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Title: Spacewrecked on Venus

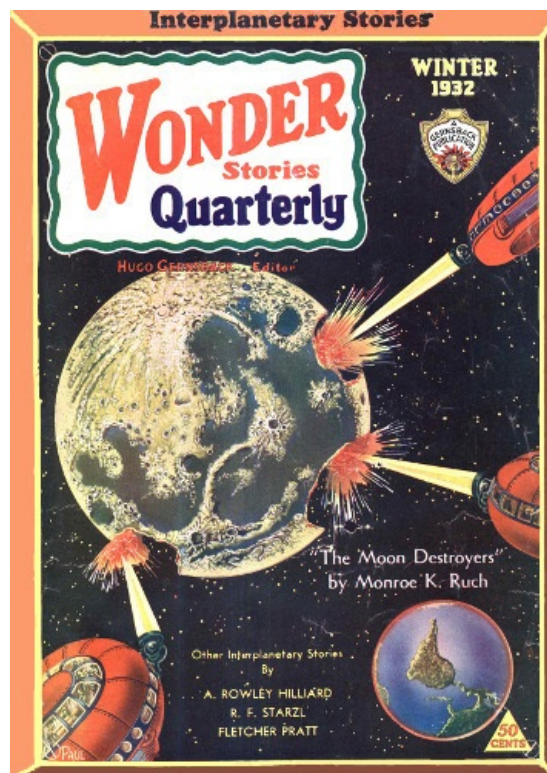
Author: Neil R. Jones

Release date: October 9, 2012 [EBook #40993]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

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## Spacewrecked on Venus

By NEIL R. JONES

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**A beam of electricity leaped from the ship. Instantly shafts of light spread from the nearest projectile to the ones on either side of it.**



**NEIL R. JONES**

Interplanetary commerce, if and when it begins, will be fraught with all of the dangers that accompany pioneering expeditions. There will be the terrible climatic conditions on other worlds to be faced, strange beasts and plants; and perhaps desperate and greedy men. That was the case when every new land was opened on earth and it may be expected to be true when we conquer the solar planets.

Mr. Jones understands these things well. His vivid imagination, his sense of a good story and his knowledge of what may be expected upon other worlds combine to make this a novel and exciting yarn. And, as is always desired, it comes to a smashing finish with a surprising ending.

His scientific weapons are quite novel, but so realistically does he portray them, that they strike one as being quite possible and likely to be used at some future time.

I stood looking from the space ship into the dense fog banks which rolled about us. We were descending through the dense cloud blanket of Venus. How near we actually were to the ground I did not know. Nothing but an unbroken white haze spread mistily, everywhere I looked.

With jarring suddenness, a terrific shudder throbbled the length of the *C-49*, rattling the loose articles on the desk nearby. The dictatyper, with which I had lately been composing a letter, crashed violently to the floor. I reeled unsteadily to the door. It was nearly flung open in my face.

"Hantel!"

Captain Cragley steadied himself on the threshold of my room. The captain and I had become intimate friends during the trip from the earth. In his eyes I saw concern.

"What's wrong?" I queried.

"Don't know yet! Come—get out of there, man! We may have to use the emergency cylinder!"

I followed Cragley. The crew, numbering seven, were gathered in the observation chamber. Most of the passengers were there too.

The *C-49* carried twelve passengers, all men, to the Deliphon settlement of Venus. In the earlier days of space travel, few women dared the trip across space.

Several of the crew worked feverishly at the controls above the instrument board.

"What's our altitude?" demanded Cragley.

"Fifteen thousand feet!" was the prompt reply. "Our drop is better than a hundred feet a second!"

Worried wrinkles creased the kindly old face of Captain Cragley. He debated the issue not one moment.

"Into the emergency cylinder—everybody!"

Herding the passengers ahead of them, Cragley's men entered a compartment shaped like a long tube, ending in a nose point. When we were buckled into a spiral of seats threading the cylinder, Cragley pulled the release lever. Instantly, the cylinder shot free of the doomed *C-49*. For a moment we dropped at a swifter pace than the abandoned ship. After that, our speed of descent was noticeably decreased.

Peering at the proximity detector, Cragley announced that we were quite safe from a collision. The *C-49* was far below us and dropping fast.

"No danger now," he assured the passengers. "We'll come down like a feather. Then all we have to do is radio Deliphon to send out a ship for us."

Cragley was equal to the situation. In this year of 2342, when the days of pioneer space flying were commencing to fade into history, it required capable men to cope with interplanetary flight. If Cragley brought his crew and passengers safely through this adversity and also salvaged the valuable cargo of the *C-49*, it was another feather in his cap.

Quentin, second to Cragley in command, labored over the sending apparatus. Quentin looked up at his superior officer with an uneasy expression. The captain was quick to sense trouble.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't like the looks of this," was Quentin's reply. "The sender refuses to function properly. I can do nothing with it."

Cragley's face bore a troubled look. He stepped to the side of his subordinate for a hasty inspection of the radio sender.

"The receiver plate doesn't light up, either," said Quentin. "Looks to me as though someone has been tampering with this."

In their spiral of seats, the passengers looked silently and gravely upon the cylinder base where Cragley and his staff were gathered over the apparatus. A dull glow of cloudy light coming in through the transparent interstices of the descending cylinder softened and counteracted the glow of the radium lights. An intangible feeling of depression hung in the air.

"Elevation, five hundred feet!" announced one of the crew from his position at the altitude dial.

"Make a landing," ordered Cragley. "We can't be very far from where the *C-49* fell. If there's enough of the ship left, we may be able to discover the cause of this accident."

Down through the lush vegetation, the cylinder felt its way, dropping very slowly. Finally it came to rest on a knoll.

"How far are we from the ship?" queried the captain.

"About seventeen hundred feet south of it, I'd say."

"We'll go outside and get organized. We've got to get that platinum shipment off the *C-49* and get into communication with headquarters at Deliphon somehow. The proximity detector tells us we're over two hundred miles from there."

One of the passengers spoke up with a suggestion. "Can't we go the rest of the way in this? You can send back for what's left of the ship. I've an important reason for arriving in Deliphon quickly. If—"

"Not a chance," cut in Cragley, both amused and annoyed. "The cylinder wouldn't take us anywhere. All the cylinder is good for is an emergency descent. It has no driving power."

Preparations were made for a trip to the wrecked space ship.

"Might I go with you and the men, Captain?" I ventured.

"Sure, Hantel, come along! I'll have to leave part of the crew here with the passengers and the cylinder, so I'm glad to have a few volunteers."

"Count on me, then," another of the passengers spoke up.

I recognized him as Chris Brady. He was a man about my own age, possibly younger, perhaps in his late twenties. Brady and I had become friends during the trip, having spent many hours together. This was my second trip to the clouded planet. Brady had made many trips to Venus, spending considerable time among the colonies. I had learned much about the man which had interested me.

Our party consisted of Cragley, Brady, three of the crew, four other passengers and myself. Well armed, we set out through the yellow jungle in search of the remains of the *C-49*. Quentin insisted that it was not far away according to the proximity detector which was especially attuned to the bulk and metal composition of the space ship.

Progress was difficult in spots, and we found it necessary to hack our way through lush growths of vegetation, taking numerous detours around interlaced verdure. We were out of sight of the cylinder almost immediately.

One of the passengers who had volunteered to accompany us complained at the prospects of becoming lost. Cragley calmed the man's anxiety with a brief explanation of the directometer he carried. It was an elaborate perfection of the old compass. On a square plate, our position was always designated in relation to the *C-49*. By telescopic condensation of the field, Cragley was capable of bringing Deliphon on the instrument. It was well over two hundred miles beyond us.

"If Quentin doesn't have that televisior fixed by the time we get back, we are in a jam."

"There's the ship!"

We looked where the pointing arm of Brady designated. The wrecked space ship lay imbedded in the murky waters of a swamp, fully one-third of its bulk out of sight. Above, the torn and tangled mass of vegetation bore witness to the rapid descent of the craft. Mighty branches were torn away from giant trees. The ship itself was enwrapped by interlaced creepers which it had ripped loose from the upper foliage.

We waded through warm, stagnant water which teemed with marine life. We were halfway to the side of the *C-49* when a cry from behind startled me into action. I turned and stared into the gaping jaws of a terrifying serpent wriggling through the shallow water on many legs. Several electric pistols flashed almost simultaneously. The loathsome monster turned belly up, floating dead upon the surface of the swamp water.

From then on, we advanced more cautiously. Coming alongside the crushed hull of the interplanetary liner, we made an inspection of its position. The space ship lay nearly right side up, the decks slanting a bit sharply to one side. Upon the outer deck of the *C-49*, Cragley scratched his head and looked the situation over.

"Not so bad as I'd feared," was his comment. "Wouldn't be much else but junk here if it hadn't been for the jungle breaking the fall." Cragley pointed upward to the strong barrier of interlaced foliage. "I hope to discover just why it was we fell."

"Wasn't there an explosion?" I inquired. "There was a great shock just before you opened the door to my stateroom. For a moment I thought we'd struck the planet."

"Yes—there was an explosion," Cragley replied, a bit reluctant to voice the admission. "It occurred somewhere in the mechanism operating our radium repellors. That's why the ship started falling. Its weight was left partly free against the gravity of Venus. We had to leave so quickly there was no time for inspection."

One by one, we descended into the wrecked *C-49*. In that part of the ship which lay lowest below water level, tiny streams of dirty water trickled between wrenched plates, forming pools of water which rose slowly about us. Cragley and his men inspected the radium repellors. They whispered strangely among themselves. A steely glint shone resolutely in Captain Cragley's eyes.

"There's devilry been done here," he stated fiercely. "The *C-49* was deliberately wrecked by someone on board!"

Heavy silence followed his words. One of the crew returned from the vault room. He announced to the captain that the *C-49's* shipment of platinum was intact as they had left it. Captain Cragley turned the matter over in his mind. He was an astute man. Having smelled out a conspiracy, he was planning the best way he knew to thwart it. The platinum itself presented an obvious motive. Finally he spoke.

"You passengers are to go up into the observation room and wait for us. Under no condition are you to leave the room and wander about the ship."

Captain Cragley's orders were obeyed to the letter.

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In the observation chamber, Brady asked my opinion of the discovery Captain Cragley had made. "What's up, anyways?"

I shook my head. Brady was plainly nervous. Others of the passengers who had accompanied us shared his apprehension. Fully a half hour had passed and still Cragley and his men put in no appearance. Outside, myriads of life flew, crawled and swam about the damaged craft.

Presently, Cragley and his three men emerged from the lower levels of the *C-49*. They presented an uncouth spectacle bedraggled as they were with grime and dirty water. In their arms they carried many small boxes. Though small, each box was extremely heavy, being loaded with a fortune in platinum bars.

"We'll return to the cylinder," said Cragley. "There's important work to be done."

Once more we trudged back through the swamp and jungle, following the trail we had made. Several times, huge shadowy forms flapped on the wing overhead, but there was no attack. Back at the cylinder, Captain Cragley ordered every man out into the open. He drew their attention.

"There's serious business here," he said slowly, his eyes darting from face to face. "I want the man, or men who wrecked the *C-49*!"

The captain snapped out the final words. Surprise, terror and alarm registered among the passengers, but Cragley evidently saw no admissions of guilt.

"The man who is responsible for our present condition owns this!" exclaimed Cragley suddenly. From behind him where he had been concealing it, he drew forth a square box studded with knobs and dials. "I know which one of you owns this. It was found hidden in his room by one of my men."

Again Cragley watched for a betraying face. At the time, I doubted Cragley's statement that he knew who owned the box. If he knew, I asked myself, why was it he did not come right out and make an accusation with whatever evidence he held? But that was not Cragley's way.

"We've also uncovered his two accomplices," continued the captain in cool, level tones. "There is proof which points definitely to them."

He paused. No one spoke. The silence of death had descended upon the entire group. For a moment my scalp prickled from the high tension of nerves which hung over this episode. Cragley's burning eyes made every man of us a criminal.

"The penalty for this offense is—death!" Cragley hurled out the final word with dramatic suddenness.

There was a stealthy movement among those who stood near the cylinder.

"Drop it!" snapped Quentin. "Or I'll bore you!"

One of the passengers, Davy by name, dropped an electric pistol and raised his hands.

"Raynor!" thundered Cragley, pointing a denunciatory finger at another of the space ship's passengers. "Let's have an end to this shamming! Step out there with Davy! Give up your weapons!"

With the attitude of a fatalist, Raynor stepped forward, allowing Quentin to disarm him.

"And now for the owner of this little box," said Cragley, a cryptic promise in his tones. "This radio-electrifier excited an electric explosion of static in the radium repellers. The reason, I suppose, was prompted by designs on the shipment of platinum. Will the owner of this ingenious little invention step up—or do I have to call his name?"

No one moved.

"Just as I thought, Brady, you have the nerve to bluff this thing out to the finish!"

The face of Chris Brady grew pale. He appeared stunned. Those nearest him stepped back in surprise. Davy and Raynor were the only ones who did not seem taken aback by the revelation.

"But I've never seen that thing before," Brady protested. "Why, I—"

"Not a chance of wiggling your way out of this, Brady! We've got the goods on you sure enough! Will you kindly explain how you intended making a getaway with the platinum?"

"I'm innocent!" exclaimed Brady heatedly. "I don't know these men!"

"This contrivance was found hidden in your room, Brady! Communications between you and these men were also found!"

Chris Brady fell silent. The evidence was overwhelming. Cragley turned to the other culprits.

"Have either of you protests to make?"

"We know when we're caught," growled Raynor, shooting a swift glance at Brady. "You've got the goods on us. We're not squawking."

"You were taking orders from this man?" the captain inquired, pointing at Brady.

Both Davy and Raynor replied in the affirmative, adding further proof against Brady.

"Known him very long?"

"Don't know him at all," replied Raynor, "only that he's the boss."

"We've been taking orders from him since we left the earth," supplemented Davy. "He had us kill the radio equipment a little while before he set off the explosion."

"And how did you expect to get away with the platinum?"

"He's the only one of us who knows," replied Davy, nodding his head at Brady.

"Brady, I suppose there'll be another ship along pretty soon—some of your friends from Deliphon. Now I see it all. Well, they won't find us, that's all. We won't be here."

"I've no idea that...."

"Pretty thorough, weren't you?" snapped Cragley. "But you slipped up a few notches! Thought there wouldn't be much left of the ship! Too careless, Brady! You three men are sentenced to death!"

"A trial!" screamed Brady. "We're entitled to a trial!"

"Not under the new interplanetary laws! This is far worse than mutiny, and you're on Venus now! You've had your trial!"

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## CHAPTER II

Grim retribution overhung the condemned men. It promised swift justice. Captain Cragley was the law. He dealt out the penalty according to the code governing interplanetary navigation.

"We must get away from this vicinity in a hurry!" he informed Quentin. "You can bet your last coin there'll be a ship around pretty soon to pick up the platinum and these three men! If there's a battle, we haven't a chance in our present condition!"

"Where'll we go?" asked Quentin. "Somewhere and hide?"

"We'll head for Deliphon. It's a long, hard tramp, but it's our only chance. Get things ready to leave. Pack everything we'll want to take with us. Just before we start, we'll have this execution over with."

Quentin immediately apprised the crew and passengers of the *C-49* of Captain Cragley's intentions. He stated the fact that brigands were expected shortly, telling of what they would do to luckless passengers who fell into their hands. A second expedition was sent to the *C-49* for food stores and various articles it was deemed necessary to carry along on the march.

With the usual brief ceremony required in such proceedings, Brady, Davy and Raynor were lined up before a shallow grave which had hastily been dug for them. Five of the crew stood at attention, electric guns half raised. Cragley, in a crisp, steady voice, gave the orders. The three men, white of face, stared fascinated at their executioners—into the face of death.

"Ready!"

The men of the *C-49* tensed themselves. Brady no longer expostulated on his pleas of innocence. He faced his fate like a man.

"Aim!"

The pistols were raised. Five left eyes closed. Sights were drawn. The interval preceding the fatal word seemed endless. At the last moment, it was apparent that Brady was unequal to the strain. He closed his eyes. His body swayed.

"Fire!"

Five blue streaks shot noiselessly from the weapons. The three men stiffened and fell—into the cavity dug for them. Their lives had been forfeited for their crimes. Dirt was shoveled upon them. No longer would fliers of the space lanes fear them. But there were other outlaws.

Captain Cragley, his crew of six, and nine passengers, set out in the direction of Deliphon. The trip promised to be perilous and fraught with danger, as well as grueling and full of hardships. Though I had been to Venus once before, I knew little of the yellow jungles. My time on the clouded world had been spent in the colonies.

Our first day of tramping took us through lush jungles and dismal swamps. The ground was fairly level. Occasionally we came to rough, rocky outcrops which protruded above ground. These we

invariably circled. Several times we found it necessary to ford rivers and skirt lakes. Our progress was very slow. Quentin prophesied we would be on the march for fully twenty rotations of Venus unless we struck the comparatively clear country which Cragley was sure existed between us and Deliphon.

Fearsome beasts menaced us at all times. We were ever on our guard, and they usually fell electrocuted before completing their charges among us. Even so, we experienced many narrow escapes. Many of these monsters were larger than the prehistoric dinosaurs which once roamed the earth. They were difficult to kill, and it required the maximum voltage of our electric guns to bring them down.

Clothes torn, bodies bruised and scratched, we presented a sorry spectacle. Most of us felt the way we looked, but Cragley's unquenched determination spurred us on toward Deliphon. He was anxious to put a good distance between us and the abandoned cylinder. He feared the brigands, friends of the three who had been executed. Though Brady had not admitted the claim, the captain was certain a shipload of the outlaws were scheduled to show up for the platinum and their comrades.

At night, a camp was set up. Cragley argued against lighting a campfire, asserting that it would prove a magnet to the wandering brigands he believed were in search of us. Quentin, employing smooth diplomacy, made it clear to his superior officer that a campfire promised to safeguard us from prowling beasts. Quentin cited the fact that it was a common sight for a night cruiser of Venus to look down upon fully a dozen or more campfires of the troglodytes.

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Guards were posted during the night. It was well. The fires held the nocturnal creatures at bay. Whenever one of them did muster enough courage to charge, it was revealed in the firelight and shot down. Several times I awoke to see a bellowing monster crash in death at the edge of our camp. Sleeping, we found was a fitful task. The first night proved the worst.

Next morning, we plodded on again through the thick, yellow jungle. The country became a bit hilly, yet none the less wooded. In the valleys between, we often found swamps. While approaching one of these swamps, we noticed a gray mist hanging over the stagnant pools. It appeared not unlike the steaming vapors we had previously encountered. One of the crew, plunging ahead of us to gauge the depth of the water and steer us clear of treacherous, clinging mud, became enveloped in the mist. Almost immediately his complexion turned black, and he fell strangling in throes of death. Another of the crew ran forward to drag back his comrade, but Captain Cragley warned him back.

"He's too far gone! There's nothing we can do for him!"

"What is it?"

"A poisonous swamp gas! There's enough poison in one breath to kill twenty men!"

Instinctively, we recoiled from the milky haze.

"How are we to cross?" asked Quentin.

"Put on the space helmets!" ordered Cragley. "That stuff can't hurt you unless you breathe it!"

To prove his words, Cragley donned his space helmet and advanced into the mist. Looking back through the transparent facing of the helmet, he beckoned to us. Previously, many of the passengers had rebelled against Cragley's persistence that they carry the added weight of the space helmets. It had seemed utterly useless. Now, as they moved unharmed through the deadly fumes, they thanked his foresight.

We carried the dead body of the luckless man, who had saved us through his unfortunate discovery, to the top of the next hill where burial was made.

The second night, it came my turn to share guard duty with one of the crew while the others slept. The fires were plentifully fueled with dry branches and stalks. Fire material was piled in reserve. Grinstead, my companion watcher, went his rounds while I attended the fire, keeping the flames well supplied.

Protected by an embankment erected near a rocky ledge, the balance of our party slept. My eyes fell upon the little mound of boxes which contained the precious metal. Cragley and Quentin lay on each side of the platinum shipment. Not since we had commenced the march had they let it out of their sight or reach.

"Hantel!" It was Grinstead's voice. "Come here a moment!"

Hastily I ran to his side. He was stooped over a mark on the ground far to one side of our camp just within circle of the firelight. Mutely he pointed to a footprint—the footprint of a six-toed man.

"Troglodytes!" I exclaimed.

Grinstead nodded. "Fresh, too! Think we'd better awaken Cragley?" he asked. "These cave men don't seem bad when they're peaceful, but if they get going—they're devils!"

I stared back into the alarmed eyes of Grinstead and pondered the matter. I was about to voice an opinion, leaving it up to Grinstead to do as he pleased, when a startled cry rang out from the direction of the sleepers.

Instantly, everything was confusion and uproar. Sleek, naked bodies prowling about our equipment flashed out of sight into the jungle. The whole camp came awake, exclamations and profanity mingling with the weird cries of the troglodytes. Recovering from my surprise, I fired a shot at one of the rapidly disappearing cave men, but the flickering firelight distorted my aim.

Then occurred the most amazing feature of the whole affair. A man, fully dressed, ran out of sight with the troglodytes, melting into the shadows of the surrounding jungle. Cragley ran up beside me and saw him too. He was out of sight before either of us had a chance to fire. At first, I had thought the man to be one of our party, but his flight with the cave men disproved the assumption.

"Wonder what the idea is?" spluttered Cragley.

"Our equipment," said Quentin, pointing to the food stores and other articles the cave men had hastily disarranged. "They came to steal!"

"But the man!" I insisted.

"A renegade!"

Cragley shook his head. "It's queer," he said. "I don't know what to make of it."

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An examination of our equipment proved we had suffered few losses. Several boxes of synthetic food were gone, and one of the crew had lost his electric pistol. Aside from these thefts, nothing else appeared to be missing. Cragley tripled the guards, and the rest went back to sleep once more. Nothing else occurred during that night. I was unable to get the fleeing renegade out of my mind. There was something familiar about the figure as I had seen it revealed in the glare of the firelight just before the savages disappeared in the jungle.

The thefts of the food and pistol were logical enough in view of the fact that the troglodytes had stolen them, but, guided by the man, why had they neglected stealing the platinum? Evidently, they were unaware of its presence.

Murky morning suffused the perpetually clouded sky, and once more we pushed on toward our goal, distant Deliphon—so near and yet so far. Much to the relief of everyone, we came out of the jungle into a comparatively open country. High grasses grew about us, but the going was much easier than we had experienced while in the jungle. The land before us was a bit rolling and hilly. Leafy copses dotted the landscape as far as the eye might reach. In the open, the danger from lurking beasts was at a minimum. Our hopes rose higher.

It was around noon when the space ship from the south cruised into view above us. Cragley viewed it in consternation.

"The brigands! Now we're up against it!"

For a moment, pandemonium reigned among the frightened passengers. All had plans, each one trying to put his own into force at once. Out of the chaos, Captain Cragley gathered order.

"Head for the bushes!" he cried. "We're all armed! If they come too close, let them have it!"

The assurance in Cragley's voice I knew was faked. Like him, I realized the desperate odds which confronted us. The ship was high above. We had plenty of time to scurry for cover before it dropped lower. Cragley and Quentin arranged us to the best advantage, and we waited for the initiative of the outlaws of Venus.

The ship descended several hundred feet away. Our retreat into the bushes had been carefully watched. Several men left the craft and came slowly, uncertainly, toward our position.

"Stop where you are!" snapped Cragley from his place of concealment.

"Come across wi' the metal!" shouted one of them in a high pitched voice. "An' get outa there—or get riddled!"

Cragley's reply was a blue spurt from the muzzle of his pistol. The distance was much too far for accurate firing, but the charge went dangerously close. The outlaws immediately turned tail and ran for their craft. We waited for their next act, knowing that the battle had only commenced.

The space ship shot skyward, circling our wide clump of bushes. The survivors of the *C-49* tensed themselves for a destructive bombardment from above. It did not come. Captain Cragley was plainly surprised. He was aware that the outlaw ship carried instant death if they chose to use it.

The craft hovered some two hundred feet above us. Cruising slowly in a circle, it suddenly dropped four objects well outside our improvised stronghold. The projectiles were shaped like torpedoes. The explosions which were expected never came. The projectiles stood straight up from the ground, their front ends imbedded deeply. It was all a strange procedure. Cragley was



nonplussed.

"They probably contain explosives," ventured Quentin, answering the question he knew stood out in the captain's mind.

"I'm not so sure of that," said Cragley.

Meanwhile, I had been doing some rapid thinking. Anxiously, I watched the ship above us, keeping myself partially screened from view of any sniper who might be looking down. I turned to the captain, a wild plan outlined in my mind.

"Let me go out there," I offered. "I can——"

"Not on your life!" he exclaimed, placing a restraining hand upon my arm. "It's death to go out there!"

"It's death to remain," I assured him earnestly.

"But not definitely certain," he maintained. "For some reason or other they're holding off from us. We have an advantage of some kind, but damned if I know what it is."

"Look!" cried Quentin.

He pointed to three of the four projectiles which were visible from where we lay. They were glowing strangely with intense light. A jagged beam of electricity leaped out from the airship. Instantly iridescent shafts of light spread from the nearest projectile to the ones on either side of it. The shafts made a flashing display, crooked, forked and darting.

"Lightning bolts!" exclaimed Cragley. "We're surrounded by a fence of them!"

"Penned in—like rats in a trap!"

"What will they do now?"

"Hard to tell. Probably pick us off one by one at their leisure. They seem to be going to a lot of unnecessary trouble for no reason at all."

Three sharp blasts of sound issued from the outlaw ship. A pause, and then followed three more. I watched Cragley to see what action, if any, he would take. He seemed undecided. I began to grow uneasy.

"Not a chance of breaking through that screen of electricity," said Quentin. "They got us right where they want to keep us."

"But why?"

Quentin shook his head. "If it was just the platinum, they could destroy every one of us, then come in here and take it."

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## CHAPTER III

Weird figures suddenly burst the walls of flaming death. They were outlaws attired in strange accoutrements. A series of metal rings surrounded them, connected to their bodies with spokes. The electrical discharges darted all over the rings. As they came closer, we discovered that they were not surrounded by separate rings but with a continuous spiral which narrowed together at the top of the head. The other end dragged on the ground.

"Electric resistors of some kind!" muttered Cragley whose face wore a hopeless expression. "They walked right through those lightning bolts!"

Quentin aimed his pistol and fired at one of the slowly advancing figures. The spiral glowed faintly. The outlaw continued his approach.

"There goes our last chance!" I cried. "We might just as well toss up the sponge!"

Cragley was thinking fast. It was unlike him to give up without a fight. But what was he to do when his weapons had been shorn of their force, leaving him utterly helpless before the superior strength of the brigands.

Several figures rushed from the bushes. They were panic-stricken passengers. In alarm, despite the warning cry the captain hurled at them, they rushed straight past the advancing figures with their encumbering spirals. Frightened, bewildered, and hemmed in by the play of lightning, they ran directly in the path of the electric fence. The crackling bolts enfolded three of them before the fourth became startled out of his madness, retreating from the flashing death.

One of the spiral clad figures turned and regarded the frightened man for a moment. Raising his electric pistol, he fired, and the passenger from the ill-fated *C-49* joined his companions who had futilely rushed the electric barrier.

A voice from the space ship of the brigands suddenly gave out an order. The voice came from a

speaker and was many times amplified.

"Crew and passengers of the *C-49*—come out in the open. Bring the platinum with you. Keep away from the electric fence unless you wish to die. Come out—or we shall come in and hunt you down."

The spiralled figures inside the fence had stopped at sound of the voice and were waiting for us to comply with the order from the space ship. More of the brigands in their electric resistors were advancing through the lightning bolts which crackled noisily. The powerful voltage danced and played upon the spirals, disappearing into the ground.

Cragley paused, undecided. Lines of broken resolve creased his face. Previously, he had remained strong and stubborn in the face of overwhelming adversity when chances were slim. There now remained not even the slimmest of chances, and stubborn courage yielded to reason.

"I guess the game's up, Quentin." He turned to regard his under officer in speculation.

Quentin waited for his captain's orders. Again came the voice from the outlaw craft in its strident tones. They were tinged with a touch of impatience.

"Show yourselves inside of one minute, or else be executed at once! Unless——"

"Hold out!" cried a new voice from the speaker, breaking in upon the first voice. "You have friends on——"

Then came sounds of scuffling. To our ears came imprecations and curses.

"Don't go out there!" warned the second voice in laboring gasps. "Stay——"

With a sudden snap, the speaker was cut off. Nothing more was heard. For a moment the lightning bolts comprising the electric fence flashed out—then reappeared. A few seconds later they disappeared once more, returning shortly to flicker in a peculiar manner.

It was evident that some sort of a struggle was taking place inside the outlaw ship. The electric display crackled and sputtered louder than ever. With a sudden, explosive thunder clap, the four terminal posts blew to pieces.

The spiralled figures turned in alarm back toward their craft. One of them, hovering close to our haven of retreat, did not follow his comrades. Instead, he drew forth from a long side pocket a black object. At first glance, it seemed shaped like a pistol. But it was much longer and was proportioned differently.

He waited patiently until several more of the brigands had returned to the ship. Raising the black weapon, he aimed carefully at his fellow outlaws. The man's strange actions amazed me. He was turning upon his own comrades. Several of the brigands fell backward off the deck of the outlaw craft.

Cragley, beside me, was speechless in surprise at the rapid succession of events. The outlaw's strange weapon which emitted no flash had us all wondering. Later, we discovered that it was a radium gun, a new instrument of destruction still in the experimental stage.

"Who is he?" voiced Cragley.

"Can't be the fellow we heard over the speaker," observed Quentin. "This man came through the electric fence with the first ones."

"Somebody over there is pulling for us," insisted Cragley, "and the man with the black gun must be a friend, too."

A flash darted out from the ship, hitting the spiralled figure operating his mystifying weapon. The spiral glowed brilliantly. The man inside the spiral remained unaffected, continuing to manipulate the knob of his weapon. Something went wrong with it, for the outlaw who had so suddenly turned against his friends tinkered with it a moment, then threw it from him in disgust. Meanwhile, the brigands had massed inside the ship.

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With a loud crackling, the speaker's volume was thrown on again. An alarmed voice vibrated in our ears. Above the words came a rattling and banging—also the muffled sound of shouting men.

"Jasper! Come t' the control room! I'm locked in! They're bustin' down the door! Bring that gun o' yours! Hurry, lad!"

Jasper looked upon his broken weapon, hesitated a moment, then picked it up—butt foremost. Seizing it in cudgel fashion, he made for the ship.

"Come on!" roared Cragley exultantly. "Now's our chance!"

We found our numbers reduced to ten, but every one of us leaped forward at Cragley's order, ready to stake everything on the one desperate, fighting chance which had come so unexpectedly. We had nearly overtaken the man we had heard addressed as Jasper when a crackling flame of lightning leaped out at us. A hissing roar smote our ear drums and we were

temporarily dazzled by an intense light. The aim had been too high. The electric charge had gone over our heads. The man in the control room had frustrated the attempt to electrocute us.

Several of the brigands jumped out of the ship to meet us. They still wore the encumbering spirals. A powerful gas of paralyzing effect was shot into our faces. We became as immobile as statues. Jasper, too, was overcome. Instantly, we were divested of our weapons.

The man locked in the control room of the ship had been taken. Whoever these two men were who had championed our cause, their desperate efforts had failed, and now we were all in the same boat. The one who had addressed us over the speaker was led out of the ship and shoved into our group beside his fellow traitor, Jasper. The latter's spiral was promptly torn off.

As the outlaws passed among us, searching for concealed weapons, I felt a cold object thrust cautiously into my hand. My heart thrilled to the contact of a pistol. I held my hand close to my side that none might see. The effects of the gas wore off quickly.

The chief of the brigands, his brutal face set in anger, strode up to the pair who had turned against him during the stress of combat. His dark eyes blazed, and he raised his clutching hands menacingly above the two. Jasper and his friend stared back unabashed, a reckless glitter in their eyes, ready for what might happen.

"I don't know who you are, but I've got suspicions!" snapped the outlaw. "You'll both die horribly—the kind of death we reserve for such as you!"

He turned upon Cragley. "Where's the platinum?" he demanded. "Is it over there?" He pointed to the clump of bushes from which we had lately emerged. "Or have you hidden it?"

"See for yourself!" snapped Cragley.

"When we find it, all tongues will be silenced," he remarked significantly. "If it's hidden, we'll find it just the same. We know how to make tongues wag."

It was a desperate situation. Cragley knew that the time of reckoning had come. The platinum lay in an open space among the bushes where we had taken our stand on seeing the approach of the outlaw ship. I fondled the gun I held out of sight.

Leaving a large force of his men to guard us, the leader of the brigands took the balance of his men and headed for the spot where Captain Cragley had left the boxes of platinum.

"Well, Ben," observed Jasper, philosophically scratching his head, "we did the best we could."

"Which weren't quite enough, Jasper, m'lad."

"Who are you two?" queried Cragley.

Each one looked at the other questioningly. For a moment neither spoke. Then through a rough, unkempt beard, Ben grinned at his companion.

"Might as well tell 'im, Jasper. The game's up."

"We ain't outlaws, that's sure, though we might have made believe so," said Jasper. "He's Ben Cartley, the best pal a man ever had. I'm Jasper Jezzan. We're from the Hayko Unit."

My mouth fell open in surprise. I nearly dropped the gun I had kept concealed in a fold of my clothing. Everyone, at some time or another, had heard of the famous Hayko Unit. The order, established since the perfection of space flying, was comprised of men pledged to keep the space lanes and colonies safe from the lawless element.

"We'll be in the death unit when Ledageree and his men come back," cracked Ben, chuckling at his own grim joke. "Did you plant the platinum, or is it back there?"

"Back there," echoed Cragley dejectedly. "We haven't a chance. I thought maybe we could make Deliphon with the stuff before these outlaws got wise."

"We followed the trail easily from the air," remarked Cartley. "First, we found the space ship and the cylinder. After that, we just watched for the green campfire markers is all."

"Campfire markers?" questioned Cragley in excitement. "What do——"

"There comes Ledageree!" interrupted Jasper.

The brigand chieftain and his men were emerging from the bushes with the little boxes stacked in their arms.

"We're sunk now!" exclaimed Quentin.

Impulsively, the captain took a step in the direction of the space ship. One of the outlaws guarding us stepped forward before the captain, bringing up his pistol. An evil light shone in his eyes, the fanatical gleam of the confirmed killer. It was the man's intention to kill Cragley where he stood.

But the act was never consummated. A blank look overspread the outlaw's face. His face held that strange expression which is so characteristic of the electrocuted man. He tottered and fell face downward. Uttering a cry of agony, another of the brigands fell, seizing frantically at a shaft which protruded from his body, a shaft of crude hammered metal.

While we all stared in surprise at the fallen men, Jasper Jezzan, quick to take stock of the situation, looked out over the high grass.

"Troglodytes!" he cried. "That's one o' their metal darts, Ben!"

Substantiating Jasper's discovery, there came a chorus of yells from all sides. Heads came into sight above the tall grass. Darts flew thick and fast, yet every one found its mark. The cave men of Venus brandished their weapons preparatory to rushing in upon us in overwhelming numbers.

The outlaws blazed away at the savages, but the latter proved to be difficult targets at which to aim. They were always on the move, running, hiding, reappearing to launch their deadly darts from another direction. Ledageree dropped his armful of the precious metal and screamed an order.

"Into the ship!"

It was then that I noticed the curious fact that none of the passengers or crew of the *C-49* had been hit. The remaining outlaws attempted to herd us into the ship. Their numbers rapidly diminished under the hail of darts cast at them so accurately by the troglodytes. Many of the cave men toppled over in death as the outlaws made a hit, but more came to take the places of those fallen.

"There's the white man—the renegade!" shouted Quentin.

Indeed, it was so. The troglodytes were led by the man who had broken into our camp on the previous night. Seizing a pistol from one of the fallen brigands, Ben hastily pointed it at the yelling cave dwellers who were running full force in our direction, the renegade at their head.

"No. Ben, no!" cried Jasper. "They're friends!"

"It's Brady!" shouted one of the passengers of the *C-49*. "Chris Brady!"

"Impossible!" exclaimed Cragley. "He's dead!"

"You're wrong, Cragley!" said I, also recognizing the renegade. "That is Brady!"

I heard a noise behind me. I turned and looked. Ledageree and two of his surviving brigands were clambering aboard the space ship. The horde of troglodytes were nearly upon us. In trepidation, I moved backward. Ledageree had gained the deck and was running in the direction of the air lock when Brady saw him, raising his pistol to fire.

From its concealment, I brought my gun into action. With hasty aim, I pulled the trigger, cursing myself for a wide miss. I was a bundle of nerves at the moment. Again I tried, this time drawing a fine bead. Chris Brady was clearly outlined beyond the sights of my pistol.

A split second before I squeezed the trigger, Jasper Jezzan seized my arm. The flash of power shot harmlessly into the sky. Fiercely, I battled with the Hayko man, raising my pistol to brain him. But Cartley was upon me, and I went down under their combined weight. Something hit my head. Blackness engulfed me.

When I regained consciousness, I was aware of the babble of voices. My head throbbed and swam dizzily. A ring of troglodytes encircled me. I heard Chris Brady talking. Had he come back to life in some miraculous manner? I had seen him shot and buried. His words penetrated my dazed senses.

"When I saw that everything was stacked against me with no chances of proving my innocence, I tried an old trick, Cragley. I was afraid you'd get wise to me, but you didn't. I fell a split second before your men fired. I watched your lips for my signal. None of the shots touched me. I played dead and was buried in the shallow grave. When you went, I dug myself out. I came pretty near smothering."

"We buried you alive!"

"You did, and I'm thankful I was alive—and still am."

"But the troglodytes?"

"My friends," replied Brady. "I've been among them a great deal during my life upon Venus. I know their language and customs. They look up to me and obey my orders. We've been following you. The other night, we broke into your camp and stole food and this pistol."

"Then you're not the outlaw we supposed you to be?" Cragley was amazed beyond words. Apologies flooded to his lips and remained unspoken. What apology could there be to this innocent man he had all but sent to his death?

"No—I'm not, but I knew there was no way of proving it to you," replied Brady, "at least not until Deliphon was reached. With my friends, here, I followed your trail. We heard the sounds of fighting far ahead. When we found you attacked by outlaws, I knew it was my chance to save you

and prove myself."

"You have proved yourself!" exclaimed Cragley warmly. "But what about Raynor and Davy?"

"They thought Brady was their leader they'd been told t' watch for!" interrupted Jezzan spiritedly. "Plain as day, ain't it, Ben?" He turned to his comrade for a confirmative nod. "There's your man!"

Jasper Jezzan pointed at me where I sat on the ground, collecting my wits. I knew that I had been caught red handed. Denials were useless.

"Ern Hantel!" exclaimed Cragley in surprise. "He's the last man I'd suspect!"

"Just the same, he's the man you thought Brady was," persisted my prosecutor relentlessly. "He put green flares in your campfire ashes, so's we could follow you."

"How did you men come to be with the outlaws?" asked Brady, a bit confused by the surprising revelations he had heard.

"The authorities at Deliphon have suspected this gang for quite a spell," replied Cartley. "Jasper and I joined 'em t' find out. We're much obliged t' you and your cave men, Brady. You got us out of a tight pinch."

Cragley confronted me. "What have you to say for yourself, Hantel?" he asked grimly.

"They've got my number right," I grumbled, rubbing an aching head. "No use bucking a Hayko man in a place like this." I nodded in the direction of Jezzan and Cartley. "Ledageree was warned against strangers."

"Then you admit Brady is innocent?" queried the captain, seeking the confession which would irrevocably clear the accused man.

"Yes. He's innocent. Davy and Raynor never knew me. I sent my instructions to them through Brady, leaving messages where they believed he'd left them. When we left the earth, I recognized Davy and Raynor right off. For secrecy's sake, they weren't supposed to talk with the man they took orders from. I took advantage of this fact by placing my article of identification in the possession of Brady."

"The brown collars you loaned me!" exclaimed Brady, realizing the mode of his undoing.

"After I'd first stolen your collars and destroyed them," I added. "I was afraid of something going wrong before Ledageree and his men picked us up. I blew out the radium repellors of the *C-49* and planted the evidence in Brady's room. I knew if anything happened Raynor and Davy would identify him as the man from whom they took instructions. That left me a loophole."

"The case against you is completed, Hantel!" Cragley's face was stern and set. "You're the one who's going to be shot this time, and there won't be any chance of falling before my men fire, either!"

"Just a minute," interposed Jezzan, thrusting back the angry captain. "We've got a say here. Headquarters wants this man. He's got more information than he's given. There's some other affairs he can talk about. He's going back with us."

Cragley didn't argue the matter. It was beyond his authority. Besides, if I received my just dues, he cared little where I was executed.

They placed me under strong guard on the outlaw ship, and we flew back to Deliphon. Knowing me for the clever, resourceful criminal which I pride myself on being, Jezzan and Cartley personally conducted me to the earth. There, I was given a brief examination.

At present, I find myself in the interplanetary penal colony of Phobos where I am being held for reasons peculiar to the Hayko Unit. I expect death most any day. In the meantime, I spend much of my numbered hours gazing out of my prison into the realms of space. The rotating sphere of Mars stands prominent against starlit skies. Occasionally, I see Phobos' companion moon, Deimos. Beyond the transparent facing of my prison cell stretches an airless void. There is but one escape. I await it, absorbed in fatalistic reflection.

## THE END

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