by other boot; it clamped tight. Then I bent at the waist, my hand with the thermal lance outstretched. The intensely hot flame roared out, slicing through the steel floor like butter. I moved it in a quick circle, trying to forget the bottom of the shaft that was rushing towards me.

THERE WAS A CREAK OF METAL and I pulled aside just as the circle of metal flooring dropped free and fell. Now! I let go of the thermal lance, ignoring the bash it gave me in the face as it swung from its safety line about my wrist. Reaching up and seizing the metal edge of the hole in my gloves. Switching off my boots at the same instant.

For an endless moment I dangled in the shaft. Then, with a single spasmodic contraction of my muscles, I hauled myself up and into the elevator.

Just as it hit the bottom of the shaft.

I just sat there for a few moments after that. Breathing deeply — and enjoying the fact that I was still breathing. Looking down at the buffers and the floor of the shaft just below the opening in the floor. I would have been squashed like a beetle in another second. That didn't bear thinking about.

"On your feet, James!" I ordered. "No rusty collection of silicon chips is going to out-think you. Act! Now! While the thing is still off its guard. You are but moments away from victory!"

I acted. Pressing the button that sent the elevator back up the shaft. Would it work? It did. The computer was not in command for the moment. I tore open the door of the control panel and counted the floors as we rose. Just a few more... there!

A blast from the thermal lance fused the controls and the elevator shuddered to a stop. Even as it did this I was pushing open the hatch in the roof and climbing out. The door to the computer room was just before me!

I did not waste time with delicacies. I simply burned off the door hangers and kicked the thing down. And dived behind it into

the room, the lance still flaring, ready for anything.

It was anticlimax. The room-sized computer just chuckled to itself. Some memory discs whirred; lights flashed on and off in interesting patterns. It appeared to be completely unaware of my presence. I straightened up and turned off the flame.

I HAD PENETRATED TO THE CENTER of its brain. It had no receptors here. Perhaps, I was still wary. I walked forward cautiously — then stopped when I saw the small metal box of circuitry in the center of the floor. A single red light glowed on its top. A large cable emerged from its side and squirmed across the floor to vanish into the computer. I leaned forward cautiously and unplugged the cable. The red light went out. I lifted the box and bounced it in my hand.

"I thought it might be something like this," I said aloud. "End of the insane computer." I walked to the control console and pushed down on the access key.

"Yes?" the calm, mechanical voice of the Mark 2500 said.

"You have sealed all of the airlocks?"

"Yes. I was issued overriding instructions."

"Cease this operation at once. And cancel any other abnormal instructions. Understand?"

"This operation is already completed. Normal operation resumed."

"Very good." I climbed out of my spacesuit. "Send out an announcement for all persons aboard the satellite to assemble in the rec room now."

I took the little metal box, but left all of my equipment, except for my pistol, then started towards the hall with the announcement booming in my ears from every loudspeaker I passed. The technician, Corona, was waiting outside the hall when I came up, his eyebrows lifted inquisitively.

"Are they inside?" I asked. He nodded.

"Good," I said, handing him my pistol. "As far as I know this is the only weapon aboard the satellite. Stop by the door and cover me. I may need help. Do you know how to use this thing?"

"You bet! You can count on me."

"Good," I said, entering the hall, my flank protected. I faced the murmuring crowd that was jammed in there and raised my hands for silence. "It's all over," I told them. "The danger is at an end."

"You've disconnected the insane computer?" Trina asked... awestruck?

"No," I responded sweetly, "I just disconnected this." I held up the metal box for them all to see. "Computers can't go crazy because they are not safe to begin with. They are not human. But they can be programmed to appear insane — which is what happened here. With this."

THERE WAS A UNIVERSAL GASP, and Trina spoke the thought that possessed them all.

"Programmed? Someone caused all this. But who...?"

"Why not you?" I asked sweetly. "Your boss died in the crash of the shuttle. Perhaps

you caused the crash in order to get his job. I looked at your personal record. You're very ambitious...."

"I'm also mechanically illiterate!" she snapped back. "Didn't you see that in my records? I'm an administrator, not an electrician. I couldn't possibly have designed or built that thing."

"True, true," I muttered, then spun on my heel and held the control box in front of Commander Stark's face. "But the commander here is no electronic dummy. His boss also died in the crash. You did it, Stark, to get his job!"

"Are you out of your teeny-tiny?" Stark sneered. "If you had looked at my file you would have seen that I volunteered for early retirement. I should have been home by now. The last thing I want is a better position. I just want out."

"Then we have the killer!" I shouted, pointing to the cowering Dr. Putz. "The assistant science officer, so jealous of his superior that he killed him. Then tried to palm me off with a dumb story about how a computer could go mad. He, a scientist, should have known better than to try and sell me that bill of goods. But he knew that someone had programmed the computer to appear to be mad. Himself!"

"You accuse me!" Putz screamed. "I know nothing about machines or computers! I am a geologist! Sent here as an emergency replacement. All I know is how to hit rocks with little hammers."

"Then," I said, jaw dropping more than a little, "if none of you did it — who did? Who had the technical knowledge for this job? Who knew the plans of the other rescuers, knew their every move so that he could thwart them...?"

I turned about as I said this — and looked into the muzzle of my own gun.

"That's right, you fool!" Corona sneered, the light of madness now visible in those piglike eyes. "I did it! Me, the one they laughed at, gave orders! Well they aren't laughing or giving orders any more. I showed them...."

"Give me that gun," I said, stepping forwards as the others quailed back.

"Take it!" he screamed. And pulled the trigger.

THEN LOOKED DOWN AT THE GUN, pulling the trigger over and over again when nothing happened. My fist caught him hard on the jaw and he slumped to the deck, unconscious. I bent and picked up the gun — and smiled.

"Unloaded," I told the gaping audience. "I was sure from the very beginning that someone had programmed the computer to do all this dirty work. And whoever did that programming had to still be aboard the satellite. Therefore, since you were all under suspicion, I could take no one into my confidence. Hence the accusations — and the unloaded gun. Corona seemed the obvious suspect, but I just wanted him to prove it himself."

A ragged cheer began, raising quickly in volume. I smiled and bowed acceptance. Accepting as well the impassioned kisses of the ravishing redhead Trina. All this and two million credits too! ■■