

Paper Treasure for Mars

by Richard Elam

Hugh Davone and Link Malloy sat at the wall desk of the space ship compartment poring over their albums of interplanetary postage stamps. The atom-powered *Princess of Mars*, cargo and passenger liner, was only a few hours out on its Earth-to-Mars run.

"It makes me nervous thinking of the thousands of dollars' worth of stamps we're carrying in the wall safe," Link said. "I don't think I'm going to enjoy this trip."

"Take it easy, Link," Hugh replied, with a lighthearted grin. "There are Space Guardsmen aboard ship to protect us."

The fellows were on their annual vacation from the Space Cadet Corps. Since cadets in training could ride any space ship free, the two were escorting a valuable shipment of Mr. Davone's interplanetary stamps to another dealer opening up shop in Mars City.

"I'm worrying about that white-haired old character your dad said asked suspicious questions at his shop the other day," Link said. "Seems funny that he is making the trip to Mars the same time we are."

"Probably only a coincidence," Hugh answered. "There's only one flight a month to Mars, you know."

"There are unscrupulous dealers who would give anything to lay their hands on our shipment," Link went on. "This deal means an awful lot to your dad's stamp business, Hugh. If we should bungle the job, he certainly would lose a lot."

"Sure he would," Hugh agreed, then he added, "but we aren't going to bungle it."

This seemed to satisfy Link and a smile of confidence deepened the corners of his broad, friendly mouth.

Hugh picked up a stamp with his tongs. "I came across this duplicate from the Venus pictorial issue. It's the six-dollar blue of the Valley of Mists. Have you got it?"

Link leaned over. "No! What have you been doing, Hugh, holding out on me? How about some of my 2027 Lunar commems in trade?"

They worked out an exchange. The Lunar stamps were curious specimens, imperforate and circular. They depicted the Lunar hemisphere which faces Earth. The single-stamp issue had been distributed on the fiftieth anniversary of man's first landing on the moon and was much in demand.

Suddenly there was a knock on the outer door of the compartment.

Hugh got up and went to the door. As he walked, his magnetic-sole shoes rasped against the metallic floor like a knife being honed. He opened the door.

A man with the face and build of a leprechaun looked at Hugh. His pale but alert blue eyes peered steadily into Hugh's. Hugh also began to wonder why this customer at Davone's Philatelic Shop should be making the voyage to Mars with them.

"Yes, sir?" Hugh asked.

"May I come in?" the man asked. "My name is Oscar Benasco."

Hugh hesitated, thinking about the valuable cargo, then he replied reluctantly, "Yes."

"Your father certainly has a fine shop, Hugh Davone," the elderly man said brightly as he entered. "However, I was disappointed to find out that he had packed up some of his choicest space items and was selling them to Mr. Elfs, a dealer on Mars."

"You know quite a lot, Mr. Benasco," Link remarked coolly.

"Yes, I pride myself on my shrewdness," Mr. Benasco replied in a modest manner. His roving eyes came to rest on the boys' albums. "I see you two have collections of your own."

"Nothing very valuable," Hugh replied. "But we enjoy our stamps just the same."

"Ah, yes," Benasco said. His eyes brightened with eagerness and he placed the tips of his outspread fingers together. "Speaking of valuable items—those you are taking to Mars—no doubt you keep them in your compartment safe. I wonder if you might show them to me?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Benasco," Hugh said, "but I promised my dad I wouldn't take the stamps out to show anyone until they were safely in the hands of Mr. Elfs on Mars."

Benasco looked completely crestfallen. His rounded shoulders slumped and the most pained expression covered his face. "Surely just a look—" he pleaded.

"If you are going to Mars, as you must be," Hugh went on, "you'll be able to see them all in Mr. Elfs's shop, and you can talk to him about any stamps you might want to buy."

"Then that's your final answer?" Mr. Benasco asked, his disappointment giving way to annoyance.

"I'm afraid it must be," Hugh told him. "I'm sorry."

"You've disappointed me sorely, young man," Mr. Benasco retorted. "Good day to you."

He turned briskly and clattered out the door. As he left, Hugh caught sight of the handle of an old type miniature rocket pistol protruding from his coat pocket.

"Did you see that pistol?" Link asked, in surprise. "It's a wonder he didn't hold us up for the stamps right here and now! But I guess he was afraid to risk it."

"For a moment I almost felt sorry for him and was about to give in," Hugh admitted. "Now I'm

glad I didn't."

In the days that followed, Hugh and Link saw little of Mr. Benasco except in the dining room.

One morning, near the end of the flight, Hugh and Link were standing in front of their compartment port looking out. The orange-red globe of Mars was so dominant that it seemed to press back the surrounding stars and nebulae to near obscurity.

"Only a few more days and our shipment will be safely in the hands of Mr. Elfs in Mars City," Hugh said. "Then Mr. Benasco will be Mr. Elfs's worry."

"That will be just dandy as far as I'm concerned," Link replied earnestly.

By this year of 2031, space mail service had increased to such proportions that it had opened up a brand new field of stamp specialization for the philatelist. It was for this reason that Mr. Elfs was attempting a stamp hobby business in Mars City. Mr. Davone's portfolios of both low and high values was to provide him with the bulk of his opening merchandise.

Even the most remote colonies of the Solar System, including the farthest on Triton, Neptune, had their own postage by now. The lone Triton bi-color, picturing Valhalla Peak, tallest mountain yet discovered in the System, was one of the most wanted by collectors.

Suddenly the chimes for lunch were heard over the compartment intercom.

Entering the dining room, Hugh and Link saw Benasco in his usual place at the end of the table near the door. They took their seats and Link smiled at his plate. "Cubed beef, Hugh."

Hugh grinned. "You can't say they don't aim to please on the *Princess of Mars*."

But the fellows did not get to finish their cubed roast, nor did anyone else at the table.

A shock hit the ship like an unheralded thunderbolt. Hugh had the crazy feeling of being in a nightmare. After the deafening report, he felt his lap belt snap, and then he was hoisted out of his chair as though in the vortex of a whirlwind. The table tore loose from the floor fittings. Hugh bounced into a coffee urn and it nearly stunned him. Groans of distress from those around him filled his ears.

"What has happened?" Hugh thought dazedly.

The ship's disaster siren pealed along the corridors of the *Princess of Mars*. Medical men with stretchers came running and officers snapped out brisk orders. Hugh groped anxiously through the melee for Link. He struggled over twisted chair tubing and found his friend helping those who were hurt.

"We've got work to do," Link told him.

Hugh rolled up his sleeves. He was still giddy. "I'm ready," he said.

It was reported later that there were no fatalities, but there were enough injured persons to keep the infirmary staff busy for awhile.

Hugh and Link, working side by side with the medical men, had not seen anything of Benasco since the accident. The ship's engineers revealed that a meteorite had caused the disaster. It had struck fairly close to the compartment occupied by Hugh and Link. Hugh shuddered to think what it would have been like to have been tossed about in their room like a pea in a whistle. Such would have been his and Link's fate had the strike occurred half an hour earlier.

The cadets had not yet had the opportunity to check their quarters for damage. When the physician in charge finally freed them with thanks for their help, Hugh thought about the stamps for the first time since the unnerving incident.

"Link," he said urgently, "we've got to get back and check on those stamps! This has been a perfect set up for Benasco and his scheme!"

"Right behind you," Link said as they hurried from the infirmary.

Along the way, the two found warped walls and doors that had been flung open. Luckily all the occupants in the worst-hit area had been in the dining room at the terrible moment, or there surely would have been fatalities.

Reaching their compartment, Hugh and Link found that the door had been forced open by the explosion.

Hugh hurried over to the wall safe. He felt a chill of dread race through him. The vault door also was open and the chamber was empty.

"They're gone!" Hugh said hoarsely. "All of Dad's stamps are gone!"

Hugh slumped remorsefully on his cot, taut fingers combing through his hair. "Dad wanted to have the stamps insured," he said bitterly, "but I was trying to save him money. The insurance fee was enormous, and on top of that he would have had to pay the fare both to and from Mars for the agents who would carry the shipment. How I wish they had done it now!"

"If Benasco has the stamps, we may still be able to recover them," Link said. "Let's go see him."

Hugh got up, his face set, his palm shaped into a fist. "If Benasco *is* the one, I'll personally—oh, never mind! Come on!"

They moved down corridor "E," which was away from the center of the damage. This was the hall where they knew Benasco's room was located. Scarcely anybody was in the section at present. Those who resided in the nearby rooms were either helping out in the emergency, or they were idly watching the beginning of repairs. The outside meteor bumper and the inner buffer bulkheads had kept the destruction to a minimum. By automatically sealing themselves off from the rest of the ship at the moment of impact, the protective bulkheads had kept the ship from being decompressed.

Hugh and Link found their suspect's door closed. Hugh walked up to it and tried the knob.

The door opened under Hugh's push, but the compartment was vacant.

“He’s gone,” Link said.

“He must be somewhere close by,” Hugh returned impatiently. “We haven’t passed him on the way, so he must be farther down the corridor.”

“Maybe he’s looking for a place to hide the portfolios until we land,” Link suggested. “He knows we’ll suspect him of taking them.”

Hugh nodded. “Let’s go.”

As the two moved ahead down the quiet passageway, Link spoke in a tense voice, “Do you think we’re right trying to tackle that little guy alone? We’re each bigger than he is, but he’s got a pistol and we haven’t.”

“We’ll be careful,” Hugh promised.

There were a number of storerooms lining the corridor. The cadets checked one after another. The rooms were shrouded in tomblike silence and full of dark hiding places. But the search revealed no sign of Benasco or the missing portfolios.

“He seems to have disappeared right into the air,” Link said discouragingly. “Hugh, I hate to say it, but something tells me we aren’t going to see either Benasco or those stamps again.”

They were approaching the door of an outer-ship repair room. Hugh knew that a ladder in this room led directly up to the outside hull of the ship.

“You’re probably thinking along the same lines that I am, Link,” Hugh replied gravely. “It may be farfetched, but a person as shrewd as Mr. Benasco makes out to be might have cooked up a pretty clever plan. He may have had a portable transmitter hidden somewhere so that he could contact another party outside the ship.”

“I get it!” Link said. “He might have radioed this crony in a space taxi to meet him on the outer skin. Then they could both take off with the loot and either land on Mars or on one of the moons!”

As Link spoke, Hugh was staring through the plastic window of the room. A wall hid much of the interior from view. Suddenly he saw the very man they were seeking cross the room and disappear beyond the corner of the concealing wall.

Link caught a glimpse of him too. “Hey!” he burst out. “Wasn’t that *him*?”

“It sure was,” Hugh replied, feeling better now. “He probably just entered the room from another door along the next side corridor.”

Hugh gently turned the knob and the door swung open soundlessly. “We’ll slip in softly,” he whispered. “Then we can try to take him by surprise around the corner up ahead. We’ll have to watch our step because he’s probably desperate and will have his pistol ready for use.”

“He deserves to get twenty years for a theft like this,” Link whispered fiercely. “How did he

ever expect to get away with it?”

“He *won't* get away with it,” Hugh whispered confidently. “Right now he’s probably getting into a space suit so he can pop through the outer hatch and join his confederate outside.”

They had reached the corner on tiptoe. Hugh, in the lead, peered carefully around the corner. He gaped in surprise at what he saw:

Benasco was seated on the floor like a child with a new scrapbook, and he was chattering away ecstatically to himself!

“My, oh, my, what a splendid group!” he was saying. “There’s a *tete beche* pair of old 1989 Space Stations I’ve always wanted! And look at this one—a full sheet of Europa triangles! Oscar Benasco will have the most splendid collection of space stamps in all the Solar System!”

Hugh came out of hiding, followed by Link. “The jig’s up, Mr. Benasco,” Hugh said. “How about returning our property?”

The old man was so preoccupied that he did not notice Hugh and Link immediately. “Dear, dear,” he purred, “what a beautiful set of Einstein memorial surcharges! I wonder if young Davone will break up the set? I have some of them.”

“He’s just a queer old guy,” Link remarked as the two of them strode up to him.

“Oh, hello, boys,” Mr. Benasco greeted them casually. “I was hoping I’d found a place where I wouldn’t be disturbed for awhile. I knew you’d come by my room. I hope you don’t mind the liberty I’ve taken with your stamps. But I did *ask* to see them and you refused, you know?”

Hugh took from him the portfolio he was holding. “How many stamps have you removed from here?” he demanded.

The man’s snowy brows went up in surprised indignation. “Removed?” he shrilled, his face coloring. “I’ve never been accused of stealing in my life, sir! I merely borrowed your collection to see if it has the items I need. When the explosion blew open your safe, it was simply a temptation I could not resist.”

“Those rare items you need cost money,” Hugh reminded him. “Lots of it.”

“Young man,” Mr. Benasco grunted, “you do not need to tell me of the value of postage stamps. I’m well acquainted with Scott’s catalogue. I have every intention of paying for my merchandise.” He pulled out such a wad of bills that Link gasped. “You see, I *can* pay.”

“What about that rocket pistol you’re carrying in your pocket, Mr. Benasco?” Link asked suspiciously. “Do you always go around armed?”

“Oh, this?” the old man asked, taking out the rusted miniature model. “This is nothing but an old relic of mine when I was a space hand myself on a freighter. I carry it with me sometimes, because it gives me a feeling of confidence.”

Hugh chuckled as a vast feeling of relief came over him. “You certainly had us fooled, Mr. Benasco. We thought surely you were a stamp thief out to steal our valuable stamps.”

“Perhaps my methods have puzzled you somewhat,” Mr. Benasco declared. “But I had to see those rarities before you got rid of them. Somebody might have bought them before I could. Perhaps Mr. Elfs would have held them out for his own collection. You must sell them to me, young man! I believe I should die if I could not get them! Stamps represent the only pleasure that is left to me.”

“All right, Mr. Benasco, since it means so much to you,” Hugh agreed, smiling. “Being a hobbyist myself, I know what a hold stamps can have on a person. We’ll take the portfolios back to our compartment and discuss the stamps you want. But if my father or Mr. Elfs complains about this, you’ll have to share the blame.”

“Gladly, gladly,” was the willing reply. “Do you mind telling us why you’re going to Mars, Mr. Benasco?” Link asked.

“I’ve got a son there working on a canal project. He invited me and my stamp collection to come and stay as long as I liked, since I had lived with my other son so long in the States. I thought it was nice of him.”

As Hugh and Link were leading the way out of the room, the portfolios safely tucked under their arms, Hugh remarked in a whisper to his pal, “Link, I’ll never prejudge another person as long as I live.”

Link stole a look back at Mr. Benasco who was clicking along behind and smiling rapturously. “That calls for a mutual pledge, Hugh,” Link replied soberly, with a shake of his head. “Let’s shake on it.”

And they did.

Source:

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