The silver stuff must have been very sacred. Each native carried only one lump, nursing it gently

Mactavish and Kennedy were out for all they could get. But Mactavish wanted the least of the most.

RAIN HAMMERED on the ship's hull and on the oilskins of the girl and man coming across the steaming ground. Out there up near the galaxy's edge some of the planets seem to have tough weather, by Earth standards, and Cephenid II, wobbling its hundred-day year round a small, young sun, was living up to rumor. Captain Kennedy scowled as he admitted the two newcomers into the entrance lock.

"Didn't know there was another Earthman in this system," he said.

He swore. I knew it was the hope that he'd have the little planet all to himself for at least a few days that had brought him at top speed from Earth, and I looked at the pair shaking their waterproofs. The girl was maybe twenty-five; small, neat and having a purposeful look. The man had to be her father; there were the same blue eyes, mildly amused, the same kind, keen face, though older and wrinkled. A look of recognition came into the blue eyes.

"Kennedy, by the horned-saint!" the man said. "What chance brings ye here?"

"The same as you,Mactavish!" Kennedy snapped, and I saw he was more uneasy than he wanted to show. "Rumors of a rake-off for them "who are quick!"

I knew Kennedy had expected to be first on the little Cephenid. A cruiser had put down' there for repairs and a crewman had taken back a piece of curious stuff he'd found. It had made him rich and he had talked. Kennedy was one of a pack of wolves anxious to cash in, had supposed himself to be the first until we met Mactavish.

Mactavish stroked his long nose and grinned. "By Halley, rumors travel! Is there no honor among thieves, mon?"

He raised his eyes expressively towards where heaven might be and Kennedy snorted.

"You're as much a thief as any of us! I warrant you nearly burned your old tramp up getting here first" .

Mactavish lifted a hand. "No swearing, Cap'n,-we've ladies present. Meet my gal Jill." She smiled, nodding. "No bad feelings over, the past," Mactavish continued. "No quarreling. By the comet, but there's enough space in the cosmos for two millionaires ! We'll split."

Kennedy's eyes were angry; he was a head taller than the older man and lacked the latter's kindly looks. I had only shipped with Kennedy because Planetary Records expects an early report on any new planet and I hadn't reached that level where they'd give me a ship of my own!

"Split nothing!" Kennedy said. "I haven't forgotten what happened on Pluto! No, Jock Mactavish,I've got you where I want you this time, and you know it. I can leave that tub of yours six months behind." '

JOCK MACTAVISH looked hurt. "You wouldn't do that Mr. Kennedy. You wouldn't spoil a poor old- trader's chance, or spoil the market for him? A single load of this stuff will fill Earth's needs for generations. Me mother wouldna believe you'd be that unkind. . . . "

"I would - and will!"

Kennedy stamped off back to the control room to see to the delayed landing check-up.

With a heavy, sigh, Mactavish led his daughter away, and they vanished in the teeming rain. I got a water-proof and went out. The rain was hot and heavy and thunder cannonaded in the distance, blue flickers some-times showing through the murk. The Mactavishes had a rough shelter out-side their ship, which was a crate that would not knock up a quarter the speed of Kennedy's ship. Jill was standing under the shelter, her red hair freed from the waterproof's hood. I hoped she didn't think me one of Kennedy's special chums. Kennedy was hard - and mean.-

"Is it always this wet?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Only these last few days."

"Anything interesting around,? You've been here some days, I see."

"A week."

The tone was hostile. "Look," I said, "I'm not tied up with Kennedy; I'm merely collecting a rough first report for Planetary Records. They tag exploratory journeys and pushed me on to him. I've got two stars up. If I get another, then they give me command of my own ship, and more pay."

She smiled, and that was a reward. "I've heard of you boys. Dad had been hoping to retire after this trip. Can't you help negotiate an agreement? Dad was here first; it's mere rotten luck his ship's slow."

"I'll try." I thought that extra pay maybe would be enough to marry on.

- "And tell Kennedy the stuff is sacred," she shouted after me as I set off back through the rain. "Sacred. Nobody can touch it except the natives."

'THAT SHOOK me for a moment and it shook Kennedy too. But I saw he was determined to forestall Mactavish, feather his own nest, then overload the Earth market.

"If Mactavish can get it loaded, so can I !" he growled.

Early next morning he was out. Temporarily fine weather brought out the natives to see the new ship. The tallest was up to my shoulder. All wore vari-colored one-piece garments like shirts reaching to their ankles. By signs I learned that the stuff we sought was half a mile away over a rocky hill, and I set off that way.

Kennedy soon caught me. "One of these days he'll call himself Tavish to save ink," he stated, jerking a thumb towards Jock's ship. "The stuff is in lumps and he's giving the natives one packet of tobacco for every ten lumps they carry into his ship! I can't calculate how many billion per cent profit that is!"

We went over the hill. Ahead, under a misty sun, was a vast pile of silvery-looking material. I gasped. It seemed to reach, almost to the clouds. The little natives watched us approach. The stuff was in long, crystalline granules such as a man might encircle with finger and thumb, and I made a mental note to find out why it was valuable. Kennedy bent to pick up a sample.

"Better not touch!" Mactavish's voice murmured.

He had followed us. Kennedy straightened. "I forgot! Funny customs in some places! But I'll show you yet!"

He emptied his pockets and made a pile of tobacco on the ground. I saw he wasn't one to lose time and the natives drew closer, eyes eagerly on the packets.

"Much, much tobacco in ship, savvy?" Kennedy pointed.. "I give you one packet for every five lumps of this stuff you carry into my ship. Savvy?"

I left him gesticulating and counting on his fingers and went on a Httle way by myself.

When I got back, a stream of natives had already begun to carry the stuff down to Kennedy's ship and Kennedy was grinning triumphantly. He spat on the earth.

"They chew the tobacco, though tenth-rate barter brand!" he said. "The flavor tickles their palate. Wait till Jock sees!"

ALL DAY the stream of natives up and down the hill continued. When I saw Kennedy again he was pleased with the progress made in loading his ship, yet irritated.

"Never saw such weaklings on any planet in my life!" he said. "It wastes time!"'

I saw what he meant. Each native carried only one lump of the silvery stuff, and. nursed it gently between both hands.

"Perhaps they're that gentle because it's sacred," I said.

I drifted over to Mactavish's shelter and found Jock smoking placidly under the lee of his ship. His hat was off and his sandy hair stood out.

"I hear ye're not on that Kennedy man's side, laddie," he greeted me. "No. I'd like to get a fair deal made."

"Any deal with Kennedy would be fair as five aces." He puffed, eyeing me critically. Then his gaze strayed to the busy natives. "He's out-bid me on the bacca. But come inside - looks like another storm anyway."

We went into the ship and to his cabin. He poured out drinks, drowning mine in water.

"To Kennedy's load!", he said.

We drank and I put the glass down. Mactavish grinned at my expression.

"I'm not the mon to hold his past against him or wish him bad luck!" he said. "Me mother wouldna' like that. I even slipped word to the natives he might want help loading up his ship. I taught their chief a few words, too!"

HIS FACE was like a wooden gargoyle There was a lump of the silvery stuff on his desk and I reached for it. He put a gnarled old hand on my arm.

Don't touch it, laddie. Never know if them natives are watching."

I played with my glass, curious. "What is it? What's its value?"

Jock puffed and leaned back in his chair. "I don't know what it is. Leave that to the

scientific lads. But this crewman begins scratching glass with his bit and tells a pal. In short, it's the hardest thing in the cosmos. It'll scratch a diamond, they say yet is easily worked as iron when hot. For drills and similar cutting machinery it'll fetch a fortune. It can be fused on to any ordinary metal. Even a thousandth of an inch layer is almost everlasting. I've heard the scientific lads have been successful in electro-plating tools and bearings with it, too."

I eyed the silvery piece with new respect and decided Mactavish was not such a simpleton as he sometimes tried to appear.

"Have you no more tobacco?" I asked,

He understood. "Plenty. Also as much of this stuff as I plan to take."

"Then why not blasf off with it?".

"Because" Kennedy could still get to Earth months before me laddie. By Galileo, 1 could have made a fortune!" He sighed and helped, himself to a second drink. "By the time Kennedy has sold his, I'll be lucky if mine' will cover expenses."

Jill came in. We talked of other things and at last I went off to write my preliminary report. T found Kennedy's stock of tobacco gone, but the natives still carrying for the promise of more to come. Jill and Jock had agreed that the origin of the stuff was curious but apparently shrouded in the dim past. The pile had been there as long as any native could remember - had always been there the wise ones of the tribe said. It wasn't the most peculiar thing I'd seen on strange planets by a long way, and I didn't particularly care where it had come from.

THE NEXT day Mactavish wandered across and Kennedy invited him triumphantly. "I'd like you to see my cargo, Jock."

He was being nasty, but we went through the ship. Every spa ce, including the main holds, was filled with neatly stacked silvery lumps.

Mactavish's brows slowly went up and up. At last he sighed, " By the saint, ye've enough here to buy a planetary, system, with careful selling!"

Kennedy patted the high piles. "Remember Pluto?" he asked.

Mactavish seemed to be taking his defeat well. "Me mother always told me never to hold malice," was all he said.

That night it rained so violently that the first storm seemed a spring shower. I awoke to find Mactavish and Kennedy holding parley outside with a native.

"Wrong to move sacred silver," the native was saying. "Cause much bad weather."

I was amazed at the ease with which he had picked up these few phrases, but remembered Jock's teaching.

- "No want more," Mactavish said.

"No more," Kennedy agreed.

The native bowed, obviously satisfied. "Good. Cause much bad weather. Sacred spirit angry." He left, dignified and erect.

"So what?" Kennedy said when he had gone. "I've got all of the stuff I want. I'm ready to blast off."

"And I," said Mactavish.

Kennedy scoffed at him and I went with Mactavish back to his old tramp. Somehow, I'd had enough of Kennedy, who was ruining Jock's one real chance of ending up a rich man, and I knew no real spaceman would refuse a lift to anyone from Planetary Records, who do so much to clear up original doubt on a score of vital points.

"Look," I said. "Why not hurry?"

Mactavish shook his head. "No use, laddie. Kennedy could leave us months behind. His ship is fast."

HE MADE leisurely preparations, economically taking down the old hut and storing it in the hold. Then he took out his remaining stock of tobacco and distributed it among the natives.

"Never let other men touch sacred silver," he said as he handed the packets out. "Cause much rain. Cause bad luck."

They all nodded vigorously. Mactavish closed the airlock and I went with him and Jill into the control room. He switched on the inter-ship radio and called Kennedy. He had one lump of the silvery stuff near the control panel and he was stroking it tenderly. Soon Kennedy's voice came back.

"Mactavish here," Jock said. "I'm still game for a fair split, because there's enough for both, and because me mother said never to bear malice -"

"You're nuts!" Kennedy sounded angry.

"Nay, mon, just kind-hearted. Don't you want to play the game my way?"

Kennedy's reply was abusive. Mactavish shrugged. "Me gal is listening," he said, and took off. All the time his expression puzzled me. He seemed in no hurry to get the ship right away and the intercom was still on.

"I'll leave you months behind!" Kennedy's voice came, a note of satisfaction in it.

Mactavish stroked the silver lump. "The natives will never help unload your ship, Cap'n," he said. "Bring much bad luck to move sacred silver lumps, eh! Besides, you gat no more bacca."

"What makes you think I want unloading!" snapped Kennedy impatiently.

"Me common sense, mon. Ever handled one of them lumps?"

"N-no. Wanted to avoid arousing the natives' feelings." Kennedy's voice held a new note of panic.'

"And quite right too," Mactavish said.

He motioned and I saw he wanted me to pick up the lump by his panel. I took it with one hand; gasped, and took it with two. I could just lift it an inch.

"Collapsed atomic structure," Mactavish said. "Them wee natives aren't weaklings. Ever see under their nightshirts? All muscles and brawn! I hate to think how many thousands of tons overload Kennedy's got on board and no means of shifting it."

The reproducer began to stutter and roar with a voice now filled with angry panic; Mactavish switched it off.

"Tut, tut, and with my gal listening too," he said softly. "Hope he doesn't blow his tubes out trying to take off with that lot. Never wished any mon bad luck "