

THRILLS



INCORPORATED

ADVENTURES IN SPACE AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

SPACE RACE

A STARTLING NOVEL
BY BELLI LUIGI

ALSO NOVELETES BY E.V. ZINNS. WOLFE HERSCHOLT

No. 1.
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Missing Page: Inside Front Cover

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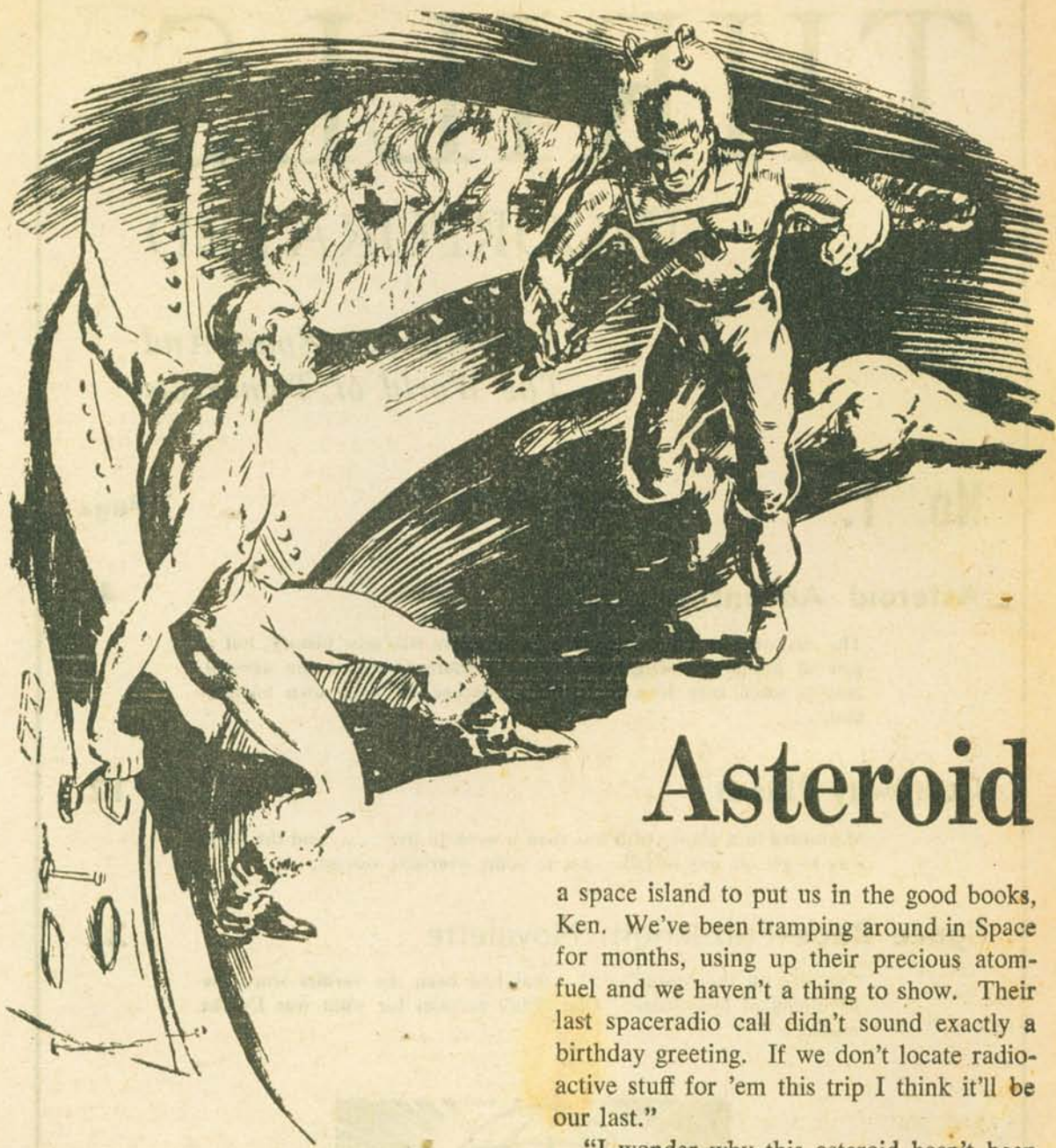
*Adventures in Space And
The World of Tomorrow*

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Asteroid

a space island to put us in the good books, Ken. We've been tramping around in Space for months, using up their precious atom-fuel and we haven't a thing to show. Their last spaceradio call didn't sound exactly a birthday greeting. If we don't locate radio-active stuff for 'em this trip I think it'll be our last."

"I wonder why this asteroid hasn't been discovered before," said Ken thoughtfully, glancing at the Astromap. "It's a bit off the Mars-Jupiter beaten track, but not so far away that—"

Ken Grayfield's words ended in a gasp as the little spacecraft lurched and spun giddily as though caught in a whirlwind of tremendous force. The plump Jimmy was flung violently against the foam-rubber padding on the side of the vessel, and

"WELL, at least it's something new," remarked Ken Grayfield, peering into the visiscreen at the asteroid which they were approaching. "We can add it to the official Astromap. Perhaps that will convince the directors of Planet Prospectors Limited that we're doing our best to locate new radio-active minerals for 'em."

Jimmy Briscoe, the co-pilot, grunted. "It'll take more than finding and charting

WHEN a couple of prospectors sink their last dime in finding the biggest ato-power strike in the millennium, they're not going to be claim-jumped without a good-old prehistoric scrap.

landed squashily on the floor. Ken, at the controls, grasped one of the larger levers and hung on grimly, although his arm felt as though it was being torn from its socket.

"Look out!" yelled Jimmy, clambering to his feet, his bulging eyes fixed on the visiscreen where the asteroid was looming hugely and with astonishing speed. "We're right on top of it! Repulsion jets—quick!"

Ken nodded. He was vainly trying to steer the craft around the obstacle; but the ship was streaking towards the leaden mass with ever-increasing speed. He grasped the emergency lever, the last resort, and one which in unskilled hands could be disastrous. To cut in emergency too quickly could weaken the hull of the craft, and the sudden deceleration could shatter the bodies of the two men.

Adventure

by Wolfe Herscholt

SLOWLY, and repressing an urge to drag at the emergency lever, Ken moved it across. Still the ship plunged on, but the recorder indicated a slight diminution in the speed. Then, just as suddenly as it all started, the craft was under control. Sweat started from Ken's forehead as he operated the emergency jets. It was a matter of seconds now. An error in judgment either way A great relief surged through the pilot as the needle gradually moved back. It had been a near thing, but his skill and judgment had won.

"Can you flatten out, Ken?" Jimmy Briscoe was looking through the glastic nose at the asteroid. Ken's answer was implicit in the action of the craft. The grey mass of the asteroid disappeared from the front of

the craft and instead appeared in the glastic panel in the floor. The spacecraft was flying parallel to the asteroid.

"I'll circle this asteroid a few times to get the feel of its atmosphere values," said Ken. "It's no wonder the place hasn't been discovered and charted. There's a belt of cosmic activity around it sufficient to toss anything but the largest spaceliner out of control. I'll bet more than one spacecraft has found itself on the edge of that activity and veered away, quick smart . . . Great Sagittarius!" said Ken, suddenly.

"What's the matter?" Jimmy's voice was nervous. The experience of the last few moments had left him jumpy.

"Gravity," replied Ken. "Look at the grav recorder and you'll understand why the normal repulsion jets weren't so hot. And I'm beginning to understand why I'm feeling a bit heavy headed."

"Three times Earth gravity," said Jimmy, eyeing the recorder. "It's going to be a job getting around when we do land."

"It might be something worthwhile, too." Jimmy's blue eyes were sparkling in his round face. "The density suggests something new in minerals. Radio-active stuff. Boy, if it is and we claim it for Planet Prospectors Limited, we're made!"

"You might have something there," admitted Ken, catching some of his friend's enthusiasm. "Still, we've got to land, explore, test, and get away again through that cosmic maelstrom. Although I don't anticipate any trouble in getting through that, now that I got the hang of the conditions. Still, exploring the ground in this gravity is going to be an exhausting job."

And gradually, under his careful delicate operation the little spacecraft sank slowly to the ground.

THE two spacemen struggled into their spacesuits, the weight of which rendered them difficult to handle, but when they were locked within the suits they felt better.

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"I'm still as heavy as lead," said Jimmy, speaking into the helmet transmitter, "but I'm getting a bit of support. The neck supports are giving my spine and neck muscles a rest, anyway. Ready to poke around, Ken?"

"Yes. Got the Enercounter plugged into your suit?"

The plump young man nodded inside his helmet, and picked up the Enercounter, the leads of which were already plugged into his suit panel.

Ken led the way through the air-lock, which automatically sealed closed after them, imprisoning the precious Earth atmosphere in the spacecraft. The ground beneath their feet was a powdery, silvery sand. Ken stooped and scraped at it, and it trickled quickly through his gloved fingers.

The two men ploughed heavily through the silvery sand, Jimmy waiting eagerly for the broadcast of ticking which would indicate radioactive substances. But the counter remained silent.

"False alarm," grunted Jimmy. "This place is a fraud. If there were any radioactivity I'd have picked it up by now."

"We'll push on to that darker patch over there," said Ken, but his voice did not sound hopeful.

"Push is right," grumbled the plump Jimmy, disgustedly. "It's like trying to walk underwater."

Slowly and heavily they moved towards the horizon which, on this small world, was distinctly convex. Sweat was pouring from the faces of the two men as they forced their triple-weighted bodies along the metallic surface, their feet sinking into the silver sand. It was becoming an increasingly painful effort to raise one leg after the other, but they struggled on doggedly, the lure of a fabulous reward urging them forward. They reached the darker patch, which proved to be a smooth expanse of metallic looking rock.

And still the Enercounter was silent!

PANTING, they sank to the ground. "I've had enough of this place, Ken," gulped Jimmy. "Better get back to the ship and take off. This gravity's too much for me."

Ken nodded heavily. He was bitterly disappointed. The place had all the earmarks of a radioactive mine. But the counter was infallible, and it indicated clearly that the asteroid was a dead mass, even though it floated in the midst of a cosmic turbulence. There was more of the tiny world to explore, of course, but the structure seemed the same everywhere: leaden sand interspersed with flat stretches of that dully-shining rock. But all dead stuff. Long before they could cover the entire surface they would be exhausted; and in any case they would have to return to the ship again and again for an oxygen recharge, for their bodies were using up oxygen at a high rate.

"Guess I'll take a sample of this stuff back if I can blast a bit off," said Ken. He withdrew his Atoblaster from its pouch and directed its muzzle to the rock. He pressed the switch and a lightning-like beam shot out and lifted a few inches of the rock-like substance and turned it to slag. And simultaneously, a wild yell in his helmet ear-phones almost deafened him.

"The Enercounter!" yelled Jimmy's voice. "It's gone mad!"

"What!"

"It's ticking away like fury," cried Jimmy excitedly. "It—it can scarcely record the beats. The place is alive—alive! It's one mass of radio activity."

Ken moved closer to the section of the blasted rock, secure against radioactivity in his spacesuit. He could see, beneath that skin, a dully glowing metallic substance. And he understood.

"It's it, all right," he said, his eyes dancing with excitement. "See! This rock is a dead skin, a baffle against the radioactivity within. Once the skin's broken the activity burst out. And look at all these patches of flat rock. Every one of 'em probably covering a reservoir of radioactivity!"

"What a strike!" yelled Jimmy. "We're made, Ken—made! We'll show Planet Prospectors Limited! They reckoned we were just loafing around in Space using up their fuel, eh. There'll be a few red faces among the staff when we get back."

"And a few happy faces around the directors' table," grinned Ken.

"And we'll be independent," said Jimmy. "We split ten per cent. of this little lot. Oh, boy! Come on, Ken. Get going again. I can't get back to Earth quick enough!"

"I'll take a sample of this skin-rock back with me," said Ken. He moved towards the rock, but stopped dead as Jimmy's voice, raised in alarm, filled his helmet.

"KEN—look!" He turned as quickly as conditions would allow, and followed Jimmy's upward gaze, and gasped. High above the asteroid, tossed and whirled in the great whirlpools of stormy energy around that little world, was a small space-cruiser. It was hopelessly out of control, but the pilot was trying every trick to keep the craft clear of the asteroid.

"Poor devils!" muttered Ken. "Oh, good!"

The craft, instead of plunging straight into the mass of the asteroid, suddenly veered at the last moment and shot like a silver bullet over the low western horizon, missing that little world by a narrow margin.

"Good work," said Ken. "He's putting up a great fight. I wonder if he's shot clear of the influence of this place. He deserves to after that effort. He's not a genius of a pilot by any means, or he would have grasped the situation and handled it—Hullo, here he comes again."

The spacecruiser had appeared over the western horizon, and was streaking low down over the asteroid.

"The fool!" shouted Ken. "Why doesn't he keep out? He's going to crash!"

Nothing now could save the spacecruiser. Its speed had diminished, the retarding jets flat out, but it was not built for landing at speed. It swept down, only a matter of feet above the surface, then it touched ground.

It landed on the edge of the strip of metallic sand, ploughed across it, sending up an enormous silver spray like a speed-boat through water, and left a deep darkened scorched furrow behind it. Then it came to rest and rolled over on its side, smoke belching from its rear.

THE two men attempted to run over to the wrecked ship, but succeeded only in achieving a lumbering walk. There was a long gaping gash in the bottom of the ship. The repulsion jet-tubes were red hot and twisted out of shape.

Ken, who was first to the scene, opened the air lock and clambered into the ship. Inside, through a dense fog of smoke he could see something moving on the floor. He bent and grabbed at the figure, and saw that luckily the pilot was already garbed in his spacesuit. The figure was lying face downwards and moving futilely.

With a tremendous effort Ken succeeded in rolling the man over, and a pair of dark, frightened eyes looked through the shield into his own.

"Can you hear me?" asked Ken, into his transmitter.

"Yes." The voice was faint, but at least it proved that the man's headradio was tuned into the universal spacesuit wavelength.

Jimmy's head appeared in the open air lock.

"Help me with this fellow, Jimmy," said Ken. "We can't carry him against this confounded gravity, but we should be able to drag him clear. This crate is going to heat up any minute now. Once the atomic fuel tanks are reached by the heat we'll be crisped to nothing. Step on it. If we can get him out in time I'll have a look for the other passenger. He may have escaped so far."

Jimmy struggled into the machine, and as he bent over the recumbent figure of the pilot a big spacesuited figure lurched through the pall of smoke. A voice, harsh and thick sounded in the rescuer's earphones. "Is he alive?" "He's all right," replied Ken. "But we'll all be in trouble if we're not clear in a minute or two. Here, take his head. Jimmy, you get his other leg. All ready? Right! Start dragging."

THE prostrate man seemed to weigh tons as the three men tugged and heaved.

"The tanks!" The big spacesuited man looked fearfully over his shoulder at the cloud of smoke.

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"We'll manage," said Ken through gritted teeth. "We're nearly there." His words, and his example stimulated the other two, and with a last combined heave they dragged the semi-conscious pilot through the air lock.

"Now!" shouted Ken. "Pull and run!" He and Jimmy, grasping the legs of the man dragged madly; the other passenger took one arm of the pilot, and the strange procession ploughed through the metallic sand. Through the back of his spacesuit Ken felt a sudden warm sensation.

He turned, and saw that the little spacecruiser was now a white-hot glowing mass, and sending out a brilliant spray of fused metal particles.

"Think you can make our craft now?" Ken spoke to the pilot. "Any injuries—bones broken?"

"I'm all right, I think," replied the dark man wearily. "Just shock, and exhaustion."

"All right, we'll move."

Inside the craft the four men divested themselves of their spacesuits. Ken eyed the two newcomers curiously. The pilot was of slight build, olive skinned, and naturally quick and nervous of movement. The other was big and blonde, with close-set cold blue eyes. Not a particularly prepossessing couple, was his mental summing up.

"How did you come to find this spot?" asked Ken bluntly.

The dark eyes narrowed slightly; then he laughed. "Just cruising, I guess. And sort of exploring. We were going to do Galaxy 26—and perhaps a bit further."

"Exploring?" Ken raised his brows.

"First chance we've had to get away from the usual Space routes," explained the other. "I'm Sel Geddes, and my pal here is Herb Smike. Both Spaceliner Pilots on the Venusian run. We pulled out for a spell and hired that natty little spacecruiser for a run around. That's all."

AFTER the two had made their way to the middle compartment Jimmy turned to his companion. "What do you make of 'em, Ken?"

"Don't like the look of 'em," replied Ken frankly. "They're both liars for a start.

They aren't Spaceliner Pilots. If they were they'd have handled that landing better. And that natty little spacecruiser isn't the sort you can hire. From what I could see of it, both in the air and on the ground, it was more in the millionaire class. Yes, there's something queer about them."

"Queer's right," grunted Jimmy Briscoe. "Notice how interested they were when we mentioned our job? I'm jolly glad you kept quiet about our radioactive mine."

"Well, we must keep our eyes peeled," said Ken, rising and getting into his spacesuit. "I'm going out now to get that sample of rock-skin. It's almost as important as the radioactive stuff. It's thin, but it seems to be a perfect shield against radioactivity. It's possible that it could be analysed and duplicated in the laboratories on Earth. I'll go now, while our two guests are out of the way."

He left by the air lock, and trudged across towards the smooth rock. About twenty yards from the craft he turned suddenly, and immediately a head, which had been watching through the middle glastic window, ducked out of sight.

"So you're inquisitive, eh!" he muttered.

"Well, I'm not going to satisfy your curiosity." Instead of walking in the direction he had intended to follow, he moved towards the blackening twisted mass of metal which had once been a luxury spacecruiser, and stood looking at it for a few minutes, for the benefit of prying eyes, then laboriously returned to the spacecraft.

"They're definitely not to be trusted," he said to Jimmy as he removed his spacesuit. "One chap was watching me through the window. They must suspect we've got on to something here. I'll wait until they're asleep before I go back to that claim. It will mean postponing our departure, but

"If you're going to postpone leaving until we're asleep, my friend," said a voice in the doorway, "you'll be here a long time."

The dark man was standing in the doorway holding a small glittering atoblaster. His eyes were alert, watchful. Behind him loomed the figure of the big man, Smike.

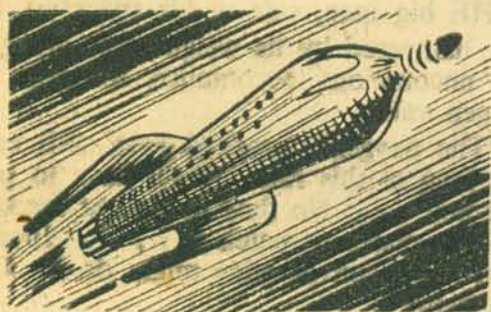
"Just where is this claim?" demanded Geddes. "And what is it?"

Ken eyed him in silent contempt for a moment. "A grateful pair, you are," he said bitingly. "Where would you have been now, but for us?"

"Pardon me," said the dark man mockingly. "I should have thanked you for saving our lives. But of what good are our lives if we can't enjoy them? And if you two prospectors have found a worthwhile claim of radioactivity, it will provide the means by which we can enjoy life to the full. In fact, my friends, a discovery like that means more to us than you can imagine." He grinned knowingly at his companion.

"And you think you can hold us up for the claim and get away with it," said Ken. "What do you intend to do about us?"

"You'll manage here for a while," replied the other calmly. "When we get far enough away we'll spaceradio your position



and a lifecruiser will be sent to pick you up. But in the meantime, the claim will be ours."

"And how are you going to explain away your leaving us here?"

"That will be our worry," said Geddes easily.

Ken pursed his lips. He knew there would be no spaceradio distress call; knew that these two crooks would not be leaving them on the asteroid—alive.

"Just take that enercounter, Smike," said Geddes. "Take a look around outside. The claim shouldn't be hard to find on this place. I'll keep these fellows quiet."

The other donned his spacesuit, plugged in the enercounter and left the craft, Geddes keeping the two men covered.

A MADLY desperate urge to throw himself at the dark cold-blooded ruffian entered Ken's mind, but he thrust it aside. Only too well he knew the lightning lethal power of that little atoblaster. A squeeze of the switch, and he would be dissolved in an atomic ray. His eyes strayed towards his own spacesuit, in the pocket of which was his own atoblaster, the only other weapon on the craft. If only he could get to that! He shifted his position slightly, but the man's voice rapped out in curt command.

"Another move like that and you'll never move again. I'm taking no risks with either of you. Get that into your skulls before you get this in your guts!"

The air lock opened, and the big man entered, his eyes gleaming with excitement behind the shield. And Ken's heart sank. He had secretly hoped that the man with the counter would miss that tiny escape of radioactivity. So long as the claim was not found he and Jimmy would have some semblance of bargaining power with these ruffians. But now his hopes in that regard were shattered.

"Radioactivity!" The big man had switched over to outer two-way broadcast and receiving, and his voice boomed through the craft triumphantly. "This little pebble's alive with radioactive stuff. There's a spot there with the rock peeled away and the counter can't catch up with what's underneath it. There's millions here, Sel—millions!"

"Very pleasant prospects—for us," said the dark man. "You may as well know now, my friends, that we are not merely cruising around on a Space holiday, and that the nice little cruiser we had was not our own. Its owner was a wealthy settler on Venus, who came to a rather sudden end." He moved his atoblaster significantly. "It was the only way," he said in mock apology. "We made things a little too warm for us on the Green Planet, and it was a case of get away quickly, or—the end for us. Our intention was to use the cruiser to get us to a remote planetoid and lie low for a while. We were in a tight spot. We had to find a remote Space island, which produced food, and as experienced Spacemen you realise that that is not easy.

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But now, thanks to you, our problem is virtually solved. We have another spacecraft, we have your identity call to allow us to enter Earth's atmosphere through the radio-beacon guard, and we have information about this claim, which we can pass on, for a price, to certain interests on Earth who will not ask any—er—awkward questions."

"WHAT about us?" burst out Jimmy.

The dark man shrugged. "You are—unfortunate." He turned to his space-suited accomplice. "Open the air lock for them," he commanded.

"You're going to send us out there without our spacesuits!" gasped Ken. "We'll be smothered in those gases in a few minutes."

"Naturally," agreed the other. "But please yourself. If you don't get through that air lock you will be blasted out of existence with this. It is for you to decide. But make up your mind quickly."

For a moment Ken eyed the ruffian, then he rose slowly, heavily. "Well, this looks like it, Jimmy," he said bitterly. "We may as well go out this way. At least we'll have the ultimate experience of an asteroid's atmosphere before we—" He broke off and lurched heavily at the man holding the atoblaster, gripping his wrist.

The man, keen-eyed and alert as he was, nevertheless was a fraction too late. He pressed the switch, and Ken felt a searing flare of heat past his temple as the blasting ray barely missed him; and then a stench of melting foamrubber and fused metal told their own story. The ray had blasted a hole in the side of the spacecraft.

Ken, clutching the man's wrist, forced it to the edge of the hole, and as the hand holding the atoblaster touched against the red-hot jagged edge of the hole Geddes uttered a scream and dropped the atoblaster through the hole, and it fell out on to the asteroid.

The hole in the craft's side was barely twelve inches in diameter, but already great waves of the heavy outside gases were pouring in. Jimmy, who had taken Ken's action as a signal, had immediately flung himself at the spacesuited figure of Smike, bearing him heavily to the floor, but this first effort was

also his last. Overcome by the gases he now lay on the floor, his face gradually turning blue. Geddes, who had also fallen to the floor clutching his seared wrist, was rapidly slipping into gasping unconsciousness. But Ken, still upright, was as yet scarcely affected by the heavy gases which were flowing in and settling low down.

He staggered away from the hole towards the automatic oxygen valve, which had cut in and was automatically endeavoring to restore the atmosphere to normal. He gulped in some precious oxygen, then turned and struggled over to Jimmy, and dragged the unconscious form of his friend towards the hissing valve; held his head close to the stream of oxygen and watched while the blue tint died first from the plump face and then from the lips. And Jimmy's eyes flickered open feebly and he gulped greedily at the life-giving oxygen.

THE big man, safe in his spacesuit, but hampered by its weight, was dragging his unconscious accomplice towards the oxygen valve.

"The oxygen!" croaked Ken. "It can't last long at this rate. We'll have to plug that hole . . . No time to get out the self-welding plates to patch it . . . Jimmy! That—that suit of mine might do it. Can you help?"

Jimmy nodded dumbly.

"Get a lungful then, and hold it."

The two men inhaled deeply, felt the oxygen pouring into their starved lungs, then lumbered across the craft to the spacesuit lying sprawled on the floor. It was like battling against an invisible surf, and by the time they had picked up the spacesuit their heads were spining madly. They struggled towards the hole, but as they reached it, Jimmy, spent, reeled helplessly away, clutching at the nearest handrail to keep himself upright. Ken, keeping his mouth shut tightly, struggled with the heavy suit, raising it higher and higher towards the hole. He was on the verge of a whirling unconsciousness, every joint in his heavy body was a focus of agony, his lungs on the point of bursting, but with a last fierce effort of will he jammed the spacesuit into the hole,

plugging the big leak with the tough triple-skinned material designed to resist pressures and gases.

Gradually the prolonged hiss of the oxygen valve lessened. Ken's head cleared. He turned slowly and saw that Jimmy was reviving. And then he remembered—his own atoblaster was in the pocket of the spacesuit! It was a bitter realisation. One atoblaster lying out on the ground, the other jammed in that hole in such a position that it was impossible for him to get it out. It was small comfort to reflect that the jamming of that leak was an immediately urgent task, that the lives of all had been in the balance, that a few seconds lost would have resulted in his sinking down, unconscious and drowning in the foul heavy gases building up on the floor of the craft.

The spacesuited man had helped the revived Geddes to his feet, the latter almost recovered, as the oxygen forced out the asteroid's gases through the small waste-discharge valves, and the atmosphere within the craft returned to normal.

AND as he looked at the two men a sudden audacious plan came to Ken. If he could only dive out through the air lock, grab the atoblaster lying on the ground, and get back in! It would be a risk, a terrible risk, to plunge into that gas-laden atmosphere unprotected. But there seemed no other alternative. The big man in the spacesuit was virtually in control now, protected as he was from any ordinary mechanical assault. The latter, his faculties unimpaired had already snatched up a heavy spanner from the shadow-board and was advancing on the two unprotected men. Behind him, holding a hammer which Smike had pushed into his hand, came Geddes, staggering slightly, but still dangerous.

And then inspiration came to Ken. He backed away, apparently afraid of the two threatening men, and the eyes of the big man glinted with mingled triumph and hatred.

"Not so sure of yourselves, eh?" boomed his voice through the two-way speaker. "Get back, there. Are you goin' to make a fight for it, or act sensible?"

"Come and find out?" snapped Ken. He backed away further, his hands behind his back. He felt one of the little cold levers. . . No, not that one. . . He moved further. . . Yes, that was it! Gently, carefully, he moved the lever a fraction. There was a slight, almost imperceptible, movement of the spacecraft, but only he, prepared as he was for it, noticed it. And the movement coincided with his suddenly raised voice.

"JIMMY," he roared. "I'm going to dive out for that atoblaster!"

He made a rush for the air lock, but pulled up short as the big spacesuited man moved in the same direction. He aimed a vicious blow at Ken's head with the spanner. Ken ducked and swerved, avoiding the blow, but the big man dropped the spanner, and with a triumphant laugh echoing through his loudspeaker plunged through the air lock in quest of the atoblaster.

"Well, that's the finish, my friends," said Geddes, grinning evilly. "No. . . don't touch those controls. If this craft starts to lift he'll burst it apart with the atoblaster."

"Yes?" Ken pointed to the glastic panel in the floor of the craft. "Just take a look through there."

"What——" the man stared, and slowly the color drained from his dark face. He was looking down on the asteroid from a height of a hundred feet—looking down on a sprawled, flattened, spacesuited figure.

"That's your friend," said Ken. "He fell for what I'd planned. Fell in more senses than one. The craft was at least fifty feet up when he took his dive, and fifty feet in this grav pull is more than something. Every bone in his body is smashed to pieces. I operated the retarding jets just enough to lift us. I knew he wouldn't risk my grabbing that atoblaster. He knew that even if I collapsed out there I'd blast the craft as a dying gesture, and he thought he'd have no trouble in getting it, protected by his spacesuit." He turned to Jimmy. "Right-O. Let her down again. We'll get busy with the self-welding plates on this hole, then back to Earth with the news of our strike and one escaped murderer from Venus."



Castaway Planet

An E. V. Zinns Space Thriller

DONELLI unstrapped himself. "I've seen chief mates who did worse on the soft jets—Helena," was the comment. "So here we are on good old—What's the name of this planet, anyway?"

"Nothing, so far as I know." She hurried over to Dr. Ibn Yussuf who lay groaning in the cast which protected the ribs and arm broken in the first explosion of Ionian Pinafore. "When we passed the system on our way to Deneb a week ago, Captain

Hauberk named the sun Maximillian—after the assistant secretary-general of the Terran Council? That would make this planet nothing more than Maximillian II, a small satellite of a very small star."

"What a deal," Donelli grumbled. "The last time I had to abandon ship I found myself in the middle of the Antares-Solarian War. Now I get crazy in the head and ship out on an expedition to a part of space where humanity's just thinking of moving

in. I pick a captain who's so busy buttering up to scientists and government officials that he doesn't bother to check storage tanks, let alone lifeboats. I ditch with three people—no offence, Helena—who can't tell a blast from the Hole in Cygnus and they get so cluttered up trying to seal the airlocks that, when the secondary explosion pops off from the ship, it catches us within range and blooies most of our jets and most of our Q. Then, to top it off, I have to set down on a planet that isn't even on the maps and start looking for the quart or two of J that may be on the surface on the off-chance we can convert it to Q."

She eased the scientist's cast to a more comfortable position and chuckled.

"Sad, isn't it? But ours was the only boat that got away at that. We were lucky."

Donelli began climbing into a space-suit. "We weren't lucky," he disagreed. "We just happened to have a good spaceman aboard. Me. I'll scout around our island and see if I can find any characters to talk to. Our only hope is to get help from the folks here, if any. Sit tight till I get back and don't touch any equipment you don't understand."

"Want me to come with you—er, Donelli?" Dr. Blaine moved to the space-suit rack. "If you meet anything dangerous—"

"I'll make out better alone. I've got a supersonic in this suit. And Doc—you might forget which button. Great gravities!"

Donelli hadn't forgotten the incident of the air-locks yet

Shaking his helmeted head, Donelli started the air-lock machinery.

The orange ground was brittle underfoot, he found, and flaked off as he walked. Despite the yellow atmosphere, he could see the complete outline of the island from the hill near the ship. It was a small enough patch of ground pointing reluctantly out of an irritated sea of hydrofluoric acid.

Most of it was bare, little dots of black moss breaking the heaving monotony of orange. Between the ship and the sea was

a grove of larger vegetation: great purple flowers on vivid scarlet stems that held them a trembling thirty feet in the stagnant air.

He had noticed a small cave yawning in the side of the hill when he climbed it. Sliding down, now, he observed its lower lip was a good bit from the ground. He started to enter, checked himself abruptly.

With his metal-sheathed finger, he clicked on the searchlight imbedded in his helmet and with the other hand, he tugged the supersonic pistol from its clamps in the side of his suit and waited for its automatic adjustment to the atmosphere of the planet. At last it throbbed slightly and he knew it was in working condition.

Just inside the cave entrance the beam of his light showed a score of tiny maggot-like creatures crawling and feeding upon two thin blankets of flesh.

A clacking sound in his headphones brought him to a halt again, squeezing a bubbling elation back into his heart.

Could it be? So early and so easy? He drew the screen away from the built-in Geiger on his chest. The clacking grew louder. He turned slowly until the flashlight on his head revealed a half-dozen microscopic crystals floating a few inches from one wall.

Contra-Uranium! The most compact, super-fuel discovered by a galactic-exploring humanity, a fuel that required no refining since, by its very nature, it could only occur in the pure state. It was a fuel for whose powerful uses every engine and atomic converter on every spaceship built in the past sixty years had been designed.

But six crystals weren't very much. The lifeboat might barely manage a take-off on that much Q, later to fall into the hydrofluoric sea.

"Still," Donelli soliloquised, "it's right heartening to find some so near the surface. I'll get an inerted lead container from the ship and scoop it up. But maybe those crystals have a family further back."

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The crystals didn't, but someone or something else did.

Four large, chest-high balls of green, veined thickly with black and pink lines, throbbed upon the ground at the rear of the cave. Eggs? If not eggs, what were they?

WEIRD BEINGS

DONELLI skirted them warily, even though he saw no opening in any of them. They were anchored to the ground, but they were unlike any plants he had seen in nine years of planet-jumping. They looked harmless, but —

The back of the cave divided into two tunnels which were higher and wider than their parent hollow. Smooth all around Donelli might have taken them for the burrows of an immense worm, had he not noticed the regularly-spaced wood-like beams crossed upon each other at intervals in both shafts. The tunnels extended a good distance ahead, then curved sharply down and away from each other.

Donelli hated to use up power in his helmet-transmitter, but he might run into trouble and it was essential that the three scientists learn of even the small amount of Q in the cave. After all, the creatures who built these tunnels might not know enough chemistry to appreciate his ineditibility before they sampled him.

He turned on his headset. "Donelli to ship! Good news: I've found enough Q to keep up breathing until after this atmosphere burns through our Grojen shielding. We'll be able to sit around in our space-suits for at least three days after the ship is eaten out from under us. Nice? You'll see the crystals about half-way into the cave. And don't forget to use an inerted lead container when you pick them up."

"Where are you going, Jake?" He recognised Helena's voice.

"Couple of tunnels at the rear of the cave here have regulation cross-supports.

That's why we didn't see any cities when we came down. The smart babies on this world live underground. I'm going to try to talk them into a reciprocal trade treaty—if we have anything they want to reciprocate with."

"Wait a minute, Donelli," Blaine shouted breathlessly. "If you meet any intelligent aliens, it's more than possible they won't understand Universal Gesture-Diagram. This is an unexplored fluorine-breathing world. I'm an experienced archaeologist and I'll be able to communicate with them. Let me join you."

Helena came back on. "I'd suggest you take him up on it," her steady voice said. "Archibald Blaine may get switches confused with buttons, but he's one of the few men in the galaxy who knows all nine of Ogilvie's Basic Language-Patterns. If these miners of yours don't respond to an Ogilvie Pattern—well, they just don't belong in our universe!"

A pause. "All right, Blaine. I'll be moving up the right-hand tunnel. And Helena—see that his space-suit is all buttoned up before he leaves the ship? He can catch an awful cold in that yellow air."

He ducked under a cross-beam, his light momentarily pointing down. When he straightened again, he saw he had company.

At the far end of the tunnel, where it slanted down, several long, segmented beings were moving slowly toward him. There was only the faintest rustle in his headphones as they approached.

Donelli noticed with relief that only one of them had a weapon, a crude hand-ax without a handle. Come to think of it, though, an ax-head thrust forcefully might penetrate not his suit, but—what was more dangerous—the Grojen shielding, leaving the metal exposed to the corrosive atmosphere. Not so good. But they didn't seem hostile.

AS they arrived within a few feet of him their speed decreased almost to im-

mobility but their three pairs of three-clawed limbs pushed them to his side. Then they stopped, and the long thin hairy appendage on their heads brushed against his suit inquiringly and without fear. Their toothless mouths opened and made low gobbling sounds to each other.

They evidently had a language. Donelli saw the flat membrane on their backs that was obviously an ear, but he looked in vain for eyes. Of course, living underground in darkness, they were blind. A fat lot of help Universal Gesture-Diagram would be, even if they could understand it.

A terrific crash sounded in his ear phones. The three burrowers stiffened around him. Donelli turned and swore.

Blaine had entered the tunnel and smashed into one of the cross-beams. He was stepping over the fallen log now. His space suit seemed undented, but his self-confidence had not fared so well. Also a little bubble of earth formed over the area which had rested on the beam end.

The natives had rubbed their head filament upon the ground as if examining its intentions. Now, before Donelli could get started, they scampered down the tunnel towards the fallen support. Working in perfect co-ordination, without any apparent orders, they quickly lifted and inserted it in its former position. Then they began brushing against Blaine.

"Deep space, Doc," Donelli moaned as he came up.

"Sh-h-h—quiet!" The archaeologist had bent over the nearest burrower and was clicking his metal-enclosed fingers in an odd rhythm over its ear patch. The animal curved away for a moment, then began a low, hesitant gobbling to the same rhythm as the finger-clicks.

"Can—can you talk to it?" Donelli found it difficult to see the old man as anything but a doddering ineffectual.

"Ogilvie Pattern Five. Knew it. Knew it! Those three-clawed feet and the sharp curve of the ax. Like to investigate the material of the ax—noticed the pointed tip right off. Had to be an Ogilvie Five language. Can I talk to it? Of course! Just need a minute

or two to establish the facets of the pattern."

Blaine began to stroke the side of one of the creatures with his other hand. The gobbling acquired a note of surprise, became staccato.

"Amazing!" Blaine said after a while. "They mine everything, and completely refuse to discuss the existence of surface phenomena. Most unusual, even for an Ogilvie Five. Do you know where they get their supporting beams? From the roots of plants. At least, that's what they seem to be from their description. But—and this is what the Galactic Archaeological Society will consider significant—they cannot seem to grasp the concept of plant blossoms. They know only of the roots and the base of the stem. Their social life, now, is strangely obscure for so elementary a culture. But perhaps it might better be termed simple? Consider the facts—"

"You consider them," Donelli invited. "I'm thinking of the Q we need. All this space-suit power drain is cutting so many hours off our total breathing time. Find out what they'd consider a good trade and ask them to move up into the cave ahead so that I can show them what Contra-Uranium looks like. We'll supply them with inerted lead containers for picking up the stuff. How far do their tunnels run?"

"All around the planet, I gather. Under the sea and under the continents in a crossing, branching network. I don't anticipate any difficulty. Being the dominant intelli-

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gent life-form of the planet, and not particularly carnivorous, they're really quite friendly."

BLAINES fingers clicked questioningly at the nearest alien and he stroked its side with short and long rolls of his hand. The creature seemed confused and gobbled to its companions. Then it moved back. Blaine clicked and stroked once more.

"What's the matter, doc? They look angry now."

"My suggestion of the cave. It's evidently under the strongest of taboos. These are barbarians, you understand, just emerging into a religious culture-matrix, and a powerful taboo takes precedence over instinct. Then, too, living in the tunnels, they are probably agoraphobic—"

"Look out! They're trying to pull some fancy stuff!"

One of the aliens had scuttled under Blaine's feet. The archaeologist tottered, crashed to the ground. The other two burrowers grasped his long arms between their claws. Blaine struggled and rolled desperately, looking like a confused elephant attacked by jackals.

"Donelli," he gasped, "I can't talk to them while they're holding my arms. They are—they're carrying me!"

The pair of burrowers were dragging the old man's body down to the tunnel with gentle but insistent tugs. "Don't worry, doc. They won't get by me. That must have been one powerful taboo you broke when you mentioned the cave."

As Donelli advanced to meet the group, the alien who had upset the archaeologist scurried ahead to confront him. A forward claw held the small ax-head well back for a thrust.

Not here though. The claw snapped forward suddenly and the ax-head spun toward his visored face with unexpected velocity. Donelli jerked his head to one side and felt the pointed tip of the weapon scratch the side of his helmet. The slight buzzing in his right ear was replaced by an empty roaring: that meant the ear phone had gone dead, which in turn meant the

Grojen shielding had been chipped off leaving the hydrofluoric vapors free to eat through the metal.

The burrower had retrieved the ax in a lightning scamper and had it poised for another throw. As Donelli brought his supersonic up, he marvelled at the creature's excellent aim despite its lack of vision.

Just before he blasted, he managed to slip the intensity rod on the top of the tube down to non-lethal pitch. The directional beam of high-frequency sound tore down at the burrower and caught it with the claw coming around again. It stopped in mid-throw, stumbled backwards, and finally collapsed into unconsciousness upon the orange ground.

Blaine protested with a grunt as he was dropped by the other two. They ran up to the fallen burrower and edged around his body insistently. Donelli held his supersonic ready for further developments. What happened took him completely by surprise.

IN a series of movements so rapid that he could hardly follow it visually, one of the aliens snatched up the ax-head while the other lifted the creature Donelli had blasted to its back. They rolled up the slope of the tunnel and scurried past him on either side, the fluorine atmosphere almost crackling with their passage. By the time the spaceman had whirled, they were gone down the far end of the shaft where it dipped into the interior of the planet.

"They sure can hurry when they feel they have to," Donelli commented as he helped the older man to his feet. "Which is what we have to do if I want to get back to the ship before I start sneezing hydrofluoric fluid."

They rang the air-lock signal and clambered in.

Race Against Time

HASTILY Donelli stripped off his space suit. There was a thin scar on the metal of the helmet where the Grojen

shielding had been scratched away and H.F. vapor eaten in. A little longer out there and he would have been doomed!

"Hullo!" For the first time, he noticed that almost one-third of the cabin was taken up by a great transparent cage, one corner of which was occupied by a relaxed red creature with folded black wings. "When did the vampire kid arrive?"

"Ten minutes ago," Helena Naxos replied. She was adjusting a temperature-pressure gauge at the side of the cage. "And he-she-it didn't arrive: I carried it inside. After Dr. Blaine left, I went over the island with the telescanner and noticed this thing flying in from the sea. It went right to those purple flowers and began cutting off sections of the petals and putting them in a sort of glider made out of vines and branches that it was towing. The things obviously cultivate vegetation. That patch out there is one of their gardens."

"Imagine!" the archaeologist breathed. "Another civilisation in embryo—avian this time. An avian culture would hardly build cities. But this is a culture where the glider comes before the wheel."

"So you put on a space suit and went out to get it." Donelli shook his head. "You shouldn't have done that. Helena. That creature might have packed a wallop."

"Yes, I considered the possibility. But I didn't know if you two were going to hit anything important, and this winged thing looked as if it might prove to be a link between us and this world. Its ability to fly, in particular, while we are grounded could prove valuable. It was fairly quiet when I approached, neither scared nor angry, so I tried the little Ogilvie I know—pattern one. Didn't work."

"Of course not," Dr. Blaine told her positively. "This is obviously Ogilvie Language-Pattern Three. Consider the hinged wings, the primitive glider you mentioned, the husbandry of flowers. It has to be an Ogilvie Three."

"Must have used up an awful lot of Q, Helena! I notice you have pretty elaborate temperature and pressure controls as well as H.F. humidifiers and in-grav studs. And that loud-speaker system is wasteful."

AS Blaine began experimental dronings and buzzings into the instrument, the creature inside the transparent cage opened its wings in a series of hinged movements and revealed the whole rich redness of its small body. It crawled under the loud-speaker and spread open a mouth that was slit up and down instead of sideways. The black wings beat slowly as it gained interest, reflecting cheerful yellow streaks in their furrows.

This would take some time. Donelli walked to the telescanner and faced Dr. Douglas Ibn Yussuf.

"Suppose we get this fellow to co-operate. Where's a good place to tell it to look for Q?"

"All right. I won't digress into a discussion of the scientific attitude. Where would you find contra-Uranium on a planet that's been shown to possess it? Near the surface, I'd say, where the lighter elements abound. You've already found some in a cave on this island? That would indicate that it was explosively brought to the surface, the only place it could exist, when the planet was in a formative state. If there is other contra-Uranium on this world, there must be other caves like the one here."

Donelli waved him to silence and bent over the telescanner. "Good enough. Deep space and suppressed novas, Doc. That was all I wanted to know! Now I'll see how much I can find out before I use up the dregs of our power."

He swept the beam across the sickly sea and up the coastline of the continent until he saw a dark spot in the orange ground. Then nudging the telebeam into the cave, he saw at last the few shimmering crystals that meant precious Q. He tried other apertures here and there, convincing himself that, while there was little enough in any one cave, the planet as a whole possessed more than they required. The sight of all the unobtainable Q on the telescanner screen made Donelli sweat with exasperation.

He made another discovery. Leading down the rear of every cave was at least one tunnel that denoted the presence of the burrowers.

"If only we could have made them understand," Donelli murmured. "All of our problems now would have been orbital ones."

He rose and turned to see how his shipmates were doing with the winged alien. "Great gravities, what did you do to it?"

The avian was back in a corner of the fluorine-filled compartment, its hinged black wings completely screening its body from sight. The wings pressed down harshly as if the creature were attempting to shroud itself out of its environment.

DR. ARCHIBALD BLAINE, his hands cupped over the microphone, was chuk-chuking urgently, droning repetitiously, humming desperately. No apparent effect.

"It was the mention of the cave, again," Helena Naxos explained, her pleasant face betraying worry. "We were doing fine, going from 'howd'ye'dos' to 'how'veyeebeen's'—the girlie was beginning to tell us all about her complicated love-life—when Dr. Blaine asked if she had ever been inside the cave. Period. She crawled away and started to make like the cover of a hole."

"They can't do this to us!" Donelli yelled. "This planet is practically crawling with Q which we can't get because we don't have the Q to cross a hydrofluoric acid sea. The only way we can get it is for these babies to haul it over, either underground through tunnels or across the sea. And every time Blaine starts talking about the caves where the Q is lying around, they go neurotic on him. What's the matter with the caves? Why don't they like them? I like the caves!"

"Take it easy, Jake," Helena soothed. "We're up against a basic taboo in two separated cultures. There must be a reason for it. Find the reason and the problem is solved."

"I'm working on it," he replied testily, withdrawing his mouth from the microphone. "To creatures on the threshold of civilisation, however, superstition takes precedence over mechanical innovations. If it's only superstition—that's another thing we don't know. Could it be the contra-Uranium crystals they're afraid of?"

Dr. Ibn Yussuf raised himself on his sound arm. "That is doubtful. Their

chemical composition contains no elements heavier than barium, according to the spectroscope. Thus no contra-atomic chain reaction would be set off by their bodies coming in contact with the crystals. Perhaps the mere existence of the crystals upsets them."

Blaine frowned. "No. Unlikely. There would have to be a factor intimately related to them in some way. If I could only attract her attention! No matter what I say, she just lies there and gurgles." He went back to his urgent buzzing, frantically using a life-time of archaeological knowledge.

Donelli looked at the fuel indicators. His lips flattened into a grimace.

"I'll have to go out there and pick up those Q particles in the cave. That cage you built may make that avian comfortable, but it sure drained us dry."

"Wait, I'll go with you," Helena suggested. "Maybe I can discover what makes these fearsome caves so fearsome."

"You know," her voice said into his headphones as they trudged toward the hill, "if Dr. Blaine is able to talk some sense into that creature and we manage to get to a regular traffic lane and get rescued, he'll make quite a smash before the Galactic Archaeological Society with his two co-existing but unrelated civilisations. I'll get some fair notice myself with the little I've been able to deduce about these creatures biologically without resorting to dissection. Even Ibn Yussuf, bed-ridden as he is, has been doing some heavy thinking on the chemistry of a bromide soil. And you—well, I imagine you want to get back to a place where you can hurry up and get drunk."

"No."

Her helmet turned toward him in surprise and question.

"No," he continued. "If we get out of this, I'm going to take advantage of the lifeboat law. Heard of it?"

She hadn't. Her eyes glowed intently behind her visor.

"The lifeboat law's one of the oldest in space. Any spaceman—Able or Ordinary—who, under a given set of circumstances, is entitled to assume command of a vessel and successfully brings that vessel to safety

may, at his written request, be issued the licence of a third officer. It's called the life-boat law because that's what it usually pertains to. I have the experience. All I need is the ticket."

"Look at that!" Helena had paused with her back to the mouth of the cave.

PRIMITIVE WAR

JAKE DONELLI turned and looked back at the ship. Across it, in the grove of fleshy purple flowers, were at least a dozen winged creatures like the one Blaine was attempting to interest in conversation. Far over the sea, were many dots that grew larger and resolved into even more of the avians. Some of them towed gliders lightly behind them. Others carried light tubes. Blow-guns?

"Wonder how they knew about Susie," the spaceman mused. "Was it because she didn't come back at the usual time that the posse was organised? Or are they telepathic?"

"A combination, possibly. They certainly seem to know when one of them is in trouble. You wouldn't say they're acting belligerent?"

"Nope. Just flexing what passes for their muscles. They don't know whether we intend to serve Susie fricassied or boiled in her hic jacet. Better duck inside."

The biologist became her crisp self the moment she saw the white worms. "Wish I could tell exactly what it is they're eating. Now suppose I make a loose guess. Yes, it could well be. Jake, where are those other eggs?"

"Other eggs? Back there. Funny kind of eggs."

She slipped ahead of him, her searchlight picking out the chest-high globules. With a muttered exclamation, she bent down and examined one closely. It was slowly splitting along a pink vein. Donelli waited hopefully.

"No." She straightened. "It doesn't add up. Even assuming, as would seem possible, that those small creatures in the front are the live young of the burrowers and

these are the eggs of the avians, it still doesn't explain their relative distance from the usual habitat of their parents. If they were the young of each species, the positions should be reversed. With their strong taboos and respective phobias, the avians would not fly so far into the cave, and the burrowers would not crawl so close to the surface."

"Continu-um!" he swore. "This isn't a research paper for some scientific society or other. We're in a hurry. This is a matter of life and death, woman! Can't you put some pressure into your thinking?"

She threw up her arms in their ungainly wrappings helplessly. "I'm sorry, Jake. I'm trying hard, but I just don't have enough facts on which to base an analysis of two separate unfamiliar societies. I'm not a sociologist; I'm a biologist. So far as these creatures are concerned, I've just reached the threshold."

The spaceman slung the inerted lead container to the ground, preparatory to catching up the crystals of contra-Uranium.

"What's the matter with them anyway that they're so afraid of the caves? What do they think will happen to them after they cross the threshold?"

"What—do—they—think—will—happen?" Helena repeated slowly. "What are we all afraid of, the fear intrinsic to any living animal? But how—the eggs—why, of course! Of course!"

She bent toward him briefly and Donelli felt his helmet clang.

"Sorry," she said. "I forgot. I tried to

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kiss you. What beautiful reasoning, Jake!"

"Huh?" He felt absurdly clumsy in his ignorance—and guilty.

"I'll have to work the details out as I go. Dr. Blaine—once I give him your promise—he'll be able to help. Isn't it wonderful how removal of one stone from the pyramid of obscurity sends the whole structure tumbling down? Now, Jake, do you think you could go into those tunnels and fetch me a live but slightly stunned burrower? We'll need one, you know."

"I—I guess I can. Where do you want him?"

"It, Jake it! Bring it right here to the middle of the cave. I'll be waiting for you. Hurry!"

SHE ran out of the cave toward the ship.

Donelli watched her go, decided he couldn't recall any particularly clever remarks he had made, set his supersonic for its lowest frequency and moved to the tunnels.

He paused before the intersection. He and Blaine had had their little scrap with the burrowers in the right-hand one, and an elaborate trap might have been set there against their return: accordingly he chose to walk down the shaft on his left.

The slope became steeper. Donelli's helmet light suddenly exposed another, more complicated intersection ahead in the form of six tunnel entrances. In front of one, two burrowers were chipping the end of a large root out of the tunnel ceiling.

As his search beam hit them, they whirled simultaneously and waved the hairy appendage at him for the barest fraction of a second. Then, both sprang for the tunnel entrance in a flicker of ivory bodies.

Donelli thought he had missed. He had brought up his weapon just as they leaped. But one fell to the floor, the ax-head dropping. The creature was not completely unconscious, gobbling weakly at him as he approached. Donelli slung it over his shoulder and started back. The creature squirmed limply in his grasp.

There was an odd, insistent patter behind him, a sound of many legs. Pursuit.

Well, they wouldn't dare follow him into the cave. He wished the suit weren't so heavy, though. He kept turning his head to look at the empty shaft to the rear. Nasty to be overcome from behind, under the suffocating earth of an alien planet.

Even though the burrower stiffened with fear when he reached the cave, he felt better. The pattering grew louder, stopped, came on slowly.

Helena Naxos and Blaine were squatting near the four large veined balls, the avian, weakly fluttering, between them. They held a supersonic over it. The winged creature had evidently had a dose of sound like that of Donelli's captive. Blaine was speaking persuasively, in that hum-drone language, with little apparent effect.

"Put it right down here, next to the other one," Helena ordered. "With a little time and a little imagination, we may get out of this fix. Too early to tell just yet. Jake, you'll have to act as sort of armed guard at this conference. We mustn't be disturbed. Susie's playmates are too frightened to come in, but they've been making all kinds of fuss since we carried her out of the ship and into the cave."

"I'll take care of it," the spaceman promised.

He gasped with sheer astonishment when he reached the entrance to the cave. The saffron sky was obscured by multitudes of black winged avians dipping in short angry circles. A swarm of the avians had surrounded the lifeboat and, as he watched, they lifted it slightly off the ground in the direction of the sea.

The supersonic low-power beam rolled them off the ship in a huge stunned mass.

They left the ship alone after that, and came in flying low at him with their blow tubes in their mouths. Jagged darts shrilled nastily all around him. He felt one bounce off his chest and hoped vaguely that they were less effective than the weapons of the burrowers on Grojen shielding. He moved back into the shadow of the cave.

Helena, Dr. Blaine and the two aliens came up behind him and gathered round the white worms near the entrance.

"Pretty dangerous here," he told them.

"These avians of yours are an accurate bunch of snipers."

"No help for it," she replied. "We're getting close. I don't think they'll keep blowing darts after they get a glimpse of Sister Susie. We'll be safe so long as we're near her."

HE moved past them toward the rear, noting that both the winged and clawed creature were no longer under the influence of the supersonics but were listening intently to Dr. Blaine as he alternately hummed at one and clicked at the other. They almost watched Helena gesture to the white worms and their grisly meal and back to them.

He began to cough. No mistake this time, there was HF vapor seeping into his suit through some scratch. Fluorine was eating at his lungs. Well, he didn't have time to feel sick.

He looked over his shoulder. No more darts were coming in at the rapt group near the cave mouth. Evidently the avians were possessed of more love for one of their number than the burrowers. He had just started to turn his head, when a heavy object struck the back of his helmet. He dimly perceived he was falling. It seemed to him that the burrower which he had captured leaped over him and rejoined its fellows, and that Susie flew out to a clustered bunch of avians and that they all buzzed and hummed like idiots.

What a waste of time, he thought as the fire began to consume his brain. Helena let them go.

It seemed to him that Helena and Dr. Blaine were hurrying to his side through a shimmering mist of yellow agony. It also seemed to him that one of the chest high balls split up along a pink vein and something came out.

But he was sure of nothing, but the painful, choking darkness into which his body twisted, nothing but the agony in his chest. . . .

He woke with a spaceman's certain knowledge of riding a smooth jet. His body felt deliciously light. He tried to sit up, but he

was too weak to do more than turn his head. Two men had their backs to him. After a while he identified them as Dr. Archibald Blaine and Dr. Douglas Ibn Yussuf. Dr. Yussuf was out of his cast and was arguing in an animated fashion with Blaine over a white ax-head imprisoned in a plastic block.

"Why, I'm in Dr. Yussuf's bunk," Donelli muttered stupidly.

"Welcome back," Helena told him, moving into range of his watery eyes. "You've been pretty far away for a long, long time."

"Away?"

"You ate enough hydrofluoric acid to etch a glass factory out of existence. I made my biological education turn handsprings to save that belligerent life of yours. We used up almost every drug on the ship and Dr. Yussuf's organic deconverter-and-respirator, which he built and used on you, is going to make him the first physical chemist to win a Solarian Prize in medicine."

"When—when did we take off?"

"Days ago. We should be near a traffic lane now, not to mention the galactic patrol. Our tanks are stuffed with contra-Uranium, our second jet is operating in a clumsy sort of way and our converter is functioning as cheerily as any atomic converted ever did.

"After the help we gave them with their own lives, the population of Maximilian II was so busy bringing us Q that we ran out of inerted lead containers. From considering us the personifications of death, they've come to the point where they believe humans go around destroying death, or at least its fear. And it's Jake Donelli who did that."

"I did, did I?" Donelli was being very cautious.

"Didn't you? That business about the threshold of life and death being the caves was what I heard you develop with my own ears. It was the only clue I needed. The caves related not only to the sacredness of birth, but—more important to the primitive mind—to the awful terror of death. A threshold, you called it. And so it was, not only between life and death, but between the burrowers and the avians. Once I had that, and with a little scientific guessing, it

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was simple to figure out why the eggs were laid in apparent reverse order—that of the burrowers near the front, and that of the avians at the rear—and why they had never met each other.”

THE spaceman thought that over and then nodded slowly.

“Simple,” Donelli murmured. “Yes, that might be the word. This little shred of scientific guessing you did, just what did it amount to?”

“Why, that the avians and the burrowers were different forms of the same creature in different stages of the life-process. The winged creatures mate just as their powers start to decline. Before the young hatch, the parents seek out a cave and die there. The young, those white worms, use the parental bodies as food until they have grown claws and can travel down to the tunnels where they become adolescent burrowers.

“The burrowers, after all, are nothing but larva—despite the timbering of their shafts and their mining techniques which Drs. Blaine and Yussuf consider spectacular. They can be considered sexless. After several years, the burrower will return to the cave. In the belief of its fellows it dies there, since it returns no more. It spins a cocoon—that’s what those large green balls were—and remains a chrysalis until the winged form is fully developed. It then flies out of the cave and into the open air where it is accepted by the so-called avians as their junior. It evidently retains no memory of its pre-chrysalis existence.

“Thus you have two civilisations unaware of each other, each different and each proceeding from the same organism. So far as the organism was concerned in either stage, it went to the cave only to die, and, from the cave, in some mysterious fashion, its own kind came forth. Therefore, a taboo is built up on both sides of the threshold, a taboo of the most thorough-going and binding nature, the mere thought of whose violation results in psychosis. The taboo, of course, has held their development in check for centuries. Interesting?”

“How did they take it?”

“Startled at first. But it explained some-

thing they were very curious about and swept away an immense weight of ugly fear. Of course, they still die in the caves to all intents and purposes. But they can see their lives as a perfect reproductive circle with the caves as a locus. And what a reciprocity they can work out—they are working out!”

“Reciprocity?” Donelli had almost moved to a sitting position.

Helena wiped his face with a soft cloth. “Don’t you see? The burrowers were injuring the avian gardens by nibbling at the roots. They will now use only the roots of old, strong plants which the surface creatures will designate and set aside for them. They will also aid avian horticulture by making certain the roots have plenty of nourishing space in which to grow. In return, the avians will bring them surface plants which are not available to tunnel creatures, while the burrowers provide the surface with the

“No wonder they broke their backs getting Q. And after working that out for them, all you did was repair the ship, fix me up, take off and set a course for the nearest traffic lane?”

“Oh, so?”

“Just so. Right, Dr. Blaine?”

The archaeologist looked up impatiently. “Of course. Of course! There has not been one moment since the disaster aboard the Ionian Pinafore, when I have not been under Mr. Donelli’s orders.”

There was a pause in which Dr. Blaine muttered to Dr. Yussuf over the ax-head.

“How old are you, Helena?” Donelli asked.

“Oh—old enough.”

“But too clever, eh? Too educated for me?”

She cocked her head and smiled at him out of a secret corner of her face. “Maybe. We’ll see what happens after we get back to the regular traffic lanes. After we’re rescued. After you get your third mate’s ticket. Here—what are you laughing at?”

He rumbled the amusement out of his throat. “Oh, I was just thinking how we earned our Q. By teaching a bunch of caterpillars that butterflies bring babies!”

SPACE RACE

An Interplanetary
Novel

by
BELLI LUIGI

*[I]t looked like Professor
Mountfield had just
the ship to make inter-
planetary travel child's-
play That's why a
few others took a hand
in his game . . . only they
wanted to play it rough
. . . . !!*



A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

THE man who alighted from the big car was heavily built, swarthy of complexion. His cold tawny colored eyes had in them an expression of fierce hatred as they surveyed the scene before him; and as he

strode along the white concrete path his square jaw was set and determined. Obviously a man with a fixed immediate purpose, and one which he was determined to achieve at any cost.

The white path led up to a steel-barred

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gate set in a high wire fence which completely encompassed the area in which stood the enormous high building and several smaller structures. Beside the steel gate was a small cylindrical concrete building which looked like a sentry-box, and which in fact served that purpose; for as the big man reached the gate a blue-overalled man emerged with an air of elaborate carelessness and leaned lazily against the wire fence, one hand in a hip pocket.

The big man glared at the guard. "You know me?" he snapped.

"Oh, yes. Mr. Sweintz, isn't it? But I've got my orders so I'll have to ring through. Won't keep you long."

The man, Sweintz, muttered angrily under his breath as the sentry re-entered his box and operated a telephone. He glared up at the colossus of a building which stood in the pleasant grassy grounds, dominating the other comparatively tiny bungalow-like buildings to which white, flower-fringed tracks radiated from the main building.

"Okay, Mr. Sweintz," said the sentry, emerging and unlocking the steel-barred gate. "Straight to the office." He indicated the nearest bungalow-like building.

The other grunted and strode along the white track to the building, on the door of which was affixed a brass plate, engraved "Astroaerial Project. Office." He entered the outer office where a clerk, after giving him a quick searching glance, escorted him to an inner office and announced him from the doorway.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Sweintz." The solitary occupant of the small sparsely furnished office rose and greeted him courteously. He was tall and thin with a long studious looking face surmounted by untidy wisps of grey hair; a pair of rather pale grey eyes peered over the top of crooked, old-fashioned gold-rimmed spectacles, which incidentally had been repaired with a piece of thin copper wire.

"Well," said Sweintz, seating himself. "What about it, Mountfield? I've come to make a last appeal to your commonsense."

The Professor smiled, taking no offence at the other's harsh tone and belligerent manner. "I am sorry, Mr. Sweintz," he said mildly. "It is really distressing for me to have to refuse, but I have complete

faith in my project. Much as I should like to accede to your—"

"You can cut out the frills, Mountfield," snapped in Sweintz. "I want Yes or No."

"Then I am afraid, Mr. Sweintz," said the Professor regretfully, "the answer is a very definite No."

"You don't seem to realise, Mountfield," he said, "that the jet-rocket principle has been experimentally proved. We have the fact of experiment, of trial. One of our robot rockets, a perfect miniature of the machine we are on the verge of completing now, has actually travelled in space for 190,000 miles, which is only fifty-odd thousand miles short of our objective—the Moon. Not only that, but it also made a perfect return and landing. Your own Astrogyro has never been off the earth. It is a thing of mathematics and theory, and no one knows better than you, Mountfield, that a slip in a mathematical equation can pyramid to a gross error in the final calculation."

"I admit that, Mr. Sweintz," said the Professor. "But in this particular case it does not apply. While there has been no test flight, in the usual sense of the term, the Astrogyro has had every unit tested over and over again during the construction of its parts and the assembling of them. If you understood the principle I am using you would know that errors are—well, if not impossible, at least, most unlikely."

"The thing is just as likely to crash on the return trip, even if it reaches the Moon," snapped Sweintz. "And how do you know how it will behave once it clears the earth's atmosphere? You've never sent up a model, have you?"

"No, because it was not necessary."

Sweintz gritted his teeth at the other's calm assumption that the Astrogyro was the complete answer to space travel. And knowing Professor Mountfield as he did he was racked with the fear that the Astrogyro was indeed all that its inventor claimed. If that were so, then all the money and effort Sweintz had poured into his jet-propulsion project would be simply thrown away, wasted, leaving him a penniless nonentity instead of a wealthy, powerful and respected figure.

With the cunning of desperation he tried a new angle.

"Now listen, Mountfield," he said, leaning forward. "You will agree with me that the whole object of this flight to the Moon is to enlarge the scope of Mankind; to enable men to study the other space bodies with a view to the betterment of the race generally?"

"Most emphatically, I agree."

"The fact that there is the International Prize of five hundred thousand pounds, as well as enormous profits in the construction of appropriate space-travel craft which will be modelled on the first machine to complete the lunar trip—those things are secondary to the true scientist. Therefore, why should we not, for the benefit of the race



and of Science, combine our forces? Your discovery, whatever it is, could be of great assistance to me if it could be incorporated in my machine. While I, on the other hand, could no doubt assist you. We could share in the honor and, of course, the profits—although that is a minor matter—and our fellows would benefit. If we go our own ways, use our own methods, we may both crash, and the loss would be enormous. A setback like that could put back space-travel for years."

"Yes! Thought your jet-prop. job was perfect, Sweintz," said a voice from the doorway.

The big man turned quickly and stared at the newcomer; a tall, well-built young man dressed in grey overalls. Although ruggedly built, and tanned of face, the young man bore a close resemblance to his father, Professor Mountfield. His face was rather long, his forehead high, while the expression of his eyes was an almost exact replica of that of the older man.

"Oh, it's you," growled Sweintz, who

hated the outspoken young scientist even more than he disliked the Professor. "You ought to know," he added in reply to Ronnie Mountfield's remark, "that nothing is perfect in science until it has been actually tried—not even your precious Astrogyro!"

"It'll do us," grinned Ron. "Going now, Sweintz? We're busy men, you know. Got an urgent appointment on the Moon."

"I hope you keep your appointment," snarled Sweintz, rising. "And I hope you live to tell the world what you saw on the Moon." He strode to the door. "Good day to you both. I won't trouble you again. I've given you a last chance to do the sensible thing. If you want to make the first flight to the Moon a race, then I accept the challenge!" He slammed the door.

Treachery

"PLEASANT fellow, Sweintz," observed Ron. "So courteous and polite."

"I can understand his feelings, up to a point," said Professor Mountfield tolerantly. "After all, Ronald, he has spent many years working on his jet-propelled craft, and until news of my work was revealed he imagined that nothing could stop him from making the first flight to the Moon, and thus winning the International Prize and the other advantages promised to the pioneer lunar traveller."

"Yes," said Ron grimly. "And he's not going to give up the idea of reaping all those advantages either."

"Of course not!" The Professor eyed his son in some surprise. "We know that he is determined to make the attempt."

"I wasn't thinking of that aspect, Dad," said the young man. "I'm convinced that not only will he make the attempt himself, but he'll try to stop us from making our flight."

"My dear boy, you are making something big out of a mere trifle. The man is upset, but beyond a display of anger he will do nothing. Nothing, that is, except to speed his preparations for the lunar trip."

"You're too easy going and trusting, Dad," grunted Ron. "Because you have certain ideals and principles you think everyone else has them. Anyway, I'm going to be wary for the next few days. Even if

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Sweintz doesn't attempt to stop us he may attempt to find out the nature of your invention. And if he could get his hands on your Antigravity Control he'd have no compunction about using it. And it's a fact that the thing is so delightfully simple in operation he would grasp its potentialities in no time."

"Be wary, by all means," smiled the Professor. "But within three days we shall be on our way to the Moon. I have no fears on that score. And now, Ronald, has the Antigravity Control been installed?"

"It has, Dad," said the young man eagerly. "That's what I came to see you about. Come and give it the once-over."

He led the way from the office and over to the huge square-topped building. Outside the locked door of this building a man was busily engaged in digging in one of the garden plots.

"He wasn't there when I came out," he remarked, eyeing the man suspiciously. "That's that fellow Miles you engaged. Dad. I don't like the look of him."

"You're too suspicious altogether," said his father. "We had to have a gardener to keep the grounds in order, and we couldn't spare any of our regular men. This man had excellent references."

Ron made no further remark, but as he turned the keys in the double-locked door, he looked swiftly behind him to see that the man had stopped digging and was eyeing him with furtive keenness. Immediately the man's eyes dropped back to his task. "You'll bear watching," breathed Ron to himself, as he opened the door.

Inside the enormous cavern-like structure, with its sliding roof stood Astrogyro, the fruits of the combined mathematical genius of the Professor and the mechanical and electrical skill of his son. It was of glassily-smooth glittering metal, an alloy perfected by Ron Mountfield and his assistant, Andy MacBride, and designed to resist the magnetic charges which would be encountered in space.

The craft, streamlined and with a row of tapering blisters of transparent plastic along either side, stood two hundred feet high, its transparent nose almost touching the sliding roof. It rested on its stern, its bow pointing directly upwards. Actually,

the machine was designed to take off like a rocket, flatten out once it cleared the earth's atmosphere, and again to assume a vertical position when reaching another atmosphere or preparing to land; but the landing would be stern-first and controlled by repulsion jetgyros. The landing and take-off gear was a splayed cylindrical member consisting of a multitude of alloy springs.

The two men entered the machine through a valve-door, stepped into a tiny lift and were shot up to the control room near the nose of the space craft.

From the lift they entered an extraordinarily topsy-turvy looking room in which dials, levers, and a mass of switches were placed at odd angles—there were dials set in the floor and the ceiling, switches high in the walls, others low; and at intervals in the walls, floor and ceiling, were short metal handrails. But there was nothing haphazard about the design of that vital control room, for in certain conditions the wall might become the floor or the ceiling, and each unit was placed in a position which would facilitate quick and efficient operation, some of them being duplicated for that purpose. When Astrogyro was beyond the influence of gravity the occupants of that room, although in an artificially created atmospheric pressure of 14.73 lbs. to the square inch, would be relatively without weight, and would have to pull themselves around to the various controls by means of the metal handrails.

Picking their way through the maze of instruments, Ron and his father opened a small door on the far side of the room and were greeted by a voice with a rich Scotch burr.

"Weel, Prof., she's a' complete." The speaker, a short, red-headed man with a grinning face, looked up from the glass-topped metal box which he had been contemplating. The two men moved across the tiny chamber and looked into the metal case—looked into the very heart of the great machine.

Under the thick plate glass was a fluted rod of dull grey metal about which was wound coils of wire, the whole mounted on a tracery of delicate gears and tiny levers, and at either end of the case was an

ivory band calibrated with small numbers. It was the vital link between atmospheric travel and space travel, the Antigravity Control.

The Professor had, in fact, found the relationship between Magnetic Force and Gravitational Force, and had calculated the combined Unit, the Magnogravam. The calibration on the ivory strip in the Regulator was arbitrary, being measured out in Decamagnogravams, with the gravity of Earth placed at 500, with the result that when the Regulator was charged at that capacity the Earth-pull was zero, and the huge astrogyro was without relative weight.

"You've tried it, Mac?" said the Professor.

"Aye," responded MacBride. "Watch noo, Prof."

He operated a vernier control and the dullness of the fluted rod gave way to a bright green glow, and at the same time a faint humming sound came from the sides of the machine which told that the Magnogravamatic Force was being fed along cables all through the hull of the huge spacecraft, just as blood is pumped from the heart through the arteries of the body. The Scotchman operated a small capstan-wheel and the rod moved slowly around until an attached pointer ran across the calibrated ivory strip until it stopped at "500."

"Earth's gravity," murmured the Professor, his mild eyes gleaming. "Now, Astrogyro should have no weight."

"That's reet," agreed Mac. "Try it, if ye like."

"I will," put in Ron quickly. He hurried from the room, descended in the lift, and emerged from the machine. His hand shook slightly as he extended it and placed it under one of the transparent blisters. Although he had implicit faith in his father's invention, and had experimented with a model, he felt the immensity of this moment when an upward movement of his arm would reveal whether the calculations and application of the experimental work, as applied to the real thing, were successful.

He pushed upwards, gently, and the enormous machine rose slowly and remained poised in mid-air! Astrogyro now weighed zero! For a few moments the young man

stood gazing at the scientific miracle in front of him, then he moved over and gently pulled the huge machine back to its resting place.

He was about to re-enter the valve door when a faint scraping sound behind him caused him to turn sharply. He looked around the big building. There were several work benches around the walls, and a confusion of crates and cases which would afford cover for any intruder. But the door had been double-locked! His mouth set grimly. If anyone was actually in the building, then he had gone to considerable trouble to gain entry—probably managed



in some way to obtain a set of duplicate keys.

The implied threat in the last words of Sweintz came back to the young man. And then he remembered Miles! He went to the door of the building, which was still locked, opened it and peered outside. The man's spade was there, but its owner was not.

Ron re-entered the building, and at the same time a soft heavy object crashed down on his skull, and he was engulfed in black unconsciousness.

"Close call, that," muttered his attacker, slipping a black sandbag into his pocket. "If he'd started searchin' here fer me it would 'ave crooled things proper. Now to get rid of yer fer a few hours."

Infernal Machine

RON struggled up through the black void of oblivion to painful consciousness. His hands and feet were securely bound, and a greasy gag was firmly tied over his mouth. He blinked around the room, and recognised it as one of the smaller outbuildings, only a short distance from the main structure, which was used as a store-room.

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"Howd'yer feel, pal?" enquired a coarse voice.

Ron glared dumbly at the leering pseudo-gardener, Miles.

"Yer needn't think yer ol' man's worryin' about yer, son," said Miles. "'Cos he ain't. I told 'im, when he come outer the ship to look fer yer that yer'd gone down to the main gate after I'd give yer a message from a bloke who came up in a car. Then I tells him yer went away in the car and would be back in about an hour's time." He chuckled. "Yer dad just shakes his silly old head and says somethin' about you bein' 'rattic, and off he goes."

The man looked at a gun-metal watch. "Well, time I started gettin' busy." Ron watched with burning anxious eyes while the fellow produced from his hip pocket a little ebonite case with a dial set into it, resembling a voltmeter. He plugged two of four leads into a power point, and the other two leads he attached to an adaptor which in turn was connected to a wire which ran through a hole in the floorboards.

Having completed his task the man again looked at his watch. "Nearly time," he grinned. "At four o'clock I'm goin' to turn on that there power point, and after the juice has passed through that there time-switch for ten minutes it'll liven up this wire 'ere what runs in the garden bed up to the buildin' where yer precious Astrogyro is.

"That," said the fellow with relish, "will be the end of yer Astrogyro. 'Cos why? 'Cos there's enough high-explosive packed around that buildin' to send the 'ole business sky-high, that's why."

Ron struggled fiercely but futilely with his bonds.

"No use wrigglin'," said the man. "I'll be the end of you, too, but that can't be 'elped. After all, yer might be blown high enough to git to the Moon first, see?" He grinned at this pleasantry, and went on, "It's yer own fault. The Boss wanted to play ball with yer, but yer wouldn't, so he give me the signal as he was leavin' to-day to carry on and do what I've been plannin' fer weeks. I laid that there wire while I was workin' in the gardens, and I dug the 'oles around the buildin' and packed in the explosive—finished the last one only a while

ago. I was supposed to find out somethin' about your craft, too, if I could, but it was too risky. Anyway, it don't matter now, because the boss's craft won't have to beat no opposition." He rose and felt in his pocket, withdrawing a bunch of keys. "If yer wonderin' how I got in, son, there's how. Uster be a locksmith before I got jugged after doin' a little job. Made me laugh to see you locking them two locks so careful. Took me no time to make up a set of keys. If it hadn't been fer them guards yer stuck around the buildin' every night I'd have 'ad a good look over that there machine, and p'r'aps did a nice job of sabby-targe. Still, what's it matter? She'll be goin' up in bits in—yes, just ten minutes from now, so it's time I wasn't 'ere. It's me knock-off time, and I want ten minutes to git clear of this joint, 'cos 'ell's goin' to break loose. Cheerio, son. Give me regards to the hangels."

The fellow bent, clicked over the power-point switch, and hastily quitted the building.

The dial of the time switch was facing Ron, and the young man could see the calibrations. There was a fixed hand on the "10," and the other, moving, hand was ticking faintly across the dial. When the two hands were level the circuit would be made, and then—

Ron struggled madly with his bonds, but the rascally Miles was evidently an expert at his job, for there was not the slightest slackening of the cords. He gave it up at last, panting, and half-suffocated by the filthy gag in his mouth. The moving hand had reached "4."

It was then that Ron decided to concentrate on his gag. He was quite close to the big building, and there was a chance—admittedly only a faint chance—that Mac or his father might pass within earshot on the way to the machine. He chewed frantically at the sodden mass of oily sponge cloth in his mouth, tearing bits from it and working them out of his mouth with his tongue, but only with great difficulty. And as he chewed and grimaced his eyes were held hypnotically by that slowly-moving hand, now passing from the 6th minute and moving inexorably, inevitably, towards "7."

Ron continued to chew frantically, at the same time listening eagerly. The footsteps came closer, were within a few feet of the door; they were at the door—then they began to die away.

A sickening sensation, a feeling of physical nausea overcame the young man. His hopes, which had soared for a brief moment, crashed. Two minutes to go. He spat another wad of the sodden cloth from his mouth. There was still a lump of the clotted cloth in his mouth, but it was no longer secured, although it was impossible to get it from his mouth due to the strip of cloth bound around his mouth and fastened behind his neck. But if he couldn't get it out of his mouth in one lump, he might be able to swallow it!

He worked the wad around in his mouth and gulped, and for a few seconds he thought that he had merely exchanged one form of death for another. The wad lodged in his throat, robbing him of air. He fought down the impulse to expel it from his throat, and instead gulped and swallowed fiercely until at length he had swallowed the thing and was breathing freely again.

And then he shouted—shouted against the strip of rag between his teeth. Shouted with a wild frenzy that carried far beyond the walls of his prison. He thought he could hear approaching footsteps, but he did not desist in his efforts in order to listen. He shouted again and again, his eyes fixed on the fatal needle, which had less than one minute to go before completing the circuit.

"Weel, what's the trouble? What's all the shoutin'—Ronnie, lad!" Mac, standing in the doorway, stared at the squirming young man.

"Switch!" Ron's cracked voice was urgent. "Turn it off. Off—off!"

"Sweetch?" Mac looked blank. "What sweetch? What—"

"Off—off!" Ron's voice rose to a scream; his eyes glared at the power-point switch. "Quick!"

"Aw'reet, lad. Dinna get yersel' excited about it." Mac stepped over to the power point. As he bent down, Ron saw the black needle move over to the fatal "10." He closed his eyes, waited, every nerve tense, for the explosion. But instead he heard Mac's voice.

"Noo to get ye undone, lad, and then we'll hear from ye."

Quick Decision

"YES, there isn't any doubt, Ronald, that Sweintz was behind that dastardly attempt." Professor Mountfield's tones were troubled. "The man's words, his admission that he received a signal from his boss today, his boast that the boss would have no opposition . . . Yes, there isn't any doubt, but unfortunately there is no proof."

"No legal proof," said Ron bitterly. "Unless we could grab that villain, Miles, and make him confess. But I'm more concerned now about the safety of the machine. If Sweintz has made one attempt to wreck the craft, and to murder us, incidentally, then he'll make another. He's absolutely ruthless."

"He wouldn't dare—" began the Professor.

"He'd dare anything if he thought he could get away with it. Look, Dad, there's only one thing to do, short of taking positive measures against Sweintz, and that is to make the trip right now!"

"What! Tonight? You're not serious, Ronald."

"Why not? Everything is ready—stores, fuel, space-suits—everything!"

"The lad's reet, Prof.," said Mac, nodding slowly. "Astrogyro is ready an' waitin'. She'll ne'er be a better craft than she is tonight, but if yon Sweintz can get at her, she'll be a worse craft by far."

"But the Interplanetary Society. They must be told—"

"Tell 'em now." Ron pushed the telephone table-set closer to his father. "Tell 'em we're going just as soon as we can move off. If they want to send a representative tell 'em to have him here within the hour."

"Aye, tell 'em just that," said Mac. He rose from his chair, his rugged face aglow with anticipation. "The lad an' I'll get things to rights, Prof. Come on, lad."

Professor Mountfield looked at his two subordinates, and something of excitement crept into his mild eyes. The enthusiasm of the others was infectious; and Ron sensed victory when he saw that gleam in his father's eyes.

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ous as you have been, Professor. Bronstern and I are at your command."

Bronstern, pale-faced and with shifty pale-blue eyes, nodded agreement.

"Very well." The Professor outlined the party's recent activities, and their plan of returning to Astrogyro and avoiding the sublunar monsters en route, after which the men moved on, Ron taking the lead.

Sweintz and Bronstern were in the rear, and deliberately lagging well behind the others. Ron, looking around once saw that Sweintz's lips were moving.

"Mac," he called quietly into his transmitter. "Those two are chatting over another wave-length. They may only be cursing us to each other, but they may be plotting mischief. Try out your wavelengths and see if you can pick them up. I don't like the look of things."

Attack

WITH the huge crater of Posidonius now a distant bulge to the north, and the flat expanse of *Mare Serenitatis* lying before them, the five men stood on the jagged sides of the rock-wall surrounding the vast plain. In the distance, glittering in the Lunar sunshine like a silver pencil standing on its end, was Astrogyro.

"And now," said Ron, "all we have to do is get aboard her." He walked to one side, motioning to Mac. The Scotchman followed him, and Ron without speaking turned his eyes meaningly in the direction of Sweintz and his companion. Silently the Scotchman shook his head, indicating that he had not been able to tune in on the conversation of the two men during the journey. Ron, who had made similar attempts without success, shook his head also. No doubt Sweintz had a peculiar wave-length selection in the space-suit apparatus into which other radios could not tune. And the knowledge brought further uneasiness to the young man.

He led the way down on to the plain, and as he drew nearer to the great craft his straining eyes picked out a score or so squat blobs rising from the white ground

and set at regular intervals in a circle around the landing member of the space-craft.

"They're there!" he cried. "Those confounded sublunar things are guarding Astrogyro."

The Professor nodded slowly, his eyes grave. "Yes, they've put two and two together and decided that their enemies came from this foreign structure, and they're guarding it to make sure that no other enemies emerge to attack them." He bit his lip. "They'll squat there indefinitely—or at least for the rest of the Lunar day, which is another twenty-odd days of our time."

"Shoot 'em up," snapped Sweintz, drawing a heavy revolver from one of the compartments of his space-suit.

"Don't!" snapped Ron quickly. "Put that thing away Sweintz—or better still, hand it to me."

"That's likely isn't it?" snarled Sweintz. "What's to stop you putting a bullet through my headgear and letting me bust?"

"You wouldn't understand what's stopping me, Sweintz," replied Ron coldly. "I know what's stopping you from doing it to us. You're relying on us to get you off the Moon alive. And if you want to get away alive you'll obey our orders. Give me that revolver, Sweintz."

The big man, muttering angrily, flung the revolver at Ron's feet.

"You too, Bronstern," snapped Ron. "Hand your gun to Mac, if you have one. You'll be searched if you say you haven't one, anyway."

"And leave me nothing to protect myself with," said Bronstern. "You say those things down there are dangerous."

"We'll do our best to look after them," said Ron. "If Sweintz here had fired that shot there would have been scores, hundreds, of the brutes coming from the ground in a few minutes. I told you before that they have a communication system of their own that sends an instant warning

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through the whole colony . . . All right, Mac. There's his gun. Take it."

Falling in beside his father, Ron moved ahead. "Any plan to get around these creatures, Dad?"

"I can only suggest, son, that we rush the valve-door. We've learnt from our incident in the tunnel that they do not sense our presence, but must see us with that solitary eye of theirs. Remember, I stood for quite a while watching their activities, and we should have got away without their knowing we were there at all had it not been for that creature coming from behind and seeing me. Therefore, our best chance is to approach as stealthily as possible, from different directions, and rush the door. Whichever one of us is first seen will be attacked. If it happens to be the one making for the door, the others will have to concentrate on the creature making the attack."

"I can suggest nothing better, Dad," said Ron, after a moment's thought. "Better get that knife of yours ready. It's sudden death to these things if you get a chance to use it. But we'll have to speed up the attack once we start, otherwise we'll be surrounded and completely overwhelmed once these sentries give the alarm to their pals underground . . . Sweintz and Bronstern," he called. "Have you knives in your equipment?" And when the two men surlily replied in the affirmative, Ron went on, "Get them out, and be ready to use them on these things. Now spread out. You over there, Mac. Sweintz, get over to the extreme left. Bronstern, move over to the right. That's the idea. All set? I'm going to make a dash for the door. Dad, you'd better keep a few yards behind me, ready to take a stab at the first creature that attacks me. Everyone ready? Right!"

Reinforcements

THERE was no movement from the squat monsters as the men, advancing in a wide semi-circle, approached the space-

craft. The sublunar creatures, their tentacles resting in convoluted masses on their mushroom-like bodies, appeared to have no suspicion of any other presence. Closer and closer the semicircle of humans drew to the immobile monsters—twenty yards, fifteen . . .

With less than half-a-dozen yards separating him from the spaceship, Ron saw, with a thrill of horror, a huge single eye swing around and come to rest on him.

"Now!" he yelled, rushing forward. And at the same instant the creatures began to swivel towards him, their tentacles waving threateningly, and the dull white of their bodies taking on a pink glow—a glow that would act as a broadcast of alarm throughout the vast underground colony.

The valve-door was directly ahead of the young man, and he reached it with one of the creatures clinging to his leg. It was the leg of his space suit which was already torn, the inner plastic skin showing in the gap; and it would take but little more damage before bursting.

Frantically, he pushed his arm up into the streamlined sheath covering the wheel which controlled the door. He felt the cold metal in his hand, and commenced winding rapidly, furiously. He felt the outer skin of his space suit ripping away under the fierce onslaught of the tearing lightning-like tentacles. The creature had attacked the most vulnerable part of the suit, enlarging the hole already made, ripping great strips of the stout material. And once it got a good grip of the inner skin . . .

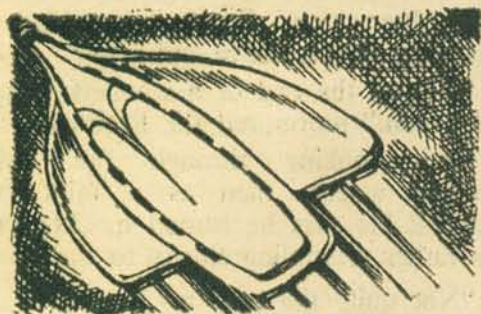
A great wave of relief poured over him as the tentacles ceased their tearing. He cast a swift look down and saw the dying body of the monster spread out at his feet. The Professor, however, in despatching the creature, had been violently attacked himself, and was reeling around, a great mass of pink tentacles around his shoulder, covering his helmet, and blinding his view.

With a final wrench, Ron brought the wheel to its limit, and the outer valve-door of the spacecraft slowly opened. He dropped back to the ground and rushed

over to his father who was hacking frantically at the tentacles covering his helmet. Another of the creatures had fastened to the Professor's legs, and as Ron reached him his father tripped and fell, falling on top of the creature which was clinging to his shoulders.

The little knife flew in a glittering arc from the Professor's hand, and Ron pounced on it as it fell. He plunged it into the soft body of the creature which was imprisoning the Professor's legs—plunged it in, and drew it across the parchment-like skin and saw the bubbling, heaving life-fluid of the creature pour out in a sickening, viscid stream. He struck at the other creature, struck and tore a gaping wound in it, and its tentacles drooped away slowly and helplessly.

"Get in, Dad," shouted Ron. "Quick!" He turned to look for the others. Mac, a



couple of yards away, was struggling desperately with half-a-dozen of the monsters, gradually pushing his way towards the spacecraft, but on the verge of falling at any moment. Bronstern was completely overwhelmed, lying on the ground, too frightened to use his knife properly. His screams, in Ron's radio, were ear-splitting and horrible. Sweintz, however, was laying about with his knife, a long-bladed murderous weapon, and around him were several oozing carcasses to testify to his efforts.

But the man was scared. The swarthy face that looked across at Ron through the

space-helmet was a dirty yellow colour; and his voice, coming intermittently through the screams of the prostrate Bronstern, was roaring for help.

Ron, forgetful of the state of his space suit, raced over to the hard-pressed Bronstern; wrenched the knife from the fellow's feebly clutching hand, and with swift tearing strokes made gaping wounds in the creatures' bodies. But, although Bronstern was enabled to rise, which he did with alacrity and raced to the open valve-door, Ron had diverted attack to himself. The creatures were flinging themselves at him, and again the fear that his space suit might give way clutched at the young man's heart.

He staggered towards the spacecraft, into which the craven Bronstern was already clambering. Sweintz's roars for help sounded in Ron's radio, but the big man was slowly getting nearer to the craft, hacking madly at the impeding creatures with his knife. It was Mac who was in real trouble.

Silently and without a suggestion of an appeal the Scotchman was using the heavy revolver as a club, but it had but slight effect upon the resiliency of his attackers' bodies. And as Ron lurched towards him Mac went down, his body smothered beneath the writhing mass.

Again wielding the knife Ron staggered over to his friend's assistance. The outer skin of his suit was hanging in great trailing rags, and two of the creatures were tearing at the inner covering, but he continued to hack at the Scotchman's attackers.

With a violent effort MacBride flung one of the oozing, dying beasts from his chest and struggled to a sitting posture. He looked behind Ron, his eyes staring with wild despair.

"This—this is it, lad," he gasped. "They're comin'—thousands of the things."

Ron swung round wildly. From the mounds were pouring scores of the monsters—the warning, as he had anticipated, had been communicated throughout the length and breadth of the vast underground system. As far as he could see across the plain the mounds were disgorging the sub-

lunar inhabitants. In an almost solid mass the creatures swept rapidly toward the craft, a vicious, lethal flood of pink-tinted bodies and thrashing tentacles.

Final Attempt

"THE gun, Mac!" As he uttered the cry, Ron drew the revolver which he had taken from Sweintz. Knowing how effective was the knife against the monsters he had neglected to use the gun. And although he knew that the bullets, unless fired through the eye into the nerve-centre of the creatures, were almost useless, he recalled, in that moment of extremity, the temporary shock which the firing of the guns underground had given the creatures. Above ground, with the sound dissipated, the same ruse might not be effective, but it was their last and only chance.

He pressed the trigger again and again, and Mac, grasping his young friend's idea, used his revolver, sending spurts of flame from the muzzle.

"It worked!" Ron's voice was a yell of triumph as the creatures, temporarily shocked by the noise, fell away. He yanked Mac to his feet and the two men raced to the valve-door, being held open by the Professor. The great mass of sublunar inhabitants stopped suddenly at the sound of gunshots, but only for a moment. Evidently reassured to some extent by their numbers, they again came forward in a swivelling rush, making towards Sweintz who was furthest from the spacecraft.

The man staggered, and almost fell over the corpse of one of the creatures, but the combination of fear and lack of gravity sent him flying forward at almost unbelievable speed. He reached the valve door, flung himself in on top of the others. Ron span the wheel of the outer space-door, and it closed on the massed horrors without.

Ron stood in the transparent bubble of Astrogyro, looking down on the plain of *Mare Serenitatis*. The ground was thick

with the sublunar inhabitants. For hours the creatures had waited, patiently, without movement, coldly intent to destroy this queer invader of their system. The young man had taken innumerable photographs of the things, as well as of the Lunar landscape itself, through the transparent observation bubble. And now the spacecraft was ready to begin its long journey homewards.

"At your post, Ron," called Professor Mountfield. "And you Mac." And presently the order was given. "Degravitize." And the order was repeated by Mac. And then, "Minor jetgyros." And, "Minor jetgyros," repeated Ron.

Slowly the spacecraft rose from the Lunar ground. Gradually, the vast plains shrank, and the huge extinct volcanoes dwindled away to tiny, jagged looking humps on the Lunar face. Above, big and glorious in the black sky, wreathed in its halo of atmosphere, was Earth, their objective.

Ron and his father, the controls being set for automatic working, stood again in the observation bubble, watching the changing scenes, above and below.

"Almost the end of a wonderful experience, son," murmured the Professor.

Ron, looking through the bubble, nodded assent; then as a faint groan reached his ears he turned quickly to see his father crumpling slowly to the floor.

"Not quite the end, my friend," rasped the harsh voice of Sweintz. "Thanks for dropping my revolver just inside the valve door, and thanks for not searching me for ammunition." He moved the big revolver threateningly as the young man took a step forward.

"You fool," cried Ron. "You can't get away with this. You'll wreck us."

"I think not," sneered the other. "Your friend, Mac, will help us steer the craft back to Earth, or else! Now, just step over here. Bronstern, you take charge of him."

"You're mad!" snapped Ron. "What's going to happen when you get back to Earth? The world knows that this is Professor Mountfield's craft —"

"Was his craft," corrected Sweintz with an evil grin. "Most unfortunate that the original crew were killed by the Lunar creatures. I'll have some photographs of the things to show, too. But very fortunate that Bronstern and I managed to escape and salvage Astrogyro. And, of course, we shall be entitled to the rewards of salvage."

"So that's your idea, you—you filthy swine!" said Ron. "Why, you—" He lunged forward, but Sweintz pulled the trigger of his gun, and Ron felt the shock of the bullet's impact in his shoulder. He reeled away, clutched at the stair rail and fell, and had it not been for the weak gravity belt of the Moon would have crashed heavily.

As it was he reached the foot of the stair flight, dazed, and bleeding from the wound, but with no ill-effects from his fall. Above, Sweintz was levelling the gun at him, and Ron ducked around the bend of the staircase and staggered across to the nearest door, which led into the jetgyro motor room. As he almost fell into the room he heard Sweintz call to his accomplice, and a moment later the two men were hurrying down the stairs.

As he rose to his feet Ron felt himself soaring upwards, and the now-familiar sensation of losing all weight told him that Astrogyro was once again in Space under the guidance of Mac. He wondered dully whether the Scotchman had heard the revolver shots. Unlikely. Mac was in the control room behind closed doors.

He grasped one of the handrails with his uninjured arm and pulled himself through the air towards the great pulsating motors which were pumping out the motive power, the gyro-rays into Space, through the big slotted openings. There was a space between the motors and the inner hull, and towards this he pulled himself, biting at his lips in the agony of the effort. His paramount need at that moment was to conceal himself, hide from these two murderous ruffians until he could recover from the shock of his wound and the loss of blood.

He reached his objective and crouched out of sight as Sweintz's voice reached his ears.

"Might have come in here, Bronstern. The door was open. Can't see him though. We'll have to track him down. He might wreck the ship if he thinks there's no other way out."

"I don't like it, Sweintz." Bronstern's voice was quivering with fear. "That other fellow, Mac, will wreck the craft when he knows about this."

"Don't be a fool, man. Don't you think I know enough about spacecraft to learn how to pilot this thing? These fools were that excited about getting away from the Moon that I was able to see into the control room as soon as I came aboard. The thing is fundamentally simple—they're using a degravity control. I'll get something about the operation from Mac. I have my methods. He'll be glad to tell me everything before I've finished with him." Sweintz ended with a cold laugh; and the listening Ron felt a blinding surge of anger welling up within him. "Come on, man," came Sweintz's voice again. "Pull yourself around and look for him. There's plenty of scope for him to hide in this great cavern of a place. He's the most dangerous one aboard. He wanted to lock us up, by the way, but the old chap was quite sure we couldn't do any harm, without endangering our own lives."

"He might be right too, Sweintz. You don't know—"

"Shut up," snapped Sweintz. "What's that? Over there behind that motor. A

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shadow! All right, Mountfield," he called. "You'd better come out."

Exit Sweintz

RON remained motionless, silent, behind the great motor. He could hear muttered words as Sweintz spoke to his henchman.

"For the last time, Mountfield, are you coming out?"

Still the young man remained silent. He looked up, and at the same time bent his knees underneath him. If Sweintz appeared in that opening, the only access to the space behind the motor, Ron promised himself grimly that he would be ready for him.

But Sweintz did not appear. Instead a hand holding a revolver gleamed above.

And as the gun turned towards him Ron launched himself upwards, grasped the wrist of the man holding the revolver and twisted violently. The gun roared above the steadily pulsating motors, but the bullet went wide.

Ron, although weakened by the oozing wound in his shoulder, retained his fierce grip on Sweintz's wrist. All the pent-up fury and hatred of this vile wretch, whose life the Astrogyro crew had saved, was behind the young man's grip. Sweintz, his dark face livid with fear and rage, raised his free hand and smashed it into the face of his antagonist. Ron's grip weakened and the other pushed himself away and shot up to the ceiling. The revolver, which had slipped from Sweintz's grasp was floating within a few feet of, and between, the two men. Both lunged towards it, but neither caught it. Instead the weapon shot away from their lunging hands and struck the wall opposite.

Ron immediately catapulted himself towards the figure up against the ceiling. He drove hard with his fist, striking the other on the jaw and causing him to spin around, bumping and bouncing back from the ceiling.

The big man, his eyes glaring stark hatred, suddenly twisted in mid air, pressed his hands against the ceiling, and lunged out with both feet. The blow caught Ron,

who was shooting upwards in an attempt to get to grips with Sweintz, full in the face. He shot backwards, striking the floor.

He opened his eyes to a whirling mass of lights, and saw through them that Sweintz, jerked backwards by the impetus of that kick, was over against the hull, within a few feet of the slotted opening.

"Look out!" yelled Ron involuntarily. "That slot! It's the gyro-rays. It goes out into—"

He broke off as Sweintz's body was swiftly and suddenly sucked, as though it were a scrap of paper, towards the slot.

The big man's eyes widened, first with surprise, then with horror. He turned his head, and a rattling scream issued from his throat. A scream that began in the motor room, and ended in Space.

Conclusion

LESS than an hour to go," said Ron. "And then, the Earth!" He was sitting in the control room, his arm in an improvised sling. Professor Mountfield, his head bandaged, was operating the jet-gyros.

The great machine had entered the Earth's gravity belt, and was travelling slowly downwards towards the pin-point of its landing place, under the guidance of MacBride.

The latter grinned across the room. "It looks more like a Space Ambulance than a spacecraft," he commented. "Weel, I canna say I'm sorry to be back where a mon belongs. Hae did ye find Bronstern, lad? Any better?"

"He hasn't got over the shock of what happened to Sweintz," replied Ron. "He's more of a fool than a rogue, so I'll make it as light as I can for him when we get back. He's lying in his bed in a daze, and a funk."

Ron rose and went to the observation bubble.

Below, the Earth was rising slowly towards them; above, the sky was again a familiar blue, and the sun the same golden globe of old . . .

[The End]

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