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Title: Operation Distress

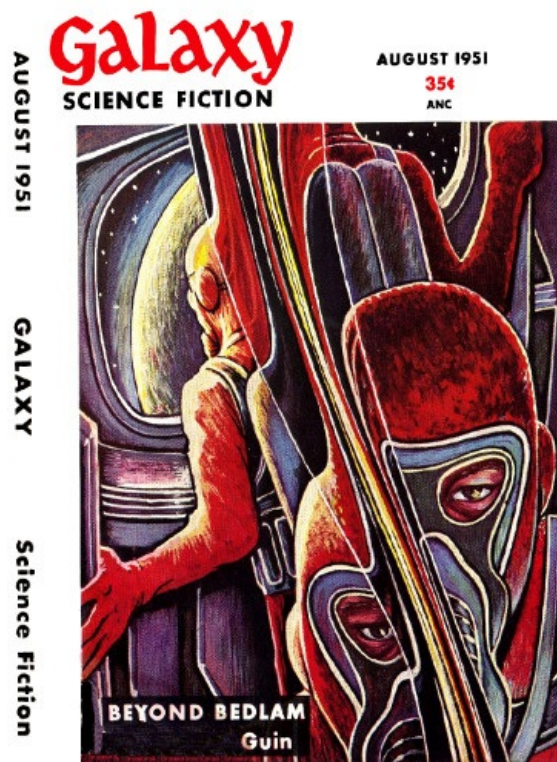
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Release date: February 10, 2016 [EBook #51168]

Language: English

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

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OPERATION DISTRESS ***



OPERATION DISTRESS

By LESTER DEL REY

Illustrated by WILLER

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Galaxy Science Fiction August 1951.
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**Explorers who dread spiders and snakes prove that heroism
is always more heroic to outsiders. Then there's the case
of the first space pilot to Mars who developed the itch—**

Bill Adams was halfway back from Mars when he noticed the red rash on his hands. He'd been reaching for one of the few remaining tissues to cover a sneeze, while scratching vigorously at the base of his neck. Then he saw the red spot, and his hand halted, while all desire to sneeze gasped out of him.

He sat there, five feet seven inches of lean muscle and bronzed skin, sweating and staring, while the blond hair on the back of his neck seemed to stand on end. Finally he dropped his hand and pulled himself carefully erect. The cabin in the spaceship was big enough to permit turning around, but not much more, and with the ship cruising without power, there was almost no gravity to keep him from overshooting his goal.

He found the polished plate that served as a mirror and studied himself. His eyes were puffy, his nose was red, and there were other red splotches and marks on his face.

Whatever it was, he had it bad!

Pictures went through his head, all unpleasant. He'd been only a kid when the men came back from the South Pacific in the last war; but an uncle had spent years dying of some weird disease that the doctors couldn't identify. That had been from something caught on Earth. What would happen when the disease was from another planet?

It was ridiculous. Mars had no animal life, and even the thin lichenlike plants were sparse and tiny. A man couldn't catch a disease from a plant. Even horses didn't communicate their ills to men. Then Bill remembered gangrene and cancer, which could attack any life, apparently.

He went back to the tiny Geiger-Muller counter, but there was no sign of radiation from the big atomic motor that powered the ship. He stripped his clothes off, spotting more of the red marks breaking out, but finding no sign of parasites. He hadn't really believed it, anyhow. That wouldn't account for the sneezing and sniffles, or the puffed eyes and burning inside his nose and throat.

Dust, maybe? Mars had been dusty, a waste of reddish sand and desert silt that made the Sahara seem like paradise, and it had settled on his spacesuit, to come in through the airlocks with him. But if it contained some irritant, it should have been worse on Mars than now. He could remember nothing annoying, and he'd turned on the tiny, compact little static dust traps, in any case, before leaving, to clear the air.

He went back to one of the traps now, and ripped the cover off it.

The little motor purred briskly. The plastic rods turned against fur brushes, while a wiper cleared off any dust they picked up. There was no dust he could see; the traps had done their work.

Some plant irritant, like poison ivy? No, he'd always worn his suit—Mars had an atmosphere, but it wasn't anything a man could breathe long. The suit was put on and off with automatic machine grapples, so he couldn't have touched it.

The rash seemed to get worse on his body as he looked at it. This time, he tore one of the tissues in quarters as he sneezed. The little supply was almost gone; there was never space enough for much beyond essentials in a spaceship, even with the new atomic drive. As he looked for spots, the burning in his nose seemed to increase.

He dropped back to the pilot seat, cursing. Two months of being cramped up in this cubicle, sweating out the trip to Mars without knowing how the new engine would last; three weeks on Mars, mapping frantically to cover all the territory he could, and planting little flags a hundred miles apart; now a week on the trip back at high acceleration most of the way—and this! He'd expected adventure of some kind. Mars, though, had proved as interesting as a sandpile, and even the "canals" had proved to be only mineral striations, invisible from the ground.

He looked for something to do, but found nothing. He'd developed his films the day before, after carefully cleaning the static traps and making sure the air was dust-free. He'd written up the accounts. And he'd been coasting along on the hope of getting home to a bath, a beer, and a few bull sessions, before he began to capitalize on being the first man to reach another planet beyond the Moon.

He cut on full acceleration again, more certain of his motors than of himself. He'd begun to notice the itching yesterday; today he was breaking out in the rash. How long would whatever was coming take? Good God, he might die—from something as humiliating and undramatic as this!

It hadn't hit him before, fully. There was no knowing about diseases from other planets. Men had developed immunity to the germs found on Earth; but just as smallpox had proved so fatal to the Indians and syphilis to Europe when they first hit, there was no telling how wildly this might progress. It might go away in a day, or it might kill him just as quickly.

He was figuring his new orbit on a tiny calculator. In two days at this acceleration, he could reach radar-distance of Earth; in four, he could land. The tubes might burn out in continuous firing. But the other way, he'd be two weeks making a landing, and most diseases he could remember seemed faster than that.

Bill wiped the sweat off his forehead, scratched at other places that were itching, and stared down at the small disk of Earth. There were doctors there—and, brother, he'd need them fast!



Things were a little worse when the first squeals came from the radar two days later. He'd run out of tissues, and his nose was a continual drip, while breathing seemed almost impossible. He was running some fever, too, though he had no way of knowing how much.

He cut his receiver in, punched out the code on his key. The receiver pipped again at him, bits of message getting through, but unclearly. There was no response to his signals. He checked his chronometer and flipped over the micropages of his *Ephemeris*; the big radar at Washington was still out of line with him, and the signals had to cut through too much air to come clearly. It should be good in another hour.

But right now, an hour seemed longer than a normal year. He checked the dust tray again, tried figuring out other orbits, managed to locate the Moon, and scratched. Fifteen minutes. There was no room for pacing up and down. He pushed the back down from the pilot seat, lowered the table, and pulled out his bunk; he remade it, making sure all the corners were perfect. Then he folded it back and lifted the table and seat. That took less than five minutes.

His hands were shaking worse when the automatic radar signals began to come through more clearly. It wasn't an hour, but he could wait no longer. He opened the key and began to send. It would take fifteen seconds for the signal to reach Earth, and another quarter minute for an answer, even if an operator was on duty.

Half a minute later, he found one was. "Earth to Mars Rocket I. Thank God, you're ahead of schedule. If your tubes hold out, crowd them. Two other nations have ships out now. The U. N. has ruled that whoever comes back first with mapping surveys can claim the territory mapped. We're rushing the construction, but we need the ship for the second run if we're to claim our fair territory. Aw, hell—congratulations!"

He'd started hammering at his key before they finished, giving the facts on the tubes, which were standing up beyond all expectations. "And get a doctor ready—a bunch of them," he finished. "I seem to have picked up something like a disease."

There was a long delay before an answer came this time—more than five minutes. The hand on the key was obviously different, slower and not as steady. "What symptoms, Adams? Give all details!"

He began, giving all the information he had, from the first itching through the rash and the fever. Again, longer this time, the main station hesitated.

"Anything I can do about it now?" Bill asked, finally. "And how about having those doctors ready?"

"We're checking with Medical," the signals answered. "We're.... Here's their report. Not enough data—could be anything. Dozens of diseases like that. Nothing you can do, except try salt water gargle and spray; you've got stuff for that. Wash off rash with soap and hot water, followed by some of your hypo. We'll get a medical kit up to the Moon for you."

He let that sink in, then clicked back: "The *Moon*?"

"You think you can land here with whatever you've got, man? There's no way of knowing how contagious it is. And keep an hourly check with us. If you pass out, we'll try to get someone out in a Moon rocket to pick you up. But we can't risk danger of infecting the whole planet. You're

quarantined on the Moon—we'll send up landing instructions later—not even for Luna Base, but where there will be no chance of contamination for others. You didn't really expect to come back here, did you, Adams?"

He should have thought of it. He knew that. And he knew that the words from Earth weren't as callous as they sounded. Down there, men would be sweating with him, going crazy trying to do something. But they were right. Earth had to be protected first; Bill Adams was only one out of two and a half billions, even if he had reached a planet before any other man.

Yeah, it was fine to be a hero. But heroes shouldn't menace the rest of the world.

Logically, he knew they were right. That helped him get his emotions under control. "Where do you want me to put down?"

"Tycho. It isn't hard to spot for radar-controlled delivery of supplies to you, but it's a good seven hundred miles from Lunar Base. And look—we'll try to get a doctor to you. But keep us informed if anything slips. We need those maps, if we can find a way to sterilize 'em."

"Okay," he acknowledged. "And tell the cartographers there are no craters, no intelligence, and only plants about half an inch high. Mars stinks."

They'd already been busy, he saw, as he teetered down on his jets for a landing on Tycho. Holding control was the hardest job he'd ever done. A series of itchings cropped out just as the work got tricky, when he could no longer see the surface, and had to go by feel. But somehow he made it. Then he relaxed and began an orgy of scratching.

And he'd thought there was something romantic about being a hero!

The supplies that had already been sent up by the superfast unmanned missiles would give him something to do, at least. He moved back the two feet needed to reach his developing tanks and went through the process of spraying and gargling. It was soothing enough while it went on, but it offered only momentary help.

Then his stomach began showing distress signs. He fought against it, tightening up. It did no good. His hasty breakfast of just black coffee wanted to come up—and did, giving him barely time to make the little booth.

He washed his mouth out and grabbed for the radar key, banging out a report on this. The doctors must have been standing by down at the big station, because there was only a slight delay before the answering signal came: "Any blood?"

Another knot added itself to his intestines. "I don't know—don't think so, but I didn't look."

"Look, next time. We're trying to get this related to some of the familiar diseases. It must have some relation—there are only so many ways a man can be sick. We've got a doctor coming over, Adams. None on the Moon, but we're shipping him through. He'll set down in about nine hours. And there's some stuff to take on the supply missiles. May not help, but we're trying a mixture of the antibiotics. Also some ACS and anodynes for the itching and rash. Hope they work. Let us know any reaction."

Bill cut off. He'd have to try. They were as much in the dark about this as he was, but they had a better background for guessing and trial and error. And if the bugs in him happened to like tachimycetin, he wouldn't be too much worse off. Damn it, *had* there been blood?

He forced his mind off it, climbed into his clothes and then into the spacesuit that hung from the grapples. It moved automatically into position, the two halves sliding shut and sealing from outside. The big gloves on his hands were too clumsy for such operations.

Then he went bounding across the Moon. Halfway to the supplies he felt the itching come back, and he slithered and wriggled around, trying to scratch his skin against his clothing. It didn't help much. He was sweating harder, and his eyes were watering. He manipulated the little visor-cleaning gadget, trying to poke his face forward to brush the frustration tears from his eyes. He couldn't quite reach it.

There were three supply missiles, each holding about two hundred pounds, Earth weight. He tied them together and slung them over his back, heading toward his ship. Here they weighed only a hundred pounds, and with his own weight and the suit added, the whole load came to little more than his normal weight on Earth.

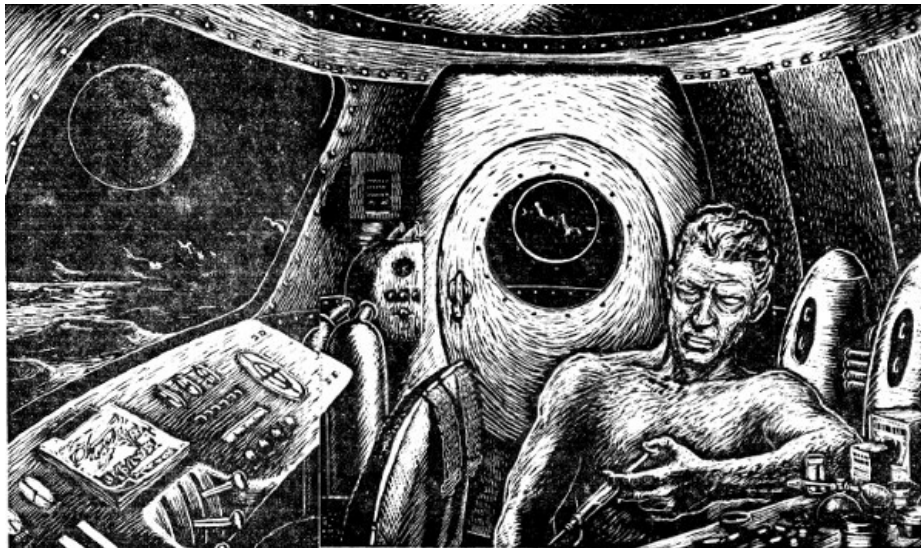
He tried shifting the supplies around on his back, getting them to press against the spots of torment as he walked. It simply unbalanced him, without really relieving the itching. Fortunately, though, his eyes were clearing a little. He gritted his teeth and fought back through the powdery pumice surface, kicking up clouds of dust that settled slowly but completely—though the gravity was low, there was no air to hold them up.

Nothing had ever looked better than the airlock of the ship. He let the grapples hook the suit off him as soon as the outer seal was shut and went into a whirling dervish act. Aches and pains could be stood—but *itching!*

Apparently, though, the spray and gargle had helped a little, since his nose felt somewhat clearer and his eyes were definitely better. He repeated them, and then found the medical supplies, with a long list of instructions.

They were really shooting the pharmacy at him. He injected himself, swallowed things, rubbed himself down with others, and waited. Whatever they'd given him didn't offer any immediate help. He began to feel worse. But on contacting Earth by radar, he was assured that that might

be expected.



"We've got another missile coming, with metal foil for the maps and photos—plus a small copying camera. You can print them right on the metal, seal that in a can, and leave it for the rocket that's bringing the doctor. The pilot will blast over it—that should sterilize it—and pick it up when it cools."

Bill swore, but he was in his suit when the missile landed, heading out across the pumice-covered wastes toward it. The salves had helped the itching a little, but not much. And his nose had grown worse again.

He jockeyed the big supply can out of the torpedo-shaped missile, packed it on his back, and headed for his ship. The itching was acting up as he sweated—this made a real load, about like packing a hundred bulky pounds over his normal Earth weight through the soft drift of the pumice. But his nose was clearing again; it was apparently becoming cyclic. He'd have to relay that information back to the medics. And where were they getting a doctor crazy enough to take a chance with him?

He climbed out of the suit and went through the ritual of scratching, noticing that his fever had gone up, and that his muscles were shaking. His head seemed light, as if he were in for a spell of dizziness. They'd be interested in that, back on Earth, though it wouldn't do much good. He couldn't work up a clinical attitude about himself. All he wanted was a chance to get over this disease before it killed him.

He dragged out the photo and copying equipment, under a red light. It filled what little space was left in his cubbyhole cabin. Then he swore, gulping down more of the pills where they were waiting for him. The metal sheets were fine. They were excellent. The only thing wrong was that they wouldn't fit his developing trays—and they were tough enough to give him no way of cutting them to size.

He stuffed them back in their container and shoved it into the airlock. Then his stomach kicked up again. He couldn't see any blood in the result, but he couldn't be sure—the color of the pills might hide traces. He flushed it down, his head turning in circles, and went to the radar. This time he didn't even wait for a reply; let them worry about their damned maps. They could send cutting equipment with the doctor and pick up the things later. They could pick up his corpse and cremate it at the same time, for all he cared right now.

He yanked out his bunk and slumped into it, curling up as much as the itching would permit. And finally, for the first time in over fifty hours, he managed to doze off, though his sleep was full of nightmares.

It was the sound of the bull-throated chemical rocket that brought him out of it—the sound traveling along the surface through the rocks and up through the metal ship, even without air to carry it.

He could feel the rumble of its takeoff later, but he waited long after that for the doctor. There was no knock on the port. Finally he pulled himself up from the bunk, sweating and shaken, and looked out.

The doctor was there—or at least a man in a spacesuit was. But somebody had been in a hurry for volunteers, and given the man no basic training at all. The figure would pull itself erect, make a few strides that were all bounce and no progress, and then slide down into the pumice. Moon-walking was tricky until you learned how.

Bill sighed, scratching unconsciously, and made his way somehow out to his suit, climbing into it.

He paused for a final good scratch, and then the grapples took over. This time, he stumbled also as he made his way across the powdery rubble. But the other man was making no real progress at all.

Bill reached him, and touched helmets long enough to issue simple instructions through metal sound conduction. Then he managed to guide the other's steps; there had been accounts of the days of learning spent by the first men on the Moon, but it wasn't that bad with an instructor to help. The doctor picked up as they went along. Bill's legs were buckling under him by then, and the itches were past endurance. At the end, the doctor was helping him. But somehow they made the ship, and were getting out of the suits—Bill first, then the doctor, using the grapples under Bill's guidance.

The doctor was young, and obviously scared, but fighting his fear. He'd been picked for his smallness to lighten the load on the chemical rocket, and his little face was intent. But he managed a weak grin.

"Thanks, Adams. I'm Doctor Ames—Ted to you. Get onto that cot. You're about out on your feet."

The test he made didn't take long, but his head was shaking at the conclusion.

"Your symptoms make no sense," he summarized. "I've got a feeling some are due to one thing, some to another. Maybe we'll have to wait until I come down with it and compare notes."

His grin was wry, but Bill was vaguely glad that he wasn't trying any bedside manner. There wasn't much use in thanking the man for volunteering—Ames had known what he was up against, and he might be scared, but his courage was above thanks.

"What about the maps?" Bill asked. "They tell you?"

"They've left cutters outside. I started to bring them. Then the pumice got me—I couldn't stand upright in it. They'll pick up the maps later, but they're important. The competing ships will claim our territory if we don't file first."

He knocked the dust off his instrument, and wiped his hands. Bill looked down at the bed to see a fine film of Moon silt there. They'd been bringing in too much on the suits—it was too fine, and the traps weren't getting it fast enough.

He got up shakily, moving toward the dust trap that had been running steadily. But now it was out of order, obviously, with the fur brushes worn down until they could generate almost no static against the rod. He groped into the supplies, hoping there would be replacements.

Ames caught his arm. "Cut it out, Adams. You're in no shape for this. Hey, how long since you've eaten?"

Bill thought it over, his head thick. "I had coffee before I landed."

Doctor Ames nodded quickly. "Vomiting, dizziness, tremors, excess sweating—what did you expect, man? You put yourself under this strain, not knowing what comes next, having to land with an empty stomach, skipping meals and loading your stomach with pills—and probably no sleep! Those symptoms are perfectly normal."

He was at the tiny galley equipment, fixing quick food as he spoke. But his face was still sober. He was probably thinking of the same thing that worried Bill—an empty stomach didn't make the itching rash, the runny nose and eyes, and the general misery that had begun the whole thing.

He sorted through the stock of replacement parts, a few field-sisters, suit wadding, spare gloves, cellophane-wrapped gadgets. Then he had it. Ames was over, urging him toward the cot, but he shook him off.

"Got to get the dust out of here—dust'll make the itching worse. Moon dust is sharp, Doc. Just install new brushes.... Where are those instructions? Yeah, insert the cat's fur brushes under the.... *Cat's* fur? Is *that* what they use, Doc?"

"Sure. It's cheap and generates static electricity. Do you expect sable?"

Bill took the can of soup and sipped it without tasting or thinking, his hand going toward a fresh place that itched. His nose began running, but he disregarded it. He still felt lousy, but strength was flowing through him, and life was almost good again.

He tossed the bunk back into its slot, lifted the pilot's stool, and motioned Ames forward. "You operate a key—hell, I *am* getting slow. You can contact Luna Base by phone, have them relay. There. Now tell 'em I'm blasting off pronto for Earth, and I'll be down in four hours with their plans."

"You're crazy." The words were flat, but there was desperation on the little doctor's face. He glanced about hastily, taking the microphone woodenly. "Adams, they'll have an atomic bomb up to blast you out before you're near Earth. They've got to protect themselves. You can't...."

Bill scratched, but there was the beginning of a grin on his face. "Nope, I'm not delirious now, though I damn near cracked up. You figured out half the symptoms. Take a look at those brushes—cat's fur brushes—and figure what they'll do to a man who was breathing the air and who is allergic to cats! All I ever had was some jerk in Planning who didn't check my medical record with trip logistics! I never had these symptoms until I unzipped the traps and turned 'em on. It got better whenever I was in the suit, breathing canned air. We should have known a man can't catch a disease from plants."

The doctor looked at him, and at the fur pieces he'd thrown into a wastebin, and the whiteness

ran from his face. He was seeing his own salvation, and the chuckle began weakly, gathering strength as he turned to the microphone.

"Cat asthma—simple allergy. Who'd figure you'd get that in deep space? But you're right, Bill. It figures."

Bill Adams nodded as he reached for the controls, and the tubes began firing, ready to take them back to Earth. Then he caught himself and swung to the doctor.

"Doc," he said quickly, "just be sure and tell them this isn't to get out. If they'll keep still about it, so will I."

He'd make a hell of a hero on Earth if people heard of it, and he could use a little of a hero's reward.

No catcalls, thanks.

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