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Lunar Intrigue

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Thornton Ayre.

First published *Fantastic Adventures* November 1939.

“Ace” Durkan, most dangerous criminal on Earth, allows himself to be captured and sent to Luna Prison for life. But he has a good reason for it—the stakes are high



Ace jammed the lever down and gave the signal as the ship roared over the crater rim

CHAPTER I

“Ace” Durkan, Tough Guy

“Scum!” growled Ace Durkan from the darkness, crossing his heavy lead-soled boots—for the purpose of gravity compensation. “Crawling scum, the whole lot of ’em! But they can’t do this to me, see? Not to Ace Durkan! I’ll get out of this damned lunar pen if I have to bite my way through the rocks! They can’t keep me away from Earth!”

“Aw, pipe down, Ace!” grunted another voice. “What’s the use of bellyaching now? They got you—same as they got all of us. And not even you’ll escape across the lava moats. The pen’s surrounded with ’em, remember. If you ask me, you got off light considering your record. And that final stunt of playing around with the Polar Power Station just hollered out for trouble.”

“So what?” Ace demanded venomously. “I set out to cripple the industry of the Earth, to make the big shots come into line—and I’ll still do it. Yes, even from the moon! They can’t frame me like this!”

He relapsed into simmering silence. Nobody spoke. Most of them were thinking of the audacity of the scheme which had caused him to be captured. On Earth, at North and South Poles stood the giant power houses which, through the Earth’s natural dynamo-like spin against the ether, absorbed the power thus generated and transferred it to the world for every conceivable use.

And Ace had dared to monkey around with the North Station! That was why he was in the belly of the pen ship right now. Only one thing puzzled the other cons. Why had Ace made such a slip-up as to get himself captured?

The cons said nothing to him, but they whispered among themselves. It was better, they considered, to be a friend of Ace Durkan’s than a foe. A blow from one of those fists could have felled an ox.

The journey was over at last. The grinding of the ship’s nose as she touched Luna sent a quiver through the vessel which aroused the sleeping convicts in a body. Within minutes, linked together by chain, they were marching, blinking their eyes, along the narrow catwalk of steel leading to the massive external airlock. They narrowed their eyes at the blinding glare that smote them as they tramped with their weighted boots into the open.

Ace Durkan, first in the line, spat his disgust at what he saw. No wonder the place was called “White Hell.”

Here, on the moon’s other side—eternally turned from Earth—was a gigantic valley, drawn thus in the moon’s plasma by the pull of the mother world; a valley filled up to a 500 ft. altitude with passable atmosphere. Here, throughout the month-long day, verdure flourished in a crushing heat which usually achieved 130° F. in the shade. Yet at night it was 100° F. below zero. Bad though the ranges of temperature were, they had nothing on the frightful extremes of the earthward side, unprotected by any atmosphere whatsoever and open to the void.

Ace’s eyes took in the view of the great penitentiary itself perched on a massive rock in the center of the valley. Around it, spanned by metal drawbridges of almost medieval style, was a mile wide moat of molten lava, ejected from the still hot core of the moon’s interior.

Round the penitentiary itself was a twenty-foot wall with electrified wires round the top. Certainly it was no easy place to crack.

“Well, like your new home, big shot?” It was the sour voice of a granite-faced warder that spoke in Ace’s ear.

“Take more than that joint to hold me!” Ace retorted, smearing his hands down his tunic. “I’ve got ideas, see! Big ideas!”

“Yeah? Well, get movin’ while you think ’em out. Go on—quick! You’re holdin’ up the line.”

Ace marched on, scuffing up white dust round his heels as he went. He was perspiring freely by the time they had crossed the lava moat and entered the vast sundrenched yard. Here he was unfettered, taken apart from the rest into the broad, cool office of the Governor. He stood with feet apart, jaw projecting, the multiple fans blowing a cool draft round his red head.

A man with iron gray hair was busy at his desk. Ace glanced across at the opposite corner where a slim, dark girl was busy with a pile of papers. She caught his glance. He had time to see she was passably good looking, then she froze up at his impudent wink.

The man with the iron gray hair looked up sharply.

“Henry Durkan, eh?” He spoke grimly, leaned back in his chair and eyed Ace steadily.

“Yeah. Ace to you.”

“You’ll say ‘sir’ when you address me, Durkan—and if you know what’s good for you you’ll keep in line with regulations. You’ll be treated no better and no worse than the others here. I had you sent in here so I could see what sort of a man it is that had ringed a whole planet with crime.”

“So you figure I’m a sort of specimen, do you?” Ace breathed, slamming a mighty fist on the desk. “Well get this, Governor, I—”

“Take him out!” the Governor interrupted briefly. “Ore shift.”

Before he had a chance to continue Ace found himself whirled out into the corridor. Thereafter, sullen but passive, he went through the prison routine of haircut, measurement, allocation of duty, and so forth. He finished up in a cell with Soapy Andrews, a hatchet-faced con serving five years.

He made no observations, simply sat folded up on his bunk, hugging his knees, and gazing at the metal ceiling most of the time. At other times he watched Ace thoughtfully, but passed no comments. Accordingly Ace gave up ranting. No use raging at a guy who remained dumb.

The following day—by clock time since the day was a month long—Ace found himself busy with some hundred others just outside the prison yards, shoveling rock and ore into trucks—lunar ores, some of them rich with gold. Not that that was any advantage. Warders were dotted everywhere with flame guns and lashes. And behind them was that hellish moat of lava.

Ace was aware as he worked that the others watched him surreptitiously—some of them at least. Six of them kept talking to each other at intervals. Soapy Andrews in particular seemed to have thawed out completely for he had plenty to say, glancing at Ace as he talked.

Suddenly Ace slitted his eyes and dropped his shovel. He strode over to where Soapy was working and talking at the same time, whirled him round.

“Listen you!” He held him tightly by a fistful of front shirt. “I don’t like guys who talk about me when I’m not there to put my two cents worth in, see? What are you doin’? Tellin’

these mugs all about me? All you've weighed up about me in the cell, eh?"

"I was only tellin' them you're Ace Durkan—"

"So what? Any guy knows that! Now you get this—"

"And you get *this*, you big ape!" bellowed a warder, swooping down on the scene. "Get back to work, all of you! You too, Durkan! *Step* on it!"

Ace hesitated, fists clenched. The warder purpled.

"*I said get back to work!*" he bellowed, then snatching out his whip he whirled the vicious lashes round across Ace's bare back. Ace winced for a moment as the tails bit deep, then he gave a taut grin.

Springing forward suddenly he lashed out his left fist into the warder's stomach. As he doubled up, gasping, Ace slammed up his right with all his strength, felt his knuckles sting under the terrific impact. The warder reeled backward, crashing his length in white dust and lay still.

"Wise guy, eh?" Ace breathed, and the red bristles of his hair seemed to stand up in fury. Then warders were running from all directions, clutching his arms, his neck. A flame gun prodded in his back.

"Better take it easy," hissed a voice. "One more break like that and you're finished, Ace. It means the lethal chamber. O. K. boys, clap him in the Governor's office for sentence."

The other convicts stood watching in awe as he was bundled off down the slope to the executive building. Soapy Andrews' axlike face broke into an admiring grin.

"It's Ace all right, boys," he muttered. "Nobody but Ace would have that much nerve, anyway—but I just wanted to make sure. That was why I kept my trap shut in the cell last night. He's all right. We'd know him from his televised photo anyway. And he's got that scar in his back too—the one he got in that gang fight two years back. Remember?"

"He'll get the cooler for this," observed "Death" Anderson grimly.

"Yes, but when he comes out we've got to rope him into the Clique," Soapy went on quickly. "No time to lose. Can't figure out how he came to get trapped. Looks to me as though it sort of queers things from the Earth end. . . ."

They turned back to work as the warders came threateningly near.

CHAPTER II

Break for Liberty

Two “days” later a slightly subdued Ace emerged from solitary into the glare of sun once more. With the daylight and the return to ore loading his truculence seemed to slowly return—but evidently he had learned his lesson for he kept his fists in bounds. The others were not long in getting word to him.

Through devious mouths he learned of a meeting when they broke for the thirty minute recess at lunch. Accordingly, as they chewed the tough but perfectly wholesome food, Ace found a group of six cons around him, including Soapy Andrews.

“Well, what’s this?” Ace snapped. “Goin’ to start ribbin’ me for what I did to that warder, or what?”

“Cut it out, Ace,” Soapy entreated. “You don’t have to get sore with us. We’re your pals. We want to know how you came to get the skids under you. Why in hell did you let ’em bring you *here*? How are the boys going to manage on Earth?”

Ace glanced at the faces sharply. “Say, you’re the Clique!”

“Sure we are!” Soapy exclaimed. “Here are we, with everything doped out—ready to go to work—then we get the shock of our lives when they bring *you* in! What’s wrong on Earth? Did the scheme fail?”

“Like hell!” Ace grinned. “That’s only what these mugs think. I got captured on purpose, see? On purpose!”

“But why?” Death Anderson demanded blankly.

“Break it up there! Break it up!” A warder muscled his way through: but the group regathered afterward.

“*Why*?” Ace resumed. “So’s I could be sure you mugs had got the thing straight. I knew you boys of the Clique would make yourselves known to me in time: couldn’t afford to try to find you by myself; might have put me in a spot. You’ve been radioing to me asking me to help you with a vengeance scheme in retaliation for the way you mugs got caught and sent here—a scheme whereby Earth’s industry can be paralyzed and my agents can step in. O. K., I’ve fixed it.”

Soapy looked momentarily uncertain. “Look here, Ace, the set-up was for radio devices to be fixed at the two polar stations—devices which we could remote-control from here. If everything’s all set all we’ve got to do is throw the switches on the apparatus here and those two polar stations will go haywire and discharge their power into the seas of the Earth. The current will paralyze shipping, stop industry because power will be blocked, and generally give those hell fired big shots on Earth plenty to worry over. But you were caught at the Polar Station! So the scheme’s sunk. . . .”

“I was caught at the Polar Station, yes—but only when I was inspecting the works the boys had done before me,” Ace grinned. “I knew I’d be caught: I fixed it that way. No other way to get up here and see how you’d fixed the remote control. Don’t worry. Those two stations are fixed so no guy will ever find anything wrong, until we’re ready to go to town. Don’t you get it? I had to get here to be sure the transmitter is properly tuned. . . .”

“You mean,” Soapy said, “that you couldn’t trust to our radio messages?”

“Listen, mug, when I do a job I do it properly! I’m not here for keeps, any more than you guys are. Once this scheme is launched my boys have orders to get us released. You leave it to me. We’ll start the biggest control racket in history. Control from the moon is the best thing ever, cause the source of trouble is two hundred forty thousand miles off—and that’s plenty.” Ace paused and frowned. “Say, I don’t quite figure how you guys ever manage to get hold of radio apparatus capable of being used for remote control.”

“Simple enough,” Soapy smiled. “Halford works in the radio factory. That radio factory is right next door to the main scientific instrument room. That room has radio. He’s a trusty. Wasn’t difficult for him to get the low down on a new instrument they’ve got there—a four dimensional distance traveler—”

“You mean one of those new things which can shift inorganic matter any distance through the fourth dimension and do away with real transit?”

“Just that. Experimental yet, but practical enough, believe you me. All Halford had to do was get the components we needed from the radio factory, pack ’em when he could into a crate, shove the crate in the four dimensional transitor, and—Blooney! Off goes crate to a chosen spot on this blasted moon on the earthward side. A cave, as a matter of fact, already chosen. Naturally the radio messages were sent to Earth by Halford. He watched his chance. Not very difficult.”

“Nice going,” Ace murmured. “How do we get to this cave where you’ve sent the stuff?”

“We’ve got it all doped out. Once we’ve crossed this blasted moat we’re well away. The cave is under the surface about two miles west of Tycho Crater. We’ve figured it all out from the lunar map on the main wall of the lecture hall.”

“No air beyond this valley. Thought of that?”

Soapy grimaced. “Sure! Halford’s fixed that too. We’ve frisked wrist-watch radios, portable space suits, tabloid provisions, flame guns—all the dope, bit by bit. Halford’s projected them to a chosen spot across the moat in the jungle. We were only waiting for you to give the prearranged all-clear signal from Earth over the radio—which Halford would have heard of course—then we were going into action. Instead you turned up. Imagine the shock we got!”

“Yeah; I can imagine.”

Ace stood pondering for a moment—then conversation stopped perforce as the whistles of the warders blew for resumption of work. But Ace took good care to remain close to Soapy as he continued shoveling.

“Get this, Soapy; everything’s fixed from my end,” he breathed. “All we’re waiting for is whatever plan you’ve doped out for cheating this moat. What do you figure on doing?”

“Tell you in the cell—later.” Soapy went on shoveling as the warder hovered near.

Locked in for the “night,” the lights out, the prison a vast tomb of darkness with steel shades drawn over the barred windows to simulate earthly night, Soapy explained. His voice was a low whisper, so low that Ace, crouched next to him on his bunk, could barely hear it at times. One had to be careful to cheat the prison’s eavesdropping devices.

“We figure on using the Governor’s daughter for our permit—” Soapy whispered.

“Say, would that be the dame I saw in the Gov’s office the day I came? A dark one; swell figure?”

“That’s her. She works as secretary to her old man. Here’s the lay out. To get to the official building she crosses the pen every day at the bridge where the ore trucks go over. That

happens in the morning when she comes onto the island from the residence house on the hillside. She never misses a day. Now, by timing it, we can run a truck of ores directly over that bridge a few seconds before she arrives. We six boys will be on the truck; six are necessary you see. Figure it out for yourself. Once we've got her we've got the perfect hostage.

"Either those sourpusses at the gate lower the drawbridge and give us freedom to the hillside beyond the moat—where's it's a cinch to get to our cave—or else Gladys Dell gets the works. It just can't miss!"

Ace wagged his bullet head in the darkness. "I've got to hand it to you, Soapy: you think of everything. O. K., signal the boys in the morning and we'll grab off the dame. Suits me fine." And lying on his bunk he emitted a deep, complacent sigh.

It was the moon's hottest day next day, with the solar rays right overhead—new moon on Earth. By eight o'clock the cons were out at their usual job under the blinding rays, nearly naked, heads protected with vast sunproof hats. Six of the workers were watching every move that was made, watching for the signal by Soapy when the moment had come.

Soapy himself, noting the exact time from the shadow cast by the rock before which he worked—a shadow which, though a circle because of the sun's overhead position, moved slowly none the less—was tensed like steel wire. But he worked with apparent calm, just finished loading the massive truck with ores to the appointed time. The guard glanced over it and nodded.

Soapy climbed on one end, Ace on the other; the remaining four took up positions on the sides. Releasing the brakes, Soapy sent the truck skimming on its rails down the long slope that led to the grinding mill two miles away—a way peppered with watchful, armed sentinels.

"We'll have to work fast," Soapy said. "If they see us before we get the girl we'll be mowed like grass. It all hangs on whether she comes at the usual time. If she doesn't, we go straight on and try again tomorrow. But I think she will."

Ace nodded grimly. He glanced up at the guards stationed every sixty yards, staring down with hawk-like eyes. The bridge was five hundred yards away: under it passed the narrow white road, built by convict labor, which led from the main entrance gate of the island. Suddenly, as the truck took a slight curve, a slim figure in white carrying a brief case, merged into view.

"That's her—right on time!" Soapy whistled, applying the brakes very gently.

"Leave this to me. . . ." Ace tensed his muscles as the truck flew down the remaining stretch and slowed momentarily. In that second he leapt off, allowing the impetus of his run to carry him forward. He hooked his arm as he traveled, clamped it round the waist of the amazed girl and bore her to the ground. In two quick movements he had zipped off her heavy lead shoes. She became like a feather in his grasp.

Hardly had he finished before a flame gun charge ate the dust into ashes not a foot away from him. Purposely making a haze, the other five came tumbling down the bank. When the dust had cleared the guards beheld six grim convicts by the bridge, Ace holding the girl aloft with consummate ease by the belt of her costume. He ignored her frantic strugglings completely.

"Hey, you mugs up there!" he bellowed. "Fire at us and this dame's finished, see? One shot—that's all—and the Governor'll be finding a fresh daughter."

He grinned up at the girl's furious, frightened face as he marched along in the midst of his companions. Quarter of a mile up the white road brought them to the main gate. The guards leveled their guns, but like those lining the truckway they hesitated at the sight of the upraised girl.

"Fire at them!" she screamed hoarsely. "Fire! They won't—"

"Oh yes we will!" roared Soapy. "You can't get the lot of us at one go, anyway, and whoever's left will finish the dame. We mean business!"

Ace lowered the girl to the ground, kept a mighty hand on the back of her neck, a grip in which she squirmed and twisted helplessly.

"Open that gate and lower the bridge!" he commanded. "And step on it!"

The guards stood motionless, uncertain. Up on the wall the alarm siren began to whine piercingly.

"Quick, blast you!" Ace thundered. "Open up by the time I've counted five or I'll twist this dame's neck so far round she'll think she's a parrot. One—two—"

The guards stirred. Up on the wall long range flame guns slashed down and carved a smoking line round the seven; but it did not dare to strike them.

"You fools!" screamed the girl. "Never mind me—get these men! They're desperate criminals—murderers—!" Soapy's hand closed over her mouth.

"Three . . ." Ace said inexorably, and the girl gave a stifled cry as his fingers tightened on her neck.

"Four . . ." A guard closed a master switch. Automatically the mighty grille began to move upward as the moat drawbridge lowered. In an instant Ace bundled the girl forward, raced along the bridge with his companions to the safety of the land beyond.

Rays criss-crossed in deadly fire in front of them, cutting ground under their feet.

"O. K., keep going!" Soapy panted. "This way— We want Martian's Head Rock."

He led the way through the blasting of rays and rising dust, up the rough hillside sprawling in places with the month long verdure. Once within its density the mighty leaves, like those of gargantuan rhubarb, hid them from the prison. For all that, foliage wilted and sizzled here and there at the prodding of an investigatory beam.

Ace grinned, relaxed his iron grip on the girl, even though he still held her firmly.

"Thanks sister," he murmured. "Guess you're the best looking passport I ever saw!"

"If you think you can get away with this—" she began hotly.

"Sure we can. You're our insurance. Keep going and keep your trap shut! Go on!" He shoved her forward, only grinned again at the fury expressed on her regular, sensitive features, the flaming anger in her dark eyes. She went on willy-nilly, Soapy still leading the way with unerring accuracy, and the more they advanced into the tangle of vegetation the more the screaming and screeching from the prison abated in the distance.

At last Soapy stopped, dived toward a solitary rock in the tangle, a rock which was shaped roughly after the style of a Martian's head. The movements of his arms inside the hollow mass finally brought forth seven space suits of the lighter, transparent variety, several air tanks with their appropriate toxic-consuming apparatus, tabloid foods and drink, a box full of sealing apparatus, and finally several wrist watch radios.

"All these wrist radios are set to one wavelength," Soapy explained. "Strap 'em on—each one of you. If anything happens so we get split up we can talk to each other. There's seven here: one each."

Without a word the others took one each, then shouldered the stuff and marched on, not pausing again until thirty minutes later when they arrived at a thinner portion of the jungle and a massive natural crater in the ground.

Soapy stopped, signaled to the suits.

“Once down here and we’re all set,” he said briefly. “This takes us right through the honeycomb to the other side of the moon.”

“Say, you don’t mean the whole two thousand miles?” Ace looked astounded.

“No; about a hundred an’ fifty. We’re pretty near the terminator^[1] right here and a hundred and fifty miles under the surface brings us out at the earthward side and the cave where the stuff is. Not much of a job: most of it can be done by floating.”

[1] Terminator: The boundary between light and dark parts of the moon. Since it was *new* moon, the boundary would be only slight.—Author.

Soapy kicked off his leaded boots and climbed purposely into his suit, finally closed the clasps and stood inside it, every part of him visible since it was as transparent as cellophane. He nodded as he adjusted the air pressure and feeder on his back, then connected the speaker phone tuned to operate by electric vibration when airless conditions were finally reached.

Gladys Dell struggled like a maniac as she was forced into one of the suits, but in the end, realizing the utter uselessness of fighting, she stood passive while Ace sealed her up. Her grim, exasperated face looked back at him through the helmet.

“Just wait until my father tracks you down!” she breathed. “You’ll get the lethal chamber for this—all of you!”

“Not while we have you,” Ace reminded her shortly. “Go on—get moving!”

Stumbling, the girl followed Soapy over the crater rim and down the rubbly slope that led to the honeycomb of the moon’s interior. The men switched on their helmet lights, went deeper and deeper into the moon’s depths as Soapy led the way. Here and there they jumped down a hundred feet of sheer cliff, to land like feathers with the moon’s sixth gravity.

In spite of herself Gladys remained close to Ace. There was something about this grim, silent tomb with its pumice walls and endless corridors of volcanic stone that frightened her. Criminal he might be, but there was packed power in that mighty body, protection in those great hands. Once she found herself wondering why a man with such a forehead had chosen crime for his career. Then she caught him smiling at her insolently in the lamplight. Tight lipped, she stared in front of her and marched on.

“Say, wait a minute!” Soapy stopped, his microphoned voice echoing eerily in the tunnel’s abysmal reaches. “Do you feel something?” he demanded.

The others stopped, detecting what he meant. The floor of the tunnel was trembling with gradually increasing force.

“If there were air we’d hear roars—that’s certain,” Death Anderson said, startled.

Soapy’s face was alarmed behind his helmet. “I don’t like it, boys—maybe internal trouble. This old hulk of a moon blows off her insides at unexpected moments. Keep your eyes peeled for trouble!”

CHAPTER III

“I Want to Help You, Ace”

They advanced again, bodies tense for sudden upheavals—but even so they were not prepared for the devastating suddenness with which things happened. Unwarned by advance sound they had no idea what to expect.

In consequence it came as a staggering shock to them when the ground rocked suddenly under their feet and hurled them helplessly down the passage. The roof buckled inward in a cloud of dust. Boulders and masses of pumice rock came crumbling down in blinding haze. Vibration crashed along the floor—but the whole thing happened in perfect silence.

Ace scrambled to his feet, staring round on his companions, then back at the chasm that had crumbled in the floor behind them. The whole roof had caved inward, it appeared, and so had the floor. There was no way back down the tunnel except through a small hole left unexpectedly in the barrier.

“Subsidence—volcanic subsidence,” Soapy panted. “Common enough, I guess— Say, where’s the girl?” He broke off in alarm.

“That’s what’s got me worried,” Ace retorted, staring round. Then as a faint shout came to his ears he leapt to the chasm edge.

“Help! Get me out of here!”

His helmet light stabbed the dusty dark to reveal Gladys Dell clinging for dear life to an outflung spire of rock, while below her yawned an abyss of nothing. She threshed desperately as the light fell on her. Her terrified face stared upward.

“Quick—I’m slipping! Rock’s too slippery to cling to!”

Ace saw the situation in a moment. Despite the weak gravity the girl could not haul herself up that sheer mass. He slid himself over the chasm rim, clutching to whatever projections he could find, lowered himself down by inches. Within a foot of the girl her grip suddenly failed. She screamed wildly—

Diving frantically, Ace caught her wrist momentarily, but a second later she was gone, tumbling head over heels with feathery slowness into the abyss. Ace cursed, took a flying leap outward and dropped down after her. Five hundred feet below he hit bottom, flexed his knees automatically and dropped harmlessly. The girl was sprawled face downward on the cleft floor, unhurt but unconscious.

“Hey there! You O. K., Ace?” It was Soapy’s voice, vibrating from the top of the shaft.

“Yeah—the dame’s passed out. I’ll figure a way to get her back.”

Ace turned the girl over, slapped her gloved hands, shook her violently. At last her eyes opened and blinked in the lamp glare.

“I—Oh, it’s you!” She recognized him with a start of alarm.

“Just about the dumb thing a dame would do to drop down this blasted hole,” he growled. “I came down after you.”

“I couldn’t hold on any longer—” She stared at him quizzically, then up at the yawning shaft. “You—you mean you jumped all this way after me—to save me?”

“What do you think?” he growled. “Get it out of your noodle, kid, that I want to hurt you. I don’t. You’re just a passport to freedom, see? Alone, I knew you couldn’t get out of this crack. With me, you might make it.” He glanced at the walls in the beam. “No way up on the

side we want,” he observed. “Have to take the other side: a bit rougher there. Once we’re at the top we can easily leap the chasm. Let’s get moving.”

He swept the girl to her feet, tossed her over his mighty shoulders before she realized what was happening. Turning, he strode to the further wall and began climbing, digging the tough boots of his suit and the sharp claws of his gloves into the rocks. Aided by the lesser gravity and his own great strength, he began to climb.

Time and again Gladys’ heart nearly stopped beating as he slipped a little. A fall now with both their weights would inevitably injure them seriously, despite the lesser gravity. And the higher they got the worse the hazard became. Gladys realized as she clung with both hands to Ace’s belt how utterly impossible it would have been for her to ascend alone. She felt an unexpected new interest in this red-haired giant, even if he was a criminal big-shot and escaped con.

It seemed hours to her before he at last set her on her feet, grinned at her and jabbed a finger back at the chasm. He glanced across the sixty foot gap to where the others were waiting with blazing lamps.

“Make this jump easy enough,” he said.

The girl nodded slowly. Her eyes turned to survey the rock wall that had dropped behind them . . . and particularly the small hole left to her right. She hesitated briefly as Ace stood measuring the chasm width with his eyes—then suddenly she turned, dived for the hole, and thrust her head and slim shoulders through it. It was just wide enough.

With a desperate wriggle she forced herself through, felt Ace’s fingers miss their grip on her withdrawing ankles. Looking back through the hole she saw his angry face behind its helmet.

“Come back here!” he bellowed, helplessly trying to squeeze his great shoulders into the gap.

“No thanks, big shot!” her voice echoed back. “Thanks a lot for saving my life—that was swell of you, but I’m the kind of girl who prefers peace and quiet to hiking around with a lot of fugitives. One of you might turn nasty and bump me off.”

She turned away and was gone. Ace stood breathing hard, swearing.

“Say, she’ll tell her old man exactly where we are!” Soapy yelled. “They’ll follow the tunnel through. Some of the warders might be thin enough to get through that gap.”

“Not if I know it!” Ace retorted, and whipping out his flame gun he turned it on the barrier. The slablike rock causing the hole shattered instantly allowing the mass to fall inward. The barrier was complete now, impassable save by the use of exhaustive batteries of heavy ray cannons.

“Nobody’ll get through that,” Ace growled. Slapping his gun back in place he tautened his legs and leapt, glared round on Soapy and the others as they looked at him sharply.

“Might have been better to have left the dame down there for keeps,” Soapy reflected. “Don’t trust dames. Never did.”

“You keep your trap shut!” Ace snapped. “I do as I like, see, and no guy can stop me! Let’s go!”

It was four hours later when the party finally arrived at a small natural cave. Soapy called a halt and flashed his torch round on a crate on the dusty floor, then up at the rough roof.

“All set,” he grinned. “This is the place. We’re two miles from Tycho. There’s an entrance from the surface through a rill—you can see it there—the sunlight makes a thin line up there. Best way, though, is the way we came, up the tunnels. Guess we’re double safe here now that subsidence is in the way. There’s the crate Halford sent. O. K., we go to work sealing this cave and getting rid of these damned suits.”

They unloaded their equipment, set to work with the special tape and lengths of sealing fabric which firmly magnetized itself to the rocky sides of all gaps, large and small, making it air tight. In an hour the place was completely sealed. The cylinders were set up, hissed gently, and the toxic consumers automatically responded.

Ace peeled off his space suit with a grateful sigh and mopped his face.

“Nice going,” he murmured, unpacking the food tabloids.

Once they had rested and eaten he said slowly, “Get one thing, boys. I’m taking charge from now on, see? I know exactly how things are set on earth and there’s only me can handle it. First thing we want is the ordinary radio transmitter-receiver.”

Soapy nodded. He and the others fell on the crate with tools and smashed it open. Within an hour they had the small self-contained apparatus fully erected. Ace squatted before it, turning the numbered dials gently, speaking softly into the tiny microphone.

“41 calling 42. . . .” he intoned. “41 calling 42. . . .”

“Code?” Soapy asked briefly, standing round with the others.

Ace nodded his red head.

“But that isn’t the wavelength that Halford used to contact you on Earth!” Death Anderson pointed out. “Are you sure you’ve gotten it right—?”

“Course I’m sure, you dope!” Ace retorted. “That was *me* you contacted before—or rather Halford did. This is my best man I’m trying to get—Clayton. We arranged for a code on a special wavelength before I left.”

The others became silent, then they looked up sharply as a voice spoke at last in the speaker.

“42 calling 41. Transmit. Over to you.”

“41 contacting. All set. Advise others. Prepare for departure. Settle at Tycho Crater. You will be directed from there. Will be delay at this end during construction of remote control. Repeat.”

The message repeated steadily.

“O. K.,” Ace said, and switched off. The others looked at him quickly.

“You’ve sent for your boys to come *here*?” Soapy asked sharply.

Ace swung round. “Some of them. Dammit man, we’ve got to have some agents to secure our release from here, haven’t we? Those left on Earth will go to work dictating similar terms when we cripple industry. The whole thing’s worked out perfectly. Good man, 42. Always reliable. Right now our job is to rush this remote control apparatus to completion. Let’s get started.”

They turned to the task actively, following out details all of them knew by heart. Ace worked as hard as any of them, for upon him rested the onus of determining the exact winding of the coils necessary to the conversion of the ordinary transmitter. It was slow, laborious work demanding absolute exactitude.

“Take about three days to finish this,” Ace observed at last, flinging down his tools and yawning. “Guess we’ll pack in for the time being and carry on after a sleep.”

The others nodded, took up what positions they could find in various parts of the cave. Ace found himself dozing quickly. He was awakened finally by a persistent buzzing close to his ear. Puzzled, he glanced up, found he had his head pillowed on his arms. It was his wrist watch radio which was making the noise. Somebody was trying to establish contact. Frowning, he depressed the receiver stem, hooked the tiny audiophone in his ear.

“Ace?” It was Gladys Dell’s voice. Of course, it had to be her voice, Ace reflected. Outside those in the cave she was the only other person with the correct wrist watch radio wavelength.

“Yeah, this is Ace. Say, what’s the idea? If you’re trying to establish a contact so your old man and the guards can come in and get us, think again!”

“No—no, wait a minute!” The girl’s voice sounded genuinely urgent. “I’ve got to see you, Ace. I’ve *got* to! You’re going to walk right into a trap!”

“You mean you *think* I’m going to walk into a trap!”

The others in the cave sat up and listened. Ace’s voice was not exactly quiet. The girl’s replies were inaudible to them, of course.

“Ace,” went on her voice in his ear, “your radio message to the Earth must have been intercepted—and it means trouble for you! I’ve got to tell you personally. . . .”

“What means have I of knowing you’re on the level?”

“Listen, if I join you on my own without anybody else with me that will prove I’m on the level, won’t it? I’ll be your hostage if I do that. Right now I’m on the moon’s surface near Tycho. I couldn’t get through the tunnel, of course. Your radio message said something about you being near Tycho so I figured there might be a way in from above. How do I get to you?”

Ace hesitated for a moment, then he said, “I’ll come to the surface and join you, direct you here. But I warn you that if you pull anything I’ll drop you where you stand! Advance westward from Tycho. I’ll see you in a moment.”

He switched off and compressed his lips for a moment.

“The dame, eh?” Soapy demanded bitterly. “What did I tell you? You can’t trust ’em, Ace. It’s a trap—sure as hell.”

“I don’t reckon it is!” Ace retorted, scrambling into a space suit. “The dame’s doing this on her own; her old man would never allow her to roam around the moon’s surface, and in the night too, even to form part of a plan. Nope—she’s on the level, but I can’t figure what her angle is.”

He fixed his helmet in position, opened the small trap that existed in the sealing barrier over the crack in the roof, quickly eased himself up into the night surface of the moon and closed the trap behind him. The stars glittered like points of white hot steel in the airless void. On the horizon Earth hung bluely.

Then Ace grinned a little as he caught a glimpse of a solitary space suited figure half a mile away under the stars. He walked slowly through the lava dust to join it. It was the girl all right, completely alone, backed by the titanic mass of Tycho’s crater. Coming up to her at last he saw her face was anxious in the star and earthshine.

“Ace!” her gloved hand caught his wrist. “Ace, I’m doing this for one reason only. You saved my life back in that chasm. I couldn’t have gotten out of it except for you. So when I heard something over dad’s radio I decided I ought to give you a break and tell you about it. I had come this far because the wrist radio only works at a mile range.”

They had reached the crack as they talked. He swung her up in his arms, lowered her down through the vacuum trap. Once inside the cave with their space suits off he said briefly, "Well, out with it! What's on your mind?"

"You radioed to Earth not long ago, didn't you? Saying your plans were all set and giving directions to your agents?"

"Well?" Ace's face tautened.

"You thought your message was received by one of your best agents—but it wasn't! It was the Space Authorities who took it!"

Ace's lips set in a tight, hard line. He glanced at the grim expressions of the others.

"How come you know all this?" he asked briefly. "Don't tell me your old man's sitting down calmly taking radio messages when we guys are wanted?"

"Queer though it is, that's exactly what he *is* doing!" Gladys replied quickly. "Once he was assured I'd got back home unharmed he did not seem at all worried . . . but there's a reason for that. You see, I was with him when those messages came through, and it seems that a space ship is leaving Earth for here. *You* expect it will be carrying agents of yours who will secure your release from here—but you're wrong, Ace! It's bringing a load of S. A. men and at the head of them is none other than No. 7, the toughest investigator in the system! So dad wants you all here in a bunch for a surprise capture by No. 7!"

"The dirty, double crossing skunks—" Soapy began thickly; then Ace cut him short.

"Shut up! This wants thinking about. Clayton—42—must have got himself caught, the dimwit!" Ace stroked his stubbly chin quickly. "So the whole set up's been queered from the Earth end, has it? So they figured to send these S. A. men in place of my boys? Come right to this cave and rope in the lot of us, eh? Nice going. *Very* nice going!"

"We've got to get out of here and scatter," Soapy said hurriedly. "Once that guy No. 7 lands we're sunk. He's a human ferret, bloodhound, and snake rolled into one."

"I'd like to be sure this dame's telling the truth," growled Death Anderson. "How the heck do we know that this ain't a scheme to stop us putting our plan in action—?"

"Oh, don't be a dumb-bell!" Ace snorted. "Hasn't she repeated the very message we sent to Earth? Doesn't that prove the Governor knows all about it? Our idea is queered all right, and until we sort ourselves out our scheme for control over Earthly industry and liberty from the moon here, is wrecked. But we're not going to scam out of here," he went on slowly, eyes narrowed in thought. "No. 7 and his boys are coming. O. K., we'll finish the radio remote control, but we'll use it for a different purpose! We'll give those bright lads a welcome they don't expect!"

"Such as?" Soapy demanded.

"By a little matter of adjustment that transmitter can be made so that the remote control wave is vibratory within a range of five miles. It wouldn't work in atmosphere; too much resistance—but in a void it's a cinch. Now, the firing cylinders on a space machine use flashnite fuel. Flashnite goes off like hell at the least sign of unexpected vibration! Hence the shock proof chambers it's loaded into. Radio vibrations touching the powder, passing through the ship's chambers, will blow the entire ship to blazes. Get it?"

"Say, you've got something there!" Soapy's eyes gleamed. "Blow 7 and his whole darned outfit to Hades, eh?"

"Just that," Ace agreed slowly. "They're bound to come over Tycho's rim in order to land near that roof crack and come in here. One of us will watch from the crack and give the signal.

Once that happens it's a cinch. That's better than scattering. Come on—to work!"

"I suppose you realize you're planning cold blooded murder?" Gladys asked bitterly, as she watched Ace swing around and set about the radio apparatus again with nimble fingers.

"It's them or us, sister," he retorted. "And if they're cleared out of the way it also clears the toughest nut out of the whole System—No. 7. Once he and his boys are out of the way we'll think up new ways of forcing our ends. We're out of the pen, see, and we mean to stay out. Recapture means death anyway, so what's the difference? Might as well sink everything in an effort to beat the rap."

Gladys clenched her fists helplessly. "If I'd thought for one moment that I'd be throwing away valuable lives for worthless ones, I'd never have taken the risk of coming here! You're rotten all through—all of you! Well, serves me right, I guess."

She turned away disgustedly and flung herself in a corner, watched in bitter silence.

"Just the same, kid, we appreciate your nerve. Don't we, boys?" Ace glanced at the others, winked, then joined in the guffaw of laughter.

"Women are just suckers for trouble," Soapy observed finally.

"And will your old man be sore when he finds you've gone again!" Ace chuckled.

Gladys was silent for a moment, then she said quietly. "That's the one thing I'm counting on now. When my father finds I've gone he'll not wait for No. 7. He'll go into action himself and come after me—to this place. He'll clean up the whole rotten bunch of you!"

Ace shrugged. "Let him! Soon as any guy pokes his ugly pan in here you become our hostage again. You're the goose that lays the golden eggs, see?"

Gladys relapsed into troubled silence, looked despondently round her. There was obviously no way to stop this brutal plan of murder. What inner ideas she had on possible scruples on Ace's part—the very thought that had driven her to the impulse to give him a break—had now vanished. She was convinced at last of his devilish nature. It was no longer a wonder to her that he had become Earth's toughest racketeer.

CHAPTER IV

Number 7

Between intervals of sleeping, eating tabloid foods, and nursing her private disgust—hoping for the succor which never came—Gladys was aware of the progress of Ace’s scheme. She saw the final completion of the remote control apparatus and his elaborate tests.

Time and again he went through the vacuum trap in the roof to the surface to make tests while Soapy threw the switches on the device. Then he would return and recalculate, to finally pronounce himself satisfied.

“All set!” he proclaimed, stuffing away the notes he had made. “The minute that ship shows herself over Tycho’s rim we throw the switches, and then—! Exit No. 7. After that we figure further.” He considered for a moment. “If they left at the time we fixed for our own boys their ship should be visible from here in about another hour. Soapy, get to the surface and keep a lookout. The moment you see her rocket jets out in space let me know. Then I’ll take over. You’ll fire the radio control at my signal. I know the exact point the ship had to be to get the full force.”

“O. K.” Soapy climbed into his suit and struggled up to the surface. Ace watched the trap close then paced about slowly, pondering.

“Listen, Ace . . .” Gladys got up and caught his arm. “If you drop this—this fiendish idea maybe I can get my father to grant you all a reprieve from the lethal chamber.”

“Yeah? Don’t make me laugh!” Ace looked at her solemnly with his insolent blue eyes. “No, kid, this goes through, right to the finish! Men’s wars are things no dame should be mixed up in. It was big of you to give us the lowdown as you did and I’ll see you get returned safely home to the settlement once we’ve cleaned up 7 and his boys. After that— We’ll see which way the comets travel,” he sighed, using a slang term of the day.

Gladys parted her lips to speak, but she stopped as Soapy came clambering back suddenly into the cave.

“They’re coming, Ace! About three hundred miles off!”

“Right!” Ace wheeled round and clambered into his space suit, rattled off final instructions. “I’m trailing this bulb wire after me, see? When I depress the switch and the red light goes up here that means for you to throw the radio switches. All set?”

Soapy O’d his first finger and thumb and sat at the controls. Gladys watched in helpless silence as Ace heaved himself through the trap to the surface. She turned to look at Soapy, her mind pursuing the idea of somehow preventing him. But that was not possible. The other four men were around, flame guns at their hips, watching her narrowly.

She sat down on her accustomed piece of rock at last, waiting. Mentally, she figured the time it would take the ship to reach Tycho. 300 miles: a tiny hop in airless space.

Yet it seemed hours to her before the red light suddenly gleamed. Instantly Soapy closed the switches on the apparatus, listened with a satisfied smile to the whine of the self contained generators. Gladys cramped her eyes shut for a moment, somehow waiting for the din of the explosion, until she remembered that there being no air outside not a sound would arrive.

She swung round suddenly as Ace came scrambling back through the trap. Tearing off his helmet he raced across to Soapy, whirled him up by the collar and pinned him against the wall.

“What’s the idea of the double cross, Soapy? You dirty, crawling little rat, I’ve a good mind to—”

“But—but Ace, I fired, just as you told me! I—”

“You couldn’t have done! The ship didn’t even quiver! It’s landed near Tycho and those boys are heading for here—!”

The others vaulted to their feet at that. One of them shouted,

“He fired it O. K. on the flash, Ace. We all saw him.”

“Right enough, master mind,” put in Gladys calmly. “I saw it too. So it failed, eh?” She smiled twistedly. “Well, it serves you right! Now think your way out of this one!”

Ace scratched his head furiously. “Must have gotten it wrong some place—calculated wrong. Else they’re using a new fuel. O. K., Soapy, I’m sorry; thought you were trying to pull something.” He broke off, looked grimly round, then tugged out his flame gun. “Now get this,” he said briefly. “We haven’t time to get away, and the only thing left is to shoot it out when those boys poke their snoots through that trap. Come here you!” He caught Gladys by the arm and whirled her to him. “You’ll be useful to stop attack,” he added shortly.

“And if they don’t see me and shoot first?”

“That’s going to be too bad for the guy that shoots you,” Ace retorted. “We take that chance. O. K., boys—all of you get in a bunch over there. I’m stopping here in dead line with the trap with the dame in front of me. Right—now we’re set. When you get my signal, let ’em have it.”

He crouched beside the massive rock the girl had been sitting on, held her tight against him, leveled his gun. The others took cover at the far end of the cave, watching and waiting.

Minutes passed, then came the sound of heavy space boots on the rock above, the sound transmitted through the cave’s air. There was a fumbling with the trap switches and a boot came through. Ace tightened his hold on his gun as the first space-suited man dropped through.

Gladys attempted to scream, but Ace’s hand closed over her mouth. The man in the trap turned round slowly, leveled his gun cautiously. To him the cave was apparently empty.

Soapy, in Ace’s line of vision, made frantic gestures—but Ace shook his head. It seemed evident that it was his intention to lure all the S. A. men inside before he went to work. They came gradually until six of them were present, guns in hand. Then leaning forward round the rock out of sight of Soapy, Ace said quietly, “Over there in the corner, boys!”

Instantly the S. A. men twirled round, leveled their guns on the astounded Soapy and his four comrades before they even had a chance to depress the switches on their weapons.

“O. K., come out of it!” snapped the leader of the S. A. party.

Soapy got slowly to his feet, his face malevolent. Ace jumped to his feet too, but instead of using his gun he thrust it back in his belt.

“Nice work, boys,” he murmured, as the five cons stood up, fully covered, their faces white with fury.

“By God, Ace—you *are* No. 7!” Soapy screamed suddenly, in mad rage. “You dirty, lying, double-timing—”

“Keep your trap shut!” Ace snapped. He turned to the leader of the party. “All right boys, clap space suits on ’em and take ’em away. That’s the whole bunch. I’ve one or two details to clear up.”

He stood watching the procedure with a taut smile round his lips. Suddenly he turned as Gladys caught his arm.

“Then—then you’re not a criminal at all?” she asked. “You’re a detective? You’re No. 7 really?”

“Peeved?” he grinned.

“No, but I—” She looked away, discomfited. “I’m just wondering what you must think about me for the things I called you.”

“And I’m wondering what you think of my rough handling of you,” he laughed. “I guess we’re quits, eh?” He threw a mighty arm across her shoulders, went on seriously, “Miss Dell, you have given me some of the most alarming moments of my entire career!”

She marveled inwardly at the sudden change in his voice from coarseness to mellowness; the sudden disappearance of slang.

“I have alarmed *you!*” she echoed.

“Yes. I’m No. 7, yes—and your dad knows it too: that was why he was so complacent. The whole thing was arranged. The Earth authorities trapped the real Ace long ago. But that did not clear up the other crooks operating here from the moon, and who might still cause a whole lot of danger unless they were stopped. Plastic surgery remodeled me to look like Ace. I studied him—every mannerism. When I was perfect I came to the moon in a pen ship. My main object was to trap those five guys in a bunch.”

“Then when you radioed to Earth to your supposed criminal agents you really gave the all-clear signal to your S. A. friends?”

“Quite correct. Then you came into it. My plans were all set. The boys would have come here, and—thinking them friends—those crooks would have made no effort to stop them entering. But you queered everything by accidentally overhearing your dad’s radio. Your warning here looked very likely for breaking up the crooks and scattering them.

“It might be months—if ever—before they could be tracked down in a rambling place like this moon. I had to think up hasty ways of keeping them here in a bunch. I suggested supposed ways of smashing up the approaching ship. Naturally, I knew it would never work, but they fell for it. On the surface, I signaled my S. A. boys where to come. Then I came below and raised hell with Soapy. It was quite interesting, if a little strained, while it lasted. When I was in solitary I radioed Earth and told them all I’d found out. The rest was up to chance, to whether the Clique moved once they had made themselves known to me. My fake attack on that warder convinced them I was the genuine article.”

“Then my being kidnaped was genuine?”

“Yes. But I took charge of you to be sure you didn’t get hurt. You played an unwitting part magnificently. Now you know why I couldn’t let you die in that chasm. The real Ace would have left you, believe me.”

“You’re sure that was the *only* reason you saved me?” she asked, smiling.

It seemed queer to her that a man so tough could look so suddenly embarrassed.

“Suppose we get back to your old man and talk it over?” he murmured, handing her her space suit.

[The end of *Lunar Intrigue* by John Russell Fearn (as Thornton Ayre)]