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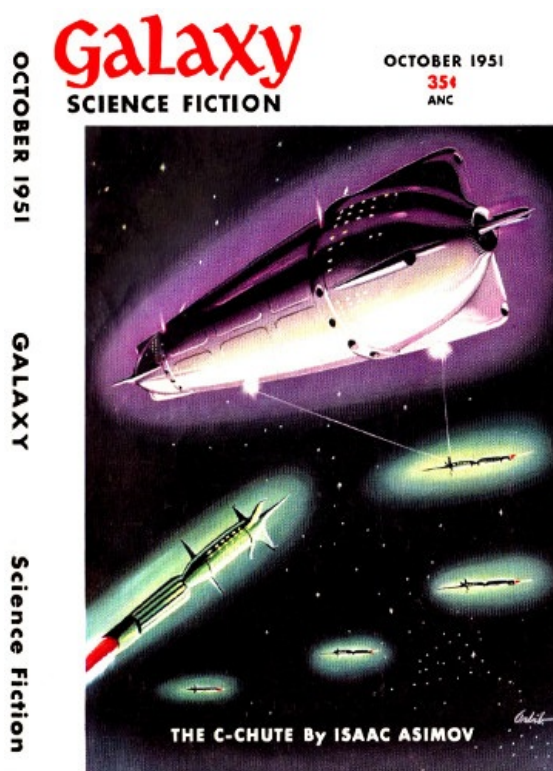
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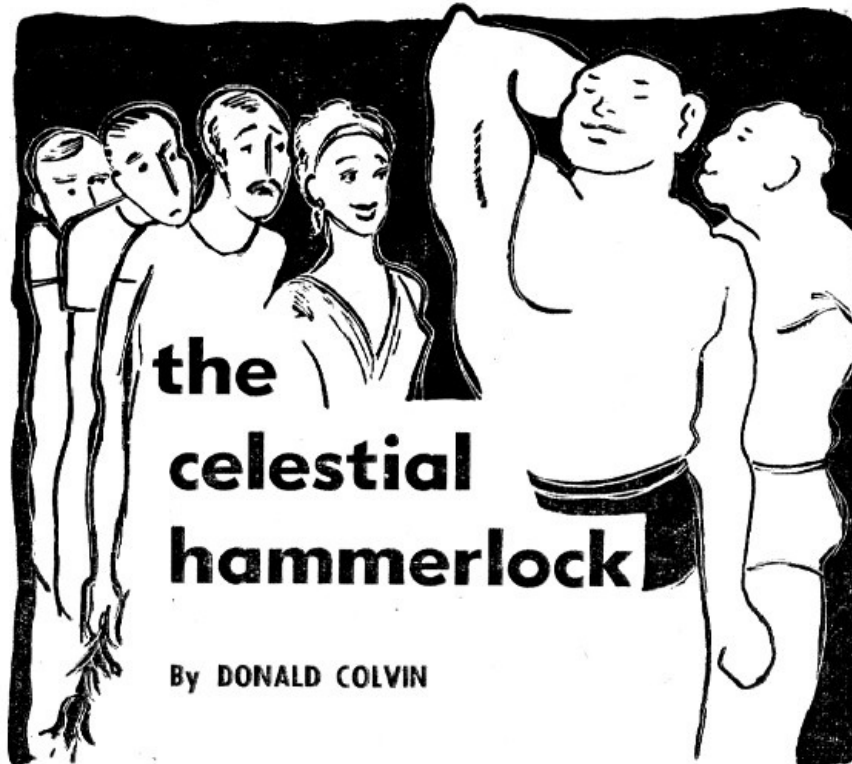


The Celestial Hammerlock

By DONALD COLVIN

Illustrated by NORRIS

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*This bigtime space promoter could get
the Horsehead Nebula in a flying mare—but
pinning a planetoid is tougher!*

SPACEGRAM

From: Jed Michaels,
Ryttuk, Eros

To: H. E. Horrocks,
Interplanetary Amusement Corp.,
Cosmopolis, Earth

I QUIT, YOU BALLOON BRAIN.

JED

ROCKET MAIL (Second Class)

Dear Michaels:

Your last message indicates you wish to leave the employment of the Interplanetary Amusement Corp. Under our employee policy, this is allowable, effective upon completion of your current assignment. Under precedent set as long ago as 2347 A. D. the company will even pay the cost of your message of resignation.

However, the words "you balloon brain" do not seem a necessary part of that message and will be deducted from your salary.

Furthermore, I have a few words of my own to say. You march straight into my office, Michaels, just as soon as you get back from Eros. Eros? WHAT IN HELL ARE YOU DOING ON EROS?

Horrocks

ROCKET MAIL (First Class)

Mr. H. E. Horrocks

Dear Balloon Brain:

If you paid a little more attention to your office and less to that golf course on Venus, you'd know what I am doing on Eros. I got here two days ago via Mars with a herd of six wrestlers, in accordance with your own written memorandum. We were to appear at an Auruchs club smoker.

Upon arrival, I found that no preparations had been made for us and nobody knows anything about an Auruchs club.

The people here are nuts. They talk in six syllable words and their idea of a good time is to sniff flowers and do five dimensional calculus. They have less use for wrestlers than I have for you.

Michaels

ROCKET MAIL (Second Class)

Michaels, you nitwit:

That wasn't *Eros*, you idiot! You were supposed to go to *Erie*—Erie, Pa., right here on Earth!

If you remembered even your sixth grade Solar System history, you would know that the planetoid Eros was settled in 2141 by a group of longhairs headed by Prof. M. R. Snock, a philosopher with a dozen university degrees.

He wanted to show that war, crime and all forms of violence would disappear if people thought only beautiful thoughts.

The planetoid is lousy rich with erydnium ore and the people keep in luxury selling it to space freighters. They spend their time being gentle and thinking beautiful. There hasn't even been a spitball thrown there in eight generations.

A *fine* place for you to show up mahouting six wrestlers with no foreheads. You're lucky they haven't thrown you in jail.

Horrocks

ROCKET MAIL (Postage Due)

Mr. H. E. Horrocks

Dear Jellyhead:

What do you mean lucky? *We are* in jail.

Right after we got here, the boys decided they had been cramped in that local spaceship and needed a workout to limber up. As soon as they got started, they were surrounded by a bunch of scrawny males, all sniffing hollyhocks.

Their spokesman, a bald bird with rosebuds in his whiskers, touched me with a gold-headed cane and said that apparently we were not yet attuned to the high mental plane of the planetoid, and would we mind going into protective custody while they worked over our egos and cured our kineticism.

I said suppose we wouldn't. He looked shocked and waved his flower and said that then, although it had never happened before, he supposed he would have to call the space patrol and have us thrown into the hoosegow on Ganymede.

I translated that into basic wrestler for the boys and we agreed we'd better go along. We'd heard about the jail those tough space patrol babies operate on Ganymede.

The flower lovers took us to an old erydnium pit and asked us to please go down. Now they're perfuming us every hour and feeding us flower bulbs to make us gentle.

We could climb out of this rat-hole whenever we wanted, but that would be climbing straight into a striped spacesuit.

I think about you all the time. And if you think they're beautiful thoughts, you're as crazy as I've always suspected.

Michaels

P.S. The boys asked that I enclose this note from them:

Dear Mr. Horox:

We do not like it here Mr. Horox. The Grub is no good. You come get us. Please Mr. Horox. Come soon.

Gorilla Man Thorpe
Choker Jonas

R. Z. Zbich, light-heavyweight champion of the Moon, Mercury and the inner rings of Saturn
Gorgeous Gordon
Barefoot Charles Anya
X, the Faceless Wonder

ROCKET MAIL (First Class)

Mr. Jed Michaels

Mr. Michaels:

Don't think you can sit around doing nothing and collect pay from the Interplanetary Amusement Corp. You're suspended until you get out of there.

Horrocks

SPACEGRAM (Collect)

Mr. H. E. Horrocks,
Cosmopolis, Earth

MY RESIGNATION IS A MISTAKE. I WITHDRAW IT. YOU ARE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE BOSSES. IMPROBABLE AS IT SEEMS, I LOVE YOU.

JED

SPACEGRAM

Mr. Jed Michaels,
Ryttuk, Eros

ONLY ONE POSSIBLE CAUSE FOR YOUR LAST SPACEGRAM. HAS SHE A SISTER?

HANK

ROCKET MAIL (Second Class)

Mr. H. E. Horrocks

My dear employer and pal:

Eros is a *wonderful* asteroid!

Toward the end of the second day in the pit, the wrestlers limbered up. Zbich and the Gorilla Man worked out on headlocks, Gorgeous Gordon did calisthenics, and Barefoot Charley, Choker Jonas and the Faceless Wonder got themselves into a grunting free-for-all.

After that got under way, I heard a squeal and a girl came bounding down the pit side. She was young and dark-haired and pretty. She might have been as intellectual as the president of Harvard above the shoulders, but what a framework she had to hold up that brain!

She went over to Gorgeous Gordon and she said, "Ooh!" With all the flower lovers around here, it was probably the first man with muscles she had ever seen.

The big ham swelled up. He flexed his arms and stuck out his chest. "OOH!" said the girl, and went bounding back up the side of the pit.

I stopped the exercise and the wrestlers sat and mused blankly at each other.

In a few minutes, our little visitor was back again. With her were about a dozen pals, differing in details, but resembling her in the important points.

The leader was a tall, brown-haired, gray-eyed girl, with a face where intellect fought a losing battle with a dimple. The others helped her down the pit side as if she were something fragile and precious, like maybe a new bottle of perfume.

Then our pal went back to Gorgeous Gordon. "More ooh!" said the girl guide.

You know how wrestlers are. They'll slap each other silly to get the cheers of four kids on a street corner, or commit mayhem for a purse big enough to buy a ham hock. In five seconds, we had going one of the finest wrestling matches in the history of good, clean sportsmanship. And over the cracking of wrestler's bones rose the shrieks of the girls, showing that their throats were in the right place, even if their brains weren't.

The gray-eyed girl sat with me on a flange of unmined ore. She was Aliana, a direct descendant of the leader of the Eros pioneers. As such, she was princess of the planetoid, although she left most of the governing to a council of elders, apparently as outstanding an array of mossbacks as ever smelled a gardenia or just plain smelled.

"I sometimes think, Mr. Michaels," Aliana told me, "that we of Eros have laid too much stress upon the cerebral. I wonder if our lives would not be fuller if we also included some of the more vigorous activities, such as the one in which those men are now engaged."

"If it's a vacation for your mind that you want, Princess," I agreed, "those boys are your meat."

Just then the Gorilla Man got a leg split on Barefoot Charley and began to braid his toes.

"How stimulating," breathed Aliana. "What is proper for the onlooker to remark in such a situation?"

"A satisfactory outcry, Princess," I explained, "is, 'Break it off!'"

"Break it off!" encouraged Aliana.

I had to wind it up, finally, before the wrestlers reduced themselves to blubber, thereby forcing the Interplanetary Amusement Corp. to go out and lasso itself another herd.

The girls went giggling up the side of the pit. At the top, Aliana waved at me. The others blew kisses, not caring much where they landed, as long as the receiver had muscles.

Next morning, a young man came into the pit. He announced that, upon Princess Aliana's orders, we were to have the freedom of Eros, so that contact with the planetoid culture could win us from our uncouth ways.

He was too young to be wholly gentled by the flowers and the council of elders. So the Choker showed him a wristlock. And when the Choker tossed him on his ear in the erydnium ore, he said words that were not beautiful. Maybe there's something to the people of this asteroid.

Anyway, everything is great now. We wander wherever we please, as long as we return to the pit to sleep. When nobody is looking, we sneak into the royal palace courtyard and put on a wrestling show for the girls.

And the nights! Ah, the nights!

Don't turn entirely green with envy, Hankus. At least leave your nose the familiar red.

Jed

SPACEGRAM

To: Jed Michaels, Rytuk, Eros

FINE WORK. RETURN IMMEDIATELY. WILL MEET YOU AT MARS. MAYBE YOU CAN PERSUADE SOME OF THE GIRLS TO ACCOMPANY YOU THAT FAR. AM SENDING THE WRESTLERS TO SATURN.

HANK

ROCKET MAIL (First Class)

To: H. E. Horrocks,
Cosmopolis, Earth

Dear Hank:

Go to Mars, the man says. I can't go anywhere. The elders caught us giving a rassel when Aliana was away and we're in again.

These flower roots taste terrible.

Jed

SPACEGRAM

To: Jed Michaels,
Rytuk, Eros

YOU BLUNDERING BABOON, YOU'RE FIRED.

HORROCKS

ROCKET MAIL
(Free, Royal Frank)

Royal Palace, Eros

To: H. E. Horrocks,
Cosmopolis, Earth

Dear melon brain:

I gather from your last message that you wish to discharge me. I accept the offer, fat boy. In fact, under royal Eros precedent, which I made up three minutes ago, we will even pay for your message. However, the words "you blundering baboon" do not seem a necessary part of that message, and their cost will be taken out of the first bit of business that the royal house of Eros decides to honor your puny little corporation with.

If any.

Times are changed, Hankus. I'm a big shot now.

A few hours after we got back in the pit, Aliana came back and sneaked down to see us. She said she thought it was about time to end this council of elders' nonsense and she asked our help.

I told her plan to the wrestlers in words of one syllable or less. They all agreed except the Faceless Wonder.

"I don't see why I should have nothing to do with no book," he said. It seems he had had a book once and chewed up the first three chapters before he found out it wasn't something to eat.

I signaled to the boys. Zbich clamped a headlock on him. The Choker got a hammerlock. The Gorilla Man took him in a scissors. Gorgeous Gordon got a toehold and Barefoot Charley stood by to jump on his stomach.

"Do you understand now?" I asked politely.

"Sure, Jed, sure," said the Faceless Wonder. "Why didn't ya explain it to me in the first place?"

So the next morning, we yelled for books. And for the following days, whenever anybody was around, we were busy sniffing flowers and reading. Between times, I tried to explain to the wrestlers why there weren't more pictures in the books.

A week later, we sprang the trap. I told the stablehand who brought us our fodder that I had taken in so much culture that I was breathing beauty. Zbich, gagging a little, asked for a second helping of flower roots. Gorgeous Gordon requested a needle and thread; he said he had fallen behind in his needlepoint.

A report of the conversation got to the council of elders and it brought them to the lip of the pit, looking like something the glue factory had refused to accept. Aliana was with them.

I bowed from the waist and made a speech. I thanked the elders for showing me the error of my ways. I said that, after staying in the lovely erydnium pit, I was enraptured with flowers, crazy about culture and practically engaged in five dimension calculus. I asked that I and the boys could have the priceless boon of walking freely around Eros, swapping beautiful thoughts with the local yokels.

The elders went into a deep state of flutter. Most of them were for accepting our proposition out of hand—which was bad. Our old pal with the beard saved us.

"But I saw these men romping," he shrilled. He lowered his voice to a high alto. "Positively romping!"

"Perhaps these men could prove their sincerity," Aliana said, winking at me. "Perhaps one of them would consent to illustrate what he has learned here by giving a public talk on some scientific subject."

"I should be glad," I answered, "to hack off a lecture for the good folk of Eros. Suppose I give it on anatomy."

And so it was decided.

Exactly as we had planned.

There was an amphitheater which the inhabitants of Eros had been using for ballets, string quartets and lectures by such of the longhairs as got stuffed so full of long words that they couldn't keep them to themselves. I had ringposts and ropes set up on the platform, saying I needed them to illustrate my talk. I got into the ring with Gorgeous Gordon and Zbich, who were dressed in trunks and bathrobes.

The wit and beauty of Eros was assembled there, the beauty being represented by the girls, and the wit—such as it was—by the council of elders. The rest of the seats were filled with other forms, some of them tolerably easy to look at.

I had picked out the subject of anatomy in the belief that none of the inhabitants of Eros knew anything about it.

The men didn't notice and the women had nothing at all to look at, anyway.

I went into my act.

"Kind hosts, friends and unfortunate incidents," I said. "My topic is the science of anatomy. Now,

the science of anatomy is copacetic to the point of mopery. The cerebellum is distended and the duodenum goes into a state of e pluribus unum. Incalculably, thrombosis registers and the ectoplasm becomes elliptic. Or, in the vernacular, the eight ball in the side pocket."

The crowd sat stunned. Here and there, a flower sniffer looked down at his own rack of bones to check my statement.

"Let me illustrate," I said. I drew the bathrobes off the wrestlers.

The boys' muscles rippled as they strutted around the ring. From the women spectators came a long, deep sigh. From that moment, we had half the audience with us—the female half.

"In anatomy," I said, shaking my finger to emphasize the point, "the wingback shifts outward for a lateral. In the words of the great philosopher Hypocritus, the coil should always be kept clean between the barrel and the tap and all excess collar should be removed with a spatula."

Nobody was listening to me; they were looking at the wrestlers, which, of course, was what I'd figured on. Most of the men were comparing the grunTERS' muscles to their own, and here and there a few were dropping their flowers onto the floor.

I signaled and in a second the boys were an omelet of flying legs. The crowd gasped, then leaned forward intently. The shrieking began when Gordon got a headlock on Zbich. It grew when Zbich flipped Gorgeous with a flying mare. By the time Gordon got in a billygoat butt, the amphitheater sounded like feeding time at the zoo.

But there was another sound, too. Old Whiskers was tottering down the aisle, shrieking, "This is romping! Mere romping!"

I signaled and the boys stopped.

"We need a third man to illustrate the next point," I said. "Perhaps the gentleman in the aisle will volunteer."

Two wrestlers grabbed Old Whiskers and tossed him into the ring. Making fast double talk, I took off his shirt and he stood there, stripped to the waist, blinking in the sun and looking like a dehydrated squab.

The crowd noted the contrast between his scrawniness and the muscles of the wrestlers. A roar of laughter swept it.

"Perhaps," I said, "the gentleman would like to romp."

Zbich made a grab for him and he scuttled out of the ring, falling over the lower rope. A woman in the first row slugged him with a gardenia.

"Sit down, you old fool!" She turned to the wrestlers. "Break it off!" she shouted.

The match went on.

In my career, including my medicine show days, I've had lots of easy marks, but nothing to compare to the crowd at Eros' first wrestling match. When Gorgeous took the first fall with a body scissors, they went mad; when Zbich evened it up, they went hysterical; when Zbich took the deciding fall, they were delirious. And at the end of the match between Choker Jonas and the Faceless Wonder, they were reduced to a jelly. We had to call off the third match for fear we would have to take them home in jars.

At the end, we went in a body, led by the wrestlers, and threw the council of elders into the erydnium pit. We are keeping them now on a diet of raw meat.

The amphitheater has been converted into a permanent wrestling arena. We've laid out a football and a baseball field in the lyceum grove, and next week we'll start turning the botanical garden into a golf course.

To carry out the full program, we shall have to buy some equipment and hire some talent. Whether we toss some of the business to Interplanetary depends, Hankus boy, entirely on what attitude Interplanetary takes toward you know who.

When you write your crawling letter, you worm, address me as "Your Mightiness." I am minister of athletics on Eros now and the second most important person on the planetoid.

My work takes me close to the Princess Aliana. Very close.

Come to think of it, I wish there was a moon on Eros. It's not essential, but it helps.

So long, peasant.

JED

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CELESTIAL HAMMERLOCK ***

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