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FAR FROM HOME

BY J. A. TAYLOR

Illustrated by Emsh

*"Far" is strictly a relative term. Half a world
away from home is, sometimes, no distance
at all!*

Someone must have talked over the fence because the newshounds were clamoring on the trail within an hour after it happened.

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The harassed Controller had lived in an aura of "Restricteds," "Classifieds" and "Top Secrets" for so long it had become a mental conditioning and automatically hedged over information that had been public property for years via the popular

technical mags; but in time they pried from him an admittance that the Station Service Lift rocket A. J. "Able Jake" Four had indeed failed to rendezvous with Space Station One, due at 9:16 Greenwich that morning.

The initial take-off and ascent had gone to flight plan and the pilot, in the routine check-back after entering free flight had reported no motor or control faults. At this point, unfortunately, a fault in the tracking radar transmitter had resulted in it losing contact with the target. The Controller did not, however, mention the defection of the hungover operator in fouling up the signal to the standby unit, or the consequent general confusion in the tracking network with no contact at all thereafter, and fervently hoped that gentlemen of the press were not too familiar with the organization of the tracking system.

At least one of the more shrewd looking reporters appeared as though he were mentally baiting a large trap so the Controller, throwing caution to the winds, plunged headlong into a violent refutation of various erroneous reports already common in the streets.

Able Jake did not carry explosives or highly corrosive chemicals, only some Waste Disposal cylinders, dry foodstuffs and sundry Station Household supplies.

Furthermore there was no truth in the oft-revived rumors of weaknesses in the so-called "spine-and-rib" construction of the Baur and Hammond Type Three vessel under acceleration strain. The type had been discontinued solely because the rather complicated structure raised certain stowage difficulties in service with overlong turnabout times resulting.

There may have been a collision with a meteor he conceded, but, it was thought, highly unlikely. And now, the urgent business of the search called, the Controller escaped, perspiring gently.

Able Jake was sighted a few minutes later but it was another three hours before a service ship could be readied and got away without load to allow it as much operating margin as possible. Getting a man aboard was yet another matter. At this stage of space travel no maneuver of this nature had ever been accomplished outside of theory. Fuel-thrust-mass ratios were still a thing of pretty close reckoning, and the service lift ships were simply not built for it.

The ship was in an elliptical orbit and a full degree off its normal course. A large part of the control room was demolished and there was a lengthy split in the hull. There was no sign of the pilot and some of the cargo was missing also. The investigating crew assumed the obvious and gave it as their opinion that the pilot had been literally disintegrated by the intense heat of the collision.

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The larger part of the world's population made it a point to listen in on the first space burial service in history over the absent remains of Johnny Melland.

Such a small thing to cause such a fury. A mere twenty Earth pounds of an indifferent grade of rock and a little iron, an irregular, ungraceful lump, spawned somewhere a billion years before as a star died. But it still had most of the awesome velocity and inertia of its birth.

Able Jake, with the controlling influence of the jets cut, had yawed slightly and was now traveling crabwise. The meteor on its own course, a trifle oblique to that of the ship, struck almost directly the slender spring steel spine, the frightful energy of the impact transmuted on the instant into a heat that vaporized several feet of the nose and spine before the dying shock caused an anguished flexing of the ship's backbone; thrust violently outward along the radial members and so against the ribs and hull sheathing on that side. Able Jake's hull split open like a pea pod for fully half its length and several items of its cargo burst from their lashings, erupted from the wound.

Johnny was not inboard at the time, but floating, spacesuited alongside, freeing a fouled lead to the radar bowl, swearing occasionally but without any real passion at the stupidity of the unknown maintenance man who failed to secure it properly. For some odd reason he had never quite lost the thrill of his first trip "outside," and, donning pressure suit with the speed of long practice, sneaked as many "inspections" as possible, with or without due cause.

The second's fury that reduced the third stage of a \$5,000,000 rocket to junk was evident to him only as a brilliant blue-white flash, a hammer-like shock through the antennae support that left his wrist and forearm numb. Then a violent wrench as a long cylinder, expelled from the split hull, caught the loop of his life line and dragged him in till he clashed hard against it, the suddenly increased tension or a sharp edge parting the line close to the anchored end. He clawed blindly for a hold, found something he could not at that moment identify and hung on.

For a short time his vision seemed dulled and that part of his mind, trained to the

quick analysis of sudden situations groped but feebly through a haze of shock to understand what had happened. Orienting himself he found he was gripping a brace of the open-mounted motor on one of the Waste Disposal Cylinders. About him he could see other odd items of the cargo, some clustering fairly closely, others just perceptibly drifting farther away. To one side, or “downwards” the Earth rolling vastly, pole over pole, and with her own natural rotation giving an odd illusion of slipping sideways from under him.

Only a sudden sun glint on the stubby swept-back wings showed him where Able Jake was. Far away—too far, spinning slowly end over end. His sideways expulsion from the ship then had been enough to give him and his companion debris a divergent course.

Spacemen accept without question the fact of a ship or a station always at hand with a safety man on watch at all times over those outside and a “bug” within signaling distance constantly. They do not conceive of any other state of affairs.

Now Johnny had to face the fact that he was in such a position—entirely and utterly alone, except for the useless flotsam that came with him. He might have flung himself into a mad chase after the ship on his suit jets except that the thought of leaving his little island, cold comfort though it was, to plunge into those totally empty depths was suddenly horrible.

The tide of panic rose within him. He knew the sickening bodily revolt of blind unreasoning terror—the terror of the lost, the terror of certain untimely death, but mostly of death so dreadfully alone.

He might have gone insane. In the face of the insoluble problem his mind might have retreated into a shadow world of its own, perhaps to prattle happily the last few hours away. But there was something else there. The pre-flight school psychiatrist had recognized it, Johnny himself probably wouldn't have and it wasn't their policy to tell him. It saved him. The labored heart pounding and the long shuddering gasps slowed in time and with the easing of his physical distress he found enough heart to muster a wry little smile at the thought that of the castaways of history he at least stood fair to be named the most unique.

And after a while, shaking himself mentally, a little ashamed of his temporary fall from grace, he followed the example of the more intelligent of his predecessors and settled down to itemize his assets, analyze his position and conjecture the chances of survival.

Item: He was encased in a Denby Bros. spacesuit, Mark III, open space usage, meant for no gravity use. Therefore it had no legs as such, the lower half being a rigid cylinder allowing considerable movement within and having a swivel mounted rocket motor at its base controlled by toe pedals inside.

The upper half, semiflexible with jointed arms ending in gloves from which by contorting the shoulders the hands could be withdrawn into the sleeves when not in use.

A metal and tinted plastic helmet with earphones, mike and chin switch. An oxy air-conditioning and reprocessing unit with its spare pure oxygen tank; on this he could possibly depend for twelve hours given no undue exertion and with the most rigid economy all the time.

The power pack for suit operation and radio had a safety margin of one hour over the maximum air supply, if the radio wasn't used. At this time Johnny couldn't see much use for it.

Item: One Waste Disposal Cylinder, expendable, complete with motor and full fuel tanks, packed, according to his loading manifest with sundry supplies to avoid dead stowage space. Seldom used, since most station waste was ferried down in the otherwise empty service ships, they occasionally handled certain laboratory refuse it was considered best to destroy in space. The cylinders were decelerated and allowed to fall into atmosphere where the friction of the unchecked plunge burned up what the magnesium charge inside had not already. The rest of the shipwrecked material had by now drifted beyond easy reach and Johnny did not feel like wasting fuel rounding it up.

Position? A matter of memory and some guesswork by now. Some ten minutes out of powered flight at the time of collision, coasting up to station orbit where a quick boost from the jets would have made up his lost velocity to orbit standard. But there would be no boost now. So he'd just fall off around the other side, falling around and into Mother Earth, to skim atmosphere and climb on past and up to touch orbit altitude—and down again. A nice elliptical orbit, apogee a thousand odd miles, perigee, sixty-seventy—perhaps. How much speed had he left? How long would it be before he brushed the fringe of atmosphere once too often and too deep? Just another meteor.

And survival. A comparatively simple problem since the mechanics of it were restricted by a simple formula in which his role would seem to be a passive one. To survive he must be rescued by his own kind in twelve hours or less. To be rescued he must be seen or heard. Since his radio was a simple short-range intercom it followed that he must be seen first and heard later. Being seen meant making a sufficiently distinguishable *blip* on somebody's radar screen to arouse comment over a *blip* where, according to schedule no orbiting *blip* should be.

Johnny was painfully aware that the human body is very small in space. The cylinder would be a help but he doubted it would be enough. Then he thought of the material inside the cylinder. He pried back the lugs holding the cover in place with the screwdriver from his belt kit. He started pulling out packages, bags, boxes, thrusting them behind him, above him, downwards; cereals, ready mixed pastries, bundles of disposable paper overalls—toilet paper! He worked furiously, now stuck halfway down the cylinder, kicking the bundles behind him. He emerged finally in a flurry of articles clutching a large plastic bag that had filled the entire lower end of the tank.

About him drifted a sizable cloud of station supplies, stirring sluggishly after his emergence. He pushed them a bit more, distributing them as much as possible without losing them altogether.

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Johnny tore open the big bag and was instantly enveloped in clinging folds of ribbon released from the pressure of its packing. He knew what it was now, the big string of ribbon chutes for the Venus Expedition, intended for dropping a remote controlled mobile observer to the as yet unseen and unknown surface. Johnny had ferried parts of the crab-like mechanical monster on the last run, and illogically found himself worrying momentarily over the set-back to the Probe his mischance would cause.

But in the next minute he was making fast the lower end of the string to the WD cylinder, then, finding the top chute he toed his pedals and jetted himself out, trailing the string out to its full extent.

Now the period of action was over and he had done all he could, Johnny found himself dreading the time of waiting to follow. He would have time for thinking, and thinking wasn't profitable under the circumstances unless it were something definitely constructive and applicable to his present and future well-being. Waiting was always bad.

Surely they would find him soon. Surely they would press the search farther even when they found Able Jake as they couldn't fail to in time.

A tightness started in his throat. Johnny quickly drowned the thought in a flood of inconsequential nonsense, a trick he had learned as a green pilot. He might sleep though, if sleep were a possible thing in this cold emptiness. No one, to his recollection, had ever done so outside a ship or station—the space psychology types would be interested doubtless.

Johnny tied his life line to the WD cylinder and then jetted clear of his artificial cloud, positioning himself so that it formed a partial screen between himself and the sun. He turned his oxygen down to the bare minimum and the thermostat as low as he dared. He commenced a relaxation exercise and was pleased when it worked after a fashion—a mental note for Beaufort at the station. A drowsiness crept over him, dulling a little the thin edge of fear that probed his consciousness.

Face down towards the earth he hung. The slow noise of his breathing only intensified the complete silence outside. The well padded suit encompassed him so gently there was no sense of pressure on his body to make up for the weightlessness. Johnny felt as though he were bodiless, a naked brain with eyes only hanging in nothingness.

Beneath, Earth rolled over with slow majesty, once every two hours. His altered course was evident now, passing almost directly over the geographic poles proper instead of paralleling the twilight zone where night and day met. Sometimes he caught the faint glow of a big city on the night side but the sight only stirred the worm of anxiety and he closed his eyes.

Johnny was beginning to feel very comfortable. He supposed sleepily that this was the way you were assumed to feel while freezing to death in a snowbank, or so he'd heard. Air and heat too low perhaps. He should really turn it up a notch.

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On the other hand it was perhaps a solution to the problem of dying—a gentle sleep while the stomach was still full enough from the last meal to be reasonably comfortable and the throat yet unparched. Would it be the act of an unbalanced mind or one of the most supreme sanity?

He dozed and dreamed a bit in fragments and snatches but it was not a good sleep—there was no peace in it. At one time he seemed to be standing outside the old fretworked boarding house he lived in—looking in at the window of the “sitting room” where the ancient, wispy landlady sat among her antimacassared chairs and the ridiculous tiny seashell ashtrays that overflowed after two butts. He wanted desperately to get in and sprawl in the huge bat-winged chair by the fire and stroke the enormous old gray cat that would leap up and trample and paw his stomach before settling down to grumble to itself asthmatically for hours.

It was cold and dark out here and he wanted to get in to the friendliness and the warmth and the peaceful, familiar security, but he didn't dare go around to the door because he knew if he did the vision would vanish and he'd never find it again.

He scratched and beat at the window but his fingers made no sound, he tried to shout but his cries were only strangled whispers and the old lady sat and rocked and talked to the big gray cat and never turned her head.

The fire seemed to be flaring up suddenly, it was filling the whole room—a monstrous furnace; it shouldn't do that he knew, but the old lady didn't seem to mind sitting there rocking amid the flames—and it was so nice and warm. The fire kept growing and swelling though—soon it burst through the window and engulfed him. Too hot. Too hot.

Johnny swam hazily back to consciousness with an aching head and thick mouth. He saw that he had drifted clear of his protective screen somehow and the sun beat full on him. With clumsy, fumbling hands that seemed to belong to somebody else he managed the air valve; the increased oxygen reviving him enough to find the pedals and jet erratically about till he gained the shadow once more.

Now he was entering upon the worst phase of the living nightmare. Awake, the doubts and fears of his position tormented him; wearied, he feared to sleep, yet continually he found himself nodding only to jerk awake with that suddenness that is like a physical blow. Each one of these awakenings took away a little more of his self-control till he was reduced to near hysteria, muttering abstractly, sometimes whimpering like a lost child; now seized with a feverish concern for his air supply. He would at one instant cut it down to a dangerous minimum, then, remembering the near disaster of his first attempt at economy, frantically turn it up till he was in danger of an oxygen jag. In a moment he would forget and start all over again.

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In addition, he was now realizing bitterly what he had subconsciously denied to himself for so long, that they had found Able Jake and drawn the obvious conclusion. That he had been obliterated or blown out through the hull by the collision without warning or preparation. That he was undoubtedly dead if not vaporized altogether and, as they must, considering the expense of a probably fruitless search, abandon him.

There came the moment when Johnny accepted this in full. This was directly after the time when, sliding down the long hill to the perigee of his orbit, he turned on his radio and cried for help. It was a bare hundred miles or less to that wonderful world below, but there was the Heaviside layer, and the weak signals beat but feebly against it. All that seeped through by some instant's freak of transmission was a fragment of incoherent babble to reach the uncomprehending ear of an Arkansas ham and give that gentleman uneasy sleep for some time to come.

He kept calling mechanically even after perigee was long past, praying for an answer from the powerful transmitters below or from a searching ship. But when there was no slightest whisper in his phones or answering flare among the stars, Johnny came to the end of faith. Even of awareness, for his own ears did not register the transition of his calls to an insane howling of intermixed pleas, threats, condemnation—a sewer flood of foul vilification against those who had betrayed him.

Bright and beautiful, Earth rolled blandly beneath him, the sun was a remote impersonal thing and the stars mocked silently. After a while the radio carried only the agonized sounds of a man who had forgotten how to cry and must learn again. There were times after this when he observed incuriously a parade of mind pictures, part memory, part pure hallucination and containing nothing of reason; other times when he thought not at all. The sun appeared to dwindle, retreating and fading far away into a remote place where there were no stars at all. It became a feeble candle, guttered unsteadily a moment and suddenly winked out. Abruptly Johnny was asleep.

He opened his eyes and surveyed the scene with an oddly calm and dispassionate curiosity, not that he expected to find his status changed in any way but because he had awakened with a queer sense of unreality about the whole business. He knew vaguely that he'd had a bad time in the last few hours but could remember little of the details save that it was like one of those fragmentary nightmares in the instant between sleeping and waking when it is difficult to divide the fact from the dream.

Now he must reassure himself that this facet of it was real and when he had done so, realized with a faint shock that he was no longer afraid.

Fear, it seemed, had by its incessant pressure dulled its own edge. The acceptance of inevitable death was still there, but now it seemed to have little more significance than the closing of a book at the last page.

It is possible that Johnny was not wholly sane at this point, but there is no one to witness this and Johnny, not given to introspection at any time, felt no spur to self-analysis, beyond a brief mental registration of the fact.

So he made his visual survey, saw that it was real, nothing had changed; noted with mild surprise that he'd somehow remained in the shadow of his screen this time. He had lost track of time entirely but the suit's air supply telltale was in the yellow indicating about two hours more or less to go on breathing. In quick succession he reviewed the events, accepted the probability of the abandoned search without a qualm and made his decision. There was no need to wait about any longer.

A quick flip of the helmet lock, a moment's unpleasantness perhaps, and out. As for the rest—a spaceman needs no sanctified ground, the incorruptible vault of space is as good a place as any and perhaps the more fitting for one of the first to travel its ways.

Well then—quickly. Johnny raised his hands.

But still—

Man has his pride and his vanity. Johnny, though not necessarily prone to inflated valuation of himself still has just enough vanity left to resent the thought of this anonymous snuffing out in the dark. There should be, he thought, at least some outward evidence of his passing, something like—a flare of light perhaps, that would in effect say, if only to one solitary star gazer: "Here at this position, at this instant, Johnny Melland, Spaceman, had his time."

The whimsy persisted. Johnny, casting about mentally for some means to the end recalled the thermite bomb for the WD cylinder and was hauling himself in to it when he remembered the charges for this lot had gone up with Sally Uncle One two days before. But now he'd actually touched the metal cylinder and, as though the brief contact had completed some obscure mental circuit, the mad idea was conceived, flared up into an irrepressible brilliance and exploded in a harsh bark of laughter.

One last push to his luck then, hardly worse than a gambler's last chip except that the consequences of failure were somewhat more certain. Either way he'd have what he wanted—survival or, in the brief incandescence of friction's heat, a declaration of his passing.

A waste disposal cylinder will carry the equivalent of about three tons of refuse. Its motor is designed to decelerate that mass by 1,075 mph in order to allow it to assume a descending orbit.

Less the greater part of the customary mass, it should be considerably more effective, and since he was already in what constituted a descent path, but for a few miles and a little extra velocity, there would not be the long fall afterwards to pick up what he'd lost.

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From there on his plan entered the realm of pure hypothesis; except for the broad detail the rest depended on luck and whatever freakish conditions might arise in his favor during the operation. These, too, would be beyond his control and any move to take advantage of them would have to be instinctive, providing he was in any shape to do so.

The tendency to gnaw worriedly at a thousand disturbing possibilities drowned quickly in a rapidly rising sense of reckless abandon that possessed him. The prospect of positive action of any sort served to release any tension left in him and almost gayly he moved to set his plan in action.

He jimmied the timer on the rocket motor so it would fire to the last drop. The string of ribbon chutes he reeled in hand over hand stuffing it into the cylinder, discovering in the process why the chute Section hands at Base wore that harried look. The mass of slithering, incompressible white-and-yellow ribbon and its shrouds resisted him like a live thing; in the end Johnny managed to bat and maul the obstreperous stuff down the length of the tank. Even so, it filled it to within a couple of inches of the opening.

Now he cut off a length of his life line and attached one end to the spring-loaded trigger release on the motor control, leaving enough to trail the length of the cylinder and double back inside when he wanted it. He blessed the economically minded powers that insisted on manual firing control on these one-shot units instead of the complex radio triggers beloved of the technical brains.

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Making fast to the chutes was a major problem but eventually he managed a makeshift harness of the remainder of the safety line. He wound it awkwardly around himself with as many turns as possible, each returned again and again through, the ring at the end of the master shroud.

By now he was casting anxious glances at the Earth below, aware that he must have passed apogee several minutes before and that not more than some twenty minutes were left before the low point of this swing would be near. He was grimly aware also that it must be this time or not at all. The air telltale was well through the yellow band and the next possible chance after this one was an hour's time away, when conditions inside the suit would be getting pretty sticky.

Jockeying the unwieldy cylinder into line of flight and making it stay there took a lot longer than Johnny counted on. With no other manual purchase than that afforded by his own lesser mass, the job proved almost impossible and he had to use his suit motor. This caused some concern over his meager fuel supply since his plan called for some flat-out jetting later on. In the frantic flurry of bending, twisting, over and under—controlling, the veneer of aplomb began to wear. Johnny was sweating freely by the time he had the cylinder stabilized as best he could judge and had gingerly worked himself into the open end as far as he could against the cushioning mass of ribbon chute. He took the trigger lanyard loosely in hand and craning his neck to see past the bulk of the cylinder he watched and waited.

To the experienced lift pilot there are certain subtle changes in color values over the Earth's surface as one approaches more closely the outer fringe of atmosphere. While braking approaches are auto-controlled, the pilot taking over only after his ship is in atmosphere, the conscientious man makes himself familiar with the "feel" of a visually timed approach—just in case—and Johnny was a good pilot.

Watching Equatorial Africa sliding obliquely towards him Johnny suddenly gave thought to a possible landing spot for the first time. Not that he had any choice but a picture of a cold, wet immersion in any of several possible bodies of water was not encouraging. The suit would probably float but which end first was a matter for conjecture and out of it he would be as badly off for Johnny could not swim a stroke.

Nor had he any clear idea how long it would take to slow down to a vertical drop. Able Jake made a full half swing of the globe to brake down but Able Jake was an ultra-streamlined object with many times the mass and weight of Johnny and his rig; furthermore the ships were controllable to a certain degree while Johnny was not. Beyond the certain knowledge that the effect of the chutes would be quite violent and probably short-lived, the rest was unpredictable.

He tried to shake off gloomy speculation, uneasily aware that much of the carefree confidence of the last hour had deserted him. In a more normal state of mind again he became prey to tension once more, a pounding heart and dry mouth recalling mercilessly the essential frailties of his kind. So, with aching neck and burning eyes he strained for a clear view past the length of the cylinder and—

There! The preliminary to the visual changes, a sudden sweep of distortion over the landscape as his angle of sight through the refracting particles became more shallow. Now was the time he had judged the throat vane gyros should begin their run-up.

He worked the lanyard back carefully, fearful an awkward movement might upset the cylinder's line-up, pulling the trigger lever over to half-cock where the micro switch should complete circuit with the dry power pack. There should be approximately one minute before the major color changes began, which was also the minimum time for gyro run up. Johnny resumed the watching and the waiting.

How long is a minute?

Is it the time it takes the fear-frozen trainee, staring glass-eyed at the fumbled grenade to realize that this one at his feet is a dud?

Or is it the time before the rock-climber, clinging nail and toe to the rock face with the rope snapped suddenly taut, feels it at last slacken and sees the hands gripping safely come into sight?

Perhaps the greenhorn, rifle a-waver, watching the glimpse of tawny color in the veldt-grass and waiting the thunder and the charge, could say.

They'd all be wrong. It's much longer.

Long enough for Johnny to think of a dozen precautions he could have taken, a dozen better ways to rig this or that. Long enough to worry about whether the gyros were really running up as they should. A thousand queries and doubts piled mountainously upward to an almost unbearable peak of tension till suddenly the browns and greens below flashed a shade lighter and it was time, and the savage snap on the lanyard a blessed relief and total committal.

In the few seconds after the firing of the prime and before the busy little timer snapped the valves wide open Johnny managed to slip his toes under the jet pedals to avoid accidental firing. At the same time he braced himself as rigidly as possible with aching arms against the walls of the cylinder.

He saw briefly the flare of the jet reflected off the remnants of his cloud of station stores before deceleration with all its unpleasantness began.

The lip of the cylinder's mouth swept up past his helmet as he was rammed deep into the absorbent mass of ribbon chute. This wasn't a padded contour chair under a mild 3G lift. The chutes took the first shock, but Johnny took the rest the hard way, standing bolt upright.

He found with some surprise his head was right down through the neck ring and inside the suit proper, his arms half withdrawn from the sleeves, knees buckled to an almost unbelievable angle considering the dimensions of the lower case.

He had time to hope fervently the cheap expendable motor wouldn't burn out its throat and send him cart-wheeling through space, or blow the surrounding tanks before the blackout came down.

He came out of it sluggishly, to find the relief from the dreadful pressure almost as stupefying as the deceleration itself. While his conscious mind screamed the urgency of immediate action, his bruised and twisted body answered but feebly. The condition of complete weightlessness and the springy reaction of the ribbon mass was all that allowed him finally to claw himself out of the cylinder to where he could use the suit jet without fear of burning the precious chutes.

He was so tired. His muscles of their own accord seemed to relax intermittently, interfering with the control of his movements. Only the sudden sight of the Earth, transformed by a weird illusion of position from a bright goal to an enormous, distorted thing, looming, apparently, over him with glowing menace, spurred his flagging resolution to frantic activity.

He jetted straight back trailing his string of chutes behind him, then, before the last was free of the cylinder, kicked himself around to assume the original course once more.

At this stage it was no longer possible, even granted the time, to judge visually how near he was to the atmosphere. The uneasy feeling that he must already be brushing the Troposphere jarred his nerve so that he merely gave himself a short flat-out boost in the right direction before spinning bodily one hundred eighty degrees so that he was traveling feet first.

Reflected in the curved helmet face, the string of chutes obediently followed-my-leader around a ragged U-shape, the last—the small pilot-chute trailed limply around as he watched.

There could surely be but a few seconds left before the grand finale. Johnny found he was unconsciously holding his breath, and, as he deliberately inhaled long slow draughts of his already staling air, realized abstractly that he seemed to be attempting to meet his possible end with some degree of dignity if not with resignation, and wondered if he were the exception or the rule.

Possibly, he thought sardonically, because there is so little room for dignity in our living years, and was mildly surprised at an uncharacteristic excursion into the realm of philosophy.

There was a faintly perceptible tug on the harness. It was sustained and now there came a definite strain. Reflected for a moment in the helmet face was a glimpse of the lead chute slowly opening out like a gigantic flower.

Then swiftly, in half a breath the harness coils were tightening about him like steel fingers, the heavy ring at the end of the master shroud clashed against the back of his helmet and began a sickening, thrumming vibration there.

The harness encompassed his torso like a vise but his legs were unsupported and weighed what seemed a thousand tons. He could feel them stretching. Somewhere a coil slipped a fraction. His arms were jerked suddenly upwards and Johnny knew a sensation he'd never believed possible. At the same time his leaden feet crashed down on the jet pedals. For a few, brief, blessed moments the intolerable extension eased a fraction with the firing of the suit jets.



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He cringed mentally from the thought of what was to come and thought hazily: "This is what the rack was like. This is going to be bad, bad, bad!"

It was impossible and Johnny went out with the last drop of fuel.

Somewhere there was a queer coughing sound like wind through a crevice. He strained to identify it but an awful agony swamped him and he fled before it back into the darkness.

And later still a thumping and a rushing, gurgling sound.

Dim, grotesque figures moved about him or swooped and hovered over him. He felt an unreasoning fear of them and tried to shut them out. They were holding him down, hurting him. One was pulling and twisting at his arm. He shouted and swore at it telling it to leave him alone, but it ignored him or didn't seem to hear. There was a sudden dull snapping sound and a little of the pain abated.

The figures flowed together and swirled around like some great oily vortex but never quite left him.

Then there was a time when they separated jerkily and became the hazy but definable figures of men in rough seaman's clothes. Johnny had never heard Breton French before; in his dazed condition the apparently insane gabble might well have been the tongue of another world and gave him little assurance. He hurt so badly and so generally that he could not have determined that he was lying down save for a view of white clouds scudding overhead.

Some of the men were holding up what looked like a crumpled parody of a man. He recognized it without surprise as the soaking remains of his spacesuit, battered and with tattered shreds of outer cover and insulation hanging in festoons.

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A sharp, bearded face shot into focus abruptly, waving a hypodermic needle. It spoke English and observed passionately either to Johnny or itself that: "Name of a Spanish cow! What is it in men that they must abuse themselves so? Now here is one who was both squeezed and stretched alternately as well as hammered, dehydrated and almost asphyxiated, is it not? This will bear watching. It is alive but there will have to be X-rays in profusion."

It danced long sensitive fingers over the welts and bruises and commented bluntly that it was well the fishermen had returned his arms and legs into their sockets before he fully regained consciousness. It muttered and clucked to itself as it used the hypo which Johnny could not feel. "Formidable!"

The pleasant drowsiness came down just as he was identifying the queer smell as ozone, brine and good fresh air.

After a while they moved him to a small hospital in an upcoast town, where he slept much, suffered not a little and, even waking, viewed the world incuriously through drug-laden eyes. Finally they allowed him to waken fully and the sharp-faced doctor, together with half a dozen others from various parts of the world decided that, after all, he seemed to be surviving.

Johnny lay and itched intolerably in the cast that covered him from nape to thigh and listened to the bustling of the elderly nursing sister who, good soul, having never been more than ten miles from her town in her life, reminded him that it wanted but two days to Christmas and opined that: "Such a tragedy for M'sieu. To be so far from home!"

Johnny smiled at the ceiling, not daring to laugh yet, and sniffed at the salt sea air with its undertone of rank seaweed and gloried in it; even a chance whiff of that particular cigarette tobacco that only a Frenchman can appreciate. He thought that here, as across the water, night and day followed each other in their proper order and the ground was a solid thing beneath the feet.

Why—he could never be closer.



Transcriber's Notes and Errata

This e-text was produced from "Astounding Science Fiction, December 1955". Extensive research did not uncover any

evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

One illustration has been moved to its appropriate place in the text.

The original page numbers from the magazine have been retained.

A few typographical errors have been corrected.

Punctuation has been left as is.

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