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**STORIES**

**CAVERN OF THE  
SHINING POOL**

A Novelette of  
Time's Vortex

By  
**ARTHUR  
LEO  
ZAGAT**

A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

**THE IMMORTALITY SEEKERS**

An Interplanetary Novelette  
By **JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR.**



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# The CAVERN of the SHINING POOL

A Complete Novelette of  
An Adventure in  
Relativity

By ARTHUR LEO  
ZAGAT

*Author of "The Land Where  
Time Stood Still," "The  
Lanson Screen," etc.*

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Gurd Silton Speeds Into the Cosmos to Solve the  
Riddle of a Hole in Space!

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*I fired the trinite gun with a prayer*

## CHAPTER I

### *The Ether Eddy*

I jerked down the result-lever of my Merton Calculator, and the rattle of its gears was loud in the deserted reaches of Flight Control Headquarters. The flight-graph imprinted itself on the space-chart, the thin red line that would guide the newly launched *Phobos* on her maiden voyage to Venus. I glanced through the transparent quartz wall at her tremendous bulk, vague on the vast tarmac of New York's Spaceship Terminus in the brooding dark of 3 a.m.

The graph line I had just traced jogged erratically, a million and a half miles out, detouring the *Phobos*' course a hundred thousand miles. That hump was why I was here, alone in the crystal hive. At midnight the message had pulsed in on the infrared ray from the domed air-cell on the Moon where gaunt men ceaselessly scan the skies that Trade may ply unhampered between Earth and her sister planets.

In their electelsopes a far-flung shimmer had appeared across the blackness of space and they had leaped to send warning of the one unconquered menace that harried the spaceways. *An ether eddy!*

Sometimes I thought the old memories drowned, the thirty-year long agony ended, that had wiped out for me forever the thrill of space flight, the transcendent joy of leaping from this wrinkled ball of ours and hurtling, godlike, among the stars. Then that word, that damned word that had stripped the winged rocket from my tunic and made of me a half alive juggler of charts and figures, would strike my ears. The years would fade and I would be in hell again.

As now. I saw Jay again, my brother, too poignantly real across the span of three decades. I saw the wide-shouldered, thick-legged bulk of him, a strand of yellow hair straggling over his brow, his broad-planed face flushed with the excitement of his first command. I felt my hand crushed in his own as I wished him the immemorial "Happy landing."

The *Luna*'s hatch shut him from my sight. The great craft blasted-off from Earth. The scene shifted. In tortured imagining I bent over an electelscope view field, pride pulsing in my veins as I watched the long, clean arc of his flight. He had learned my teaching well, the bantling. He would push me hard for my laurels as ace of Earth's space fleet.

Then there was that black shimmer across the firmament's spangled black. The *Luna* plunged straight into it—and vanished!

There—where a moment ago she had been, even in her tininess, majestic as

a symbol of man's conquest of unimaginable distances, unrealizable cold—there the inscrutable panoply of the stars stared horror at me and only a faint trail of rocket gas, glowing and fading in the vacancy, showed that the *Luna* had ever been.

In the madness that took me, I ripped the insignia of my craft from my blouse and swore that never again should I leave Earth's atmosphere. I kept that oath, but my great need drew me back to this place where the space ships, in ever increasing numbers, leaped for the stars.

Here, while I moldered in the dull routine of my clerk's job, I could watch the swaggering youngsters who wore the winged rocket and pretend to myself that perhaps the next craft to land would bring Jay back to me. Here I had grown old. . . .

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**T**he little hairs prickled on the nape of my neck. The silence about me was eerie, the shadows played tricks on my overwrought nerves. Somehow I felt that I was not alone. And I was afraid.

A furtive sound whispered behind me. My eyes flicked the desk for a weapon, found none. I forced my swivel chair around, every nerve protesting.

A tall figure stood in the dimness near the door, black-cloaked, shapeless. Beneath its black hood was the pale oval of a face out of which eyes glittered, catlike, in some vagrant gleam. The figure was motionless, and all the more menacing because of its immobility. I thought of the lead-capsuled radium in the strongroom beyond my desk, the pellets that multiplied tenfold the power of the oxy-hydrogen mixture in the fuel tanks. Five million solar dollars would not replace them. But what thief would dare the photroncells' spray of death that guarded the treasure?

The intruder moved.

"Who are you?" I rasped. "What do you want?"

A voice came from the shape, a strained, hoarse voice.

"I'm looking for Captain Silton."

Unaccountably blood thumped in my ears. My collar was suddenly tight.

"I'm Silton," I grunted.

"But I mean Gurd Silton, commander of the *Terra*."

Long shivers ran through me, and a mad, impossible thought clamored. That voice!

"I am Gurd Silton," I croaked. "And once I commanded the *Terra*." I was no longer afraid. The ague that shook me was not of fear.

"You—you Gurd Silton!" The other's arm came up. Shrouded by the fabric of his cloak it pointed at me like a bat's wing. "You—impossible. You are an old man, and—"

I heaved from my chair.

“Who are you?” I said. “In God’s name, who are you?”

I hurled myself across the space between, ripped the cloak away before he could stop me, jerked the hood from his head. And then I saw him—tousled yellow hair, a long strand dipping across his clear brow; frank grey eyes, small now in puzzlement; broad-planed, youthful face. I saw wide shoulders and thick legs planted in an old, familiar stance. Sound ripped from my throat. “Jay!”

He warded me off.

“I’m Jay Silton, all right. But you’re white-haired, wrinkled! You’re an old man. You *can’t* be Gurd!”

A queer rage thickened my utterance.

“What did you expect? Thirty years don’t leave a man’s hair black.”

And then it hit me! Jay wasn’t changed at all. He was still, apparently, a youth of twenty!

He was staring at me with wide, incredulous eyes.

“Thirty years,” he whispered. “Why, it’s only a month since—”

Chaos whirled within my skull. Was I still in the delirium that had followed his vanishment, my long Calvary only a nightmare? I saw the space-chart, saw the date imprinted at its upper edge. November 16, 2048! I pointed to it.

“Look!” I said huskily.

My brother stared at the paper. A vein pulsed in his neck. He drew the back of a closed fist across his forehead and words dripped from his working mouth.

“But I swear it’s not a month since we—lost our way. Why, there’s still food left on the *Luna* and we had only a month’s supply.”

His hand came out in a gesture of utter bewilderment.

“Gurd! Where have all the years gone?” His voice was edged with hysteria, a long shudder ran through him. “Sanders is lost,” he muttered, “and Hollivant. And there are thirty years gone from my life!”

---

**M**adness flamed in his eyes. I must ease him somehow, say anything to divert his thoughts from the horror.

“By the way, Jay, I didn’t see the *Luna* land. Where is she?”

“Hidden in the Adirondack Pleasure Park, in a glen where nobody goes. I didn’t dare land her here.”

I was startled.

“Why? Of what are you afraid?” I recalled his furtive entrance, his close-swathed hood cloak and low-drawn hood.

“Afraid? I told you my mates are gone. Have you forgotten Rule Forty-nine?”

A chill ran through me. Rule Forty-nine is the most rigorously enforced of

all the Space Code. In case of disaster to a vessel, her commander must be the last to seek safety. If he return minus crew or passengers the penalty is—death in the lethal chamber!

Severe this may be, but justified. Too often, in the early days, did space madness seize crew and master alike. Too often did craft land with one, only, alive of those who had blasted-off. It was the one solution, to place all weapons in control of the master, and hold him straitly accountable for the safety of all aboard.

“Jay!” my voice cracked. “You didn’t—”

“No.” There was utter truth in the grey eyes. “Of course not.”

“But where are they? Are they alive?”

“That’s the hell of it, Gurd. I don’t know whether they are dead or alive. I don’t know where they are.”

If I was to help him I must get him talking sense.

“Come now, Jay,” I rapped out, sternly. “You must have some idea of where in the universe you have been.”

I could see that he was trying to pull himself together, trying to phrase something unphrasable. His hands fisted at his sides. Then, “Gurd! It sounds insane. But—but I don’t think it was *anywhere* in the universe.”

“What! You—”

Cold, rasping words, interrupted me. Toneless words from across nine hundred thousand miles of space. “Newyork, Newyork, Newyork,” the speaker disc above my desk blared. “From Lunar Observatory. Ether eddy is fading. Ether eddy is fading. Corrections need not be made. From Lunar Observatory. Newyork, Newyork, Newyork. . . .”

Jay’s arms flung above his head, and he shouted incredible things.

“That’s where they are! In that eddy or beyond it! That’s where I came from. It’s going, and my last chance is gone! My last chance to find them, to save them!”

In a flash I knew what must be done. I grabbed Jay’s arm.

“Come on, quick!” Without his mates or a witness to his non-culpability for their loss, death was certain for him. “We still have time!” What happened to me did not matter. “Hurry!”

We were out of the room, were darting across the tarmac. The *Phobos* loomed its dark bulk over us, and, praise be, its entrance hatch was open. I plunged through, Jay after me.

“Close down,” I shouted. “Close down!” The first command of a space flight. How long since I had uttered it!

## CHAPTER II

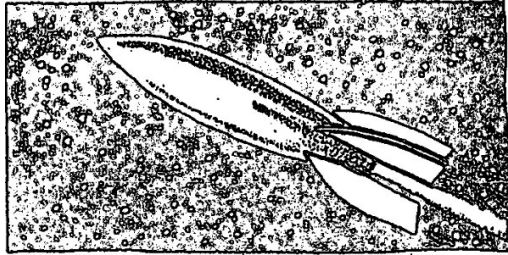
### *Into a New Universe*

I hurtled up the companionway, followed by the clangor of the shutting air-lock hatch. Thirty years since I had flown, yet all the old, hard won spacemanship tingled at my finger-tips as I burst into the control room and saw before me a gleaming bank of levers and fuel wheels.

Jay's staccato report met me, from the speaker disc above the gaugeboard. "All tight, sir." Just as in the years when I taught him the secrets of the void.

"Make it so, mister," I acknowledged in the unforgotten jargon. "Stand by for the blast-off." Not for nothing had I conned the plans of this latest product of the spaceship engineers, assuaging nostalgia in vicarious flight. There was no lost motion now as I dived for the protective couch, snapped straps around me, and jammed down the main-feed lever. I functioned almost automatically, thrown back a third of a century to the old routine.

The surge of sudden vast power, the down-thudding of acceleration's weight, was a trip-hammer blow to my unaccustomed flesh. For an instant I knew the agonies of the damned, then merciful oblivion took me.



I do not know how long I was unconscious, nor what awesome speed the *Phobos* attained before the Thorson electro-spring cut off fuel flow. But when sight and thought returned I saw, in the visi-screen, the blackness of space, the wide-spread panoply of stars infinite in distance and number that I had thought never to set my eyes upon again, and the ominous shimmer of the ether eddy, straight ahead.

Terror jerked my unwilling hand to the braking valve, but it was too late. The *Phobos* plunged straight into the heart of the mystery from whence my brother had come.

In that instant livid fingers reached, twisting, into my brain!

The *Phobos* jarred. That jar seemed repeated in every atom of my being. Light poured in, a vivid, red light that paled the gleam of our argons, a crimson



light that smote all color from the cabin. I whirled to the visi-screen.

And then I was at the lever-bank, furiously, frantically active. I had seen a great orb blotting out the sky, a gigantic, scarlet sphere toward which we hurtled headlong.

The *Phobos* vibrated, screeched protest at the forces that tore at her. Great, whirling, scarlet clouds became distinct, blanketing the strange world that had us in its grip. A craggy spire thrust above the vapor, spearing to impale our vessel.

The nose-tubes were on full force and they couldn't brake her! In minutes, in seconds, we should crash against the red world into infinitesimal fragments. It wasn't thought, it was sheer instinct unforgotten after thirty years that guided my flashing hands among the wheels and levers. There was no time for thought.

I swung her! I swung the *Phobos* half about as she hurtled to her doom, and with the maximum blast of her main tubes I detoned her into a sideward path, parallel to the rounding surface of the strange planet.

That held her! By the horns of Taurus, that held the craft in a circling orbit, made her a satellite of the cloud-shrouded crimson world!

I slumped, breathless, and stared at the five-fold visi-screen. In one division I saw the mist-clothed, encarnadined bulk of the world whose attraction had nearly done for us. To the side, and far off, an immense sun sent scarlet streamers writhing out from a scarlet, dazzling disc. In the other sectors the firmament was revealed; a black firmament, star-studded. In all that vast panoply of worlds and suns there was not one familiar constellation! They were strange, all strange.

---

A voice, a blessed human voice, broke the stillness.

"Gurd! Are you all right?" Jay leaned against the hatch, his face ghastly in the weird red light, his pupils unnaturally enlarged, the corner of his mouth twitching.

"A little dazed, but whole. And you?"

His lips tried to twist into a smile.

"I? Oh, I've been through this before."

"Then this is what we are looking for. This is where you lost Hollivant and Sanders."

He nodded. "If they're still alive, they're down there. We broke through, like this. Just as you just did, I swung the *Luna* about and forced her into a circling orbit.

"I did more. I turned my ship again, so that her stern was toward that world and tried to blast her away. But I couldn't, Gurd. The attraction was too great. We were held tight."

“But the *Luna* was powered to escape from Jupiter,” I exclaimed, “against five times Earth’s gravity!”

“It wasn’t enough. We were chained here, eternally doomed. I dared not land, not knowing what lay under those clouds and not being equipped for interplanetary exploration. We circled endlessly, seeing below nothing but those rolling mists, now scarlet in the light of the crimson sun, now black as we passed over the night hemisphere. I refused to attempt a landing, hoping reasonlessly that patience would bring release.

“At length Hollivant and Sanders demanded permission to take space suits and make the attempt. I did not feel justified in refusing. I opened the air-lock for them, watched their bulky shapes spiral down, black against the red-lighted clouds, the long-darting flames of their gas-tubes streaming ahead of them to brake their descent. I saw them land on that peak we glimpsed, the only evidence that the strange planet is solid. And then—”

“What?”

“And then the *Luna* jarred. The crimson light was gone, and in the visiscreen I saw Orion with his sword, I saw White Rigel and topaz Betelgeuse blazing in splendor. The white blaze of our own Sun warmed me, and little Earth was a green disc calling me home.”

“You had plunged through the ether eddy again!”

“I guessed that. But, Gurd. What does it all mean? What is this strange universe, and what became of the thirty years that seem to me less than a month?”

Somehow I knew the answer, must have reasoned it out subconsciously as he spoke. “Science has moved while you were gone, Jay. We know now that the ether eddy is the manifestation of a fourth dimensional tangency between two spatial hyperspheres.<sup>[1]</sup> You remember your high school Einstein, don’t you?”

[1] The figure in four-dimensional geometry that is analogous to a sphere in three-dimensional, i.e., the figure described by a sphere rotated through the fourth dimension, as a circle is rotated through the third dimension to describe a sphere.

“Of course. I get it. Einstein said space, *our* space, is unbounded but finite, the three-dimensional surface of a hypersphere within which, and without, nothing exists that is in any way related to anything in our space. What’s happened is that we’ve—”

“Broken through into *another* space. Another universe. And since, as you said, nothing in this space has any relation to anything in ours, their Times are different, so that it is perfectly reasonable that while you, here, were living only a month I, there, aged thirty years.”

“Yes, but—” He didn’t finish his sentence. At least I didn’t hear him finish it. For I had kept my eyes on the electroscope viewplate as we talked, and just then, the *Phobos* having completed a circuit of the red planet, the black peak came into its field. And I had caught a flicker of movement on its surface.

---

**I**t was an Earthman, his space suit unmistakable! He seemed to be struggling with something. A billow of cloud spurted upward and he was lost to view.

“They’re alive,” I blurted. “One of them is alive. We’ve got to go down there.”

I managed it. With a gentle side discharge of the rocket flares I changed our level circling to a slow, tightening spiral. Each circuit we made through the shifting changes from black night to crimson day brought us nearer and nearer the clouds, and then after an interminable time, we were among them.

We were through them! We were over a great, almost level plain, black as the belly of Jonah’s whale. We landed, gently as thistledown, right at the base of the needlelike spire that pierced the clouds.

“How’s that for navigating?” I grinned. “The old boy hasn’t lost his skill.”

“Swell,” Jay applauded. “But what’s to do now? We can’t climb that mountain. It must be fifty miles high.”

“Into space suits,” I snapped. “And the *Phobos* carries a small stratocar as a lifeboat. If there’s any atmosphere at all, and there must be or there wouldn’t be any clouds, that will take us up there quicker than we came down.”

“Let’s get going then. The fellows need our help, bad.”

“We’ll get going, but I’m afraid we’re too late. Time’s all mixed up, Jay, by our circling, but I figure a week at least has passed here since we saw him, although only minutes in the time of this universe elapsed while you came back to Earth and we returned.”

“Never mind that. We’ve got to make a try.”

“Okay. I’m with you,” I responded. “Don’t forget these trinite guns. I’ve got a hunch we’re going to need them badly.”

The buzzing hum of the stratocar’s hydroxy motor battered against the side of that incredible mountain as we lifted straight up to its summit. Suddenly, just under the cloud ceiling I saw a hole in the rampart, underlined by a narrow ledge. And on that ledge—the broken off hand-claw of a space suit.

“In there! They’re in there,” I shouted. It was with an effort that I controlled my shaking hand sufficiently to land our little conveyance on the ledge. Bulky in our space suits, we squeezed out, stood precariously on the rock shelf.

The cave that confronted us seemed shallow, a blank wall closed it only six feet back. But a tunnel angled off to the left, so sharply that light, reflected not at all by the dull surface of black rock, did not enter it. My tentative, testing

step felt a level floor in that Stygian darkness, and in the sensitive ear of my space suit I heard the scrape of Jay's feet following me.

The jointed metal of my garment made sudden, echoing clangor as I thumped into vertical stone. I froze. Surely that clumsy sound would arouse the mysterious denizens of this cave, would bring them in sudden attack upon us! My hand-fork closed about my weapon's butt.

The stillness was ripped by a long wailing cry, packed with terror; a thin, hopeless, human wail that rose and fell, rose and fell, somewhere ahead! It snapped short. The following, intensified silence was vibrant with horror.

I jumped forward. The ground dropped away from beneath me, and I was falling, falling—

## CHAPTER III

### *The Turtle Men*

**T**here was sound now, sound aplenty. The crash of my own sheathed body, jerking from side to side. The crash of Jay dropping too, above me. Rattle of loosened stones, following us down. I dropped, dropped endlessly.

The sensation of falling ceased, but not the noises. I seemed to be floating free in the eyeless dark. My flung-out hand touched the side wall, was thrust away with terrific force. I knew then that I was still falling, but not at an increasing rate, as I should have if gravity alone were acting. Some intangible force was holding the speed of my descent steady, so that, with nothing by which to judge, I seemed to be at rest.

Precisely as if I were in a spaceship, zipping along at a thousand miles a minute, with nil acceleration. But this was in the bowels of a world, not in the free leagues of space. Sooner or later we'd hit something solid.

The blackness greyed slightly. I felt myself moving upward, slowly. But so sudden a change of direction, at the speed I must have attained, should have torn me to bits. It dawned on me that my fall was merely slowing gradually. Queer! What could be causing this gentle deceleration?

In a sort of drab dusk I could now see the glass-smooth, curved walls blurring past. I twisted and saw Jay's queerly distorted form below—no, above me. It must be above. I had fallen first, and he had not passed me. Sensation was chaotic. As a space pilot I should have been familiar with apparent changes of direction, deceptively due to misinterpretation of changes in acceleration, in rate of motion, by the monitors in our nervous system. But it was so long since I had flown.

The light grew brighter. It was white light. White light! Brighter and brighter it was, dazzling after the dark. Abruptly the walls of the shaft were gone!

We had dropped through the roof of a tremendous cavern, its boundaries miles away! Below, straight below us, five hundred feet or more, a circular pool of what seemed white-hot, shining metal blazed. I glimpsed forms moving about its edges, a road bordering it, low-lying buildings. Beyond them fields, green fields. We were falling straight for that white blaze!

A hurtling form shot sideward, from above me, blue gas spitting. "Gurd. Your gas-tube! Your gas-tube, Gurd!"

Jay's howl shocked me back to thought, to action. I had clean forgotten that this was a self-propelled space suit. My hand-fork flashed to the control

button. The death pool jerked away from under me. I thudded hard to the cavern floor, beside the prone figure of my brother. My head rang with the impact, my body felt a mass of bruises, but I was alive!

Jay's helmet was split across the forehead! Was he dead from the fall, or poisoned by unbreathable gases admitted through that ominous tear in his head cover? I rolled to him, peered in through his face-plate.

His eyelids flickered, opened. Color flowed back into his cheeks, and he smiled, wryly.

"I'm all right, Gurd. Just got a rotten crack on the head."

I was nauseous with relief.

"I thought you were gone."

"Not yet. I was born to be gassed out." He sniffed. "I smell flowers. What did you do, lay a wreath on me? A little previous, wasn't it?"

"Your helmet's cracked open."

"Good Lord, but this air is salubrious. Open up and get a whiff of it."

---

I got to my knees, was rigid with dismay. Across the level, grassy meadow from the shining pool a horde of creatures were rushing toward us, things out of some fantastic dream, gigantic in size, of vivid, kaleidoscopic coloring.

As they came closer I saw that they were dome-shaped, more like turtles than any other Earth creature. But there was no shell, no tail, and their six unjointed legs were squarely beneath the ungainly bodies. From the topmost point of the hemispherical torsos, a full eight feet from the ground, sprang a series of long tentacles, thin and writhing snakily. In front, fragile-seeming necks jutted, ending in comparatively tiny, globular heads, each featureless save for one unwinking green eye and two drooping, flapped ears.

Before I could move the turtle men closed around us in a jostling, nightmare circle, leaving an open space about twenty feet in diameter. They squashed into one another, seeming to merge in a solid wall of obscene protoplasm, so that we were the center of a serried circle of ball heads thrust out from a high barrier. From that incredible ring came a high, squeaking chorus of whimpering sound, oddly infantile.

I remained kneeling, gaping at that circled horror, could not have moved had I so willed.

The whimpering squeals grew in volume, then ceased altogether. The ring parted, the crowding hosts behind gave way till there was an open lane, stretching back to whence they had come. From the direction of the pool, down that long passage, moving with vast dignity, a little procession came slowly toward us.

In front was a turtle man, similar to those we had already seen, save that

his body was a steady blue and that in one of his tentacles there was a bundle of what seemed like long grass which he held aloft and waved slowly from side to side. Behind him, on some sort of discoid platform whose bearers were screened from us by the leader's bulk, lumped another of the creatures.

This one glowed purple, and even from a distance I could see that his legs and tentacles were rudimentary, while the sphere of his head was triple the size of the others'.

As they came on a wave accompanied them in the forest of uplifted tentacles. They came down in evident obeisance, then lifted again to resume their eternal weaving.

I rose and tried to assume what dignity of posture I could muster. The blue turtle man came within the cleared circle of grass land and moved to one side, turning as he did so. And I saw who it was that bore the palanquin of his master.

Their once natty uniforms hanging in torn strips, their faces smeared with dried blood and twisted in agony, their eyes great pits of suffering, the two Earthmen were bent almost double beneath the weight on their shoulders. Hal Sanders' face was seared by two livid welts from ear to chin, and on Ralph Hollivant's chest, where his tunic had been ripped away, another glowed angrily. I felt the hot blood of rage surge into my face. My fists balled within their gloved hand-forks.

The blue-hued major domo flicked out a tentacle that touched the platform, and then the ground, in an obvious signal. The Earthmen knelt, their necks cording with the effort, and struggled to put the palanquin down evenly.

One side slipped from Sanders' shoulder, thumping against the ground. The prime minister lashed a tentacle across the poor fellow's cheek! Hal's shoulders jerked and I held my breath, thinking he would spring at his tormentor. But, pitifully, his head drooped and all he did was to rub the new mark of punishment with a trembling, grimy hand.

I remembered Hal Sanders as a two-fisted, brawling chap, impatient of discipline. To see him meekly accept the lash told more eloquently than many words what he had gone through, what lay in store for us.

---

**T**he enslaved men heaved painfully upright. They looked at us with lack-luster eyes, not the least ripple in their dull faces showing recognition of us, or wonder at our appearance.

"Hal! Ralph!" Jay cried. "What have these devils done to you?"

Hollivant looked at his blue master, appeared to beg voicelessly for permission to speak.

One of the turtle man's snakelike arms reached out to me, swept shuddersomely over my metal suit, then to Ralph's puffed lips.

Hollivant's voice was almost unrecognizable as human speech. "He wants you to get out of the space suits."

"Like hell we will," Jay blurted. "Let him try to take them off."

"You had better. We tried to defy them, and look at us. They're utter fiends."

Jay's gesture of negation was evidently understood by the weird creature. His tentacle touched Hollivant's lips again, then waved in an all-embracing movement.

"Evidently they don't want another scrap. We did some damage before they got us down. I'm to explain the uselessness of defying them."

"Never mind that," I broke in. "Tell us about this place. With the benefit of what you have learned we may have a chance to get you away."

"Impossible. If you have any weapons the best thing you can do is kill yourselves and us." They were licked, there was no question of that.

"Chin up, Ralph. Arch your back. That way out is always available. Meantime we'll try to make a fight of it. What happened to you?"

"We got down safely enough, landing somewhere on the slope of the mountain through the center of which the entrance to this hell shoots up. Hal took a chance on opening his face-plate, and when we discovered that the air was breathable we decided to signal to Captain Silton. We climbed the peak, keeping on our space suits.

"Just as we reached the underside of the clouds, what I thought was a snake whipped around me and coiled tight. I fought for a long time, there in the red fog, against writhing, snakelike things I could not see. The huge, soft, jellylike bulks gave no resistance as I slashed, and slashed, and slashed in a delirium of struggle. One of my hand-forks struck against rock and broke off, the other was bent and useless. I grew weary, weary, and I could fight no longer. The living ropes clamped tight around me, bound my arms, my legs.

"I was dragged into pitch darkness, and then I was drifting down, slowly down and down till I thought there was no end to descent."

"Slowly? Our acceleration was tremendous at first."

The blue turtle man squealed protest at my interjection, and waved a threatening tentacle. Hollivant winced.

"He's getting impatient. I'll have to cut it short."

"Get the salient facts over. I want to know especially how they get up and down that shaft. I've got a hunch that the solution to our problem lies there."

"Okay. Here's the layout. The outside of this planet is uninhabitable because there are no life-giving rays in the light from its sun. But the pool in this cavern is a basin of highly radioactive liquid that gives off light with all the necessary vibrations at the violet end of the spectrum. As a result, animal and vegetable life has prospered here, their evolution culminating in these



highly civilized creatures. Not only does the liquid give off light, but it is also tremendously repellent. Since it is sunk so deeply it acts only upward, more than cancelling the planet's natural gravity."

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**“H**ow do they manage to control that repulsion?"

“They have a compound, a transparent, glasslike sort of stuff, that screens the pool effect. From the nearest building to the pond they swing out leaves of this material, or retract them, so as to moderate the repulsion; allowing it to act full force, or shutting it off entirely. Ordinary gravity acts through this glass, so the effect of covering the pool with it is to permit whatever is in the shaft to fall, instead of rise as it would if the pool were uncovered.”

“I get it! By regulating the laminations they control the speed of ascent or descent. That is why we fell so fast at first, then had our speed gradually checked.” Many things were clear to me now, and already a desperate plan was forming in back of my head.

“They go up there to obtain a certain ore needed in some of their scientific processes. One of their parties discovered and captured Hal and myself. Others must have observed your approach.”

“We heard a scream of pain—”

“That was when I got this.” He pointed to the scar on his chest. “The hole is a great speaking tube, carries sound perfectly. I heard what sounded like a space suit striking against rock, and tried to call a warning. But I was caught at it.” Memory of pain was a dull flame in the lack-luster eyes.

“You say they are civilized. The way they have acted to you doesn't sound like it.”

“They've outgrown all emotion, except one, loyalty and veneration for their king. He is the be-all and end-all of their economy. At a word from him the whole nation would kill itself.”

I had heard enough. “Listen, everybody,” I said in a quiet tone, and set out my scheme rapidly and succinctly, gesturing meanwhile so as to indicate to the watching turtle man that although we refused to remove our suits we should go with them peaceably.

At a gesture of command, Hal and Ralph bent to take up their burden again, and Jay and I stepped forward to aid them.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Relativity Reversed*

**T**he turtle king on his platform was unexpectedly light, despite his great size, and the four of us bore him easily, as we followed his adjutant down the long passage that reopened through the compact mass of his fellows. I chuckled grimly when I saw that the path led straight to the edge of the pool.

“The palace,” Hollivant whispered, “is on the other side. We will pass the structure from which the screens are swung and then swing around the pond.”

Everything depended now on whether those screens were over the pool or not. We slowly neared it, and the brilliant light grew almost unbearable. It blazed through the major domo’s body and made of it a huge sapphire jewel. It struck pearly iridescence from the walled bodies lining our course. There was an obscene beauty in the play of color, but my attention was focussed on the great vault of the cavern roof, and, directly over the deep-sunk shining pool, the black hole that betokened the lower end of the shaft.

The procession leader reached the edge of the lake of light, turned ponderously half left to skirt it. His bulk no longer eclipsed my view. I saw the answer to the question that pounded at my brain. Folded up against the wall of a building at our right I saw the transparent screens, towering above the low structure’s roof. The pool was unobscured, was free to pour the full strength of its repulsion up through the long vertical tunnel where lay our only way to release.

The blue turtle man was some ten feet ahead of us, the following hosts a respectful twenty behind. It was now or never.

“Ready,” I called, quietly, and shifted one arm so that it curled up over the palanquin edge, and gripped the upper surface. The burden jolted, the least bit, and I knew the others had done the same.

“Go!” my voice snapped, and I jumped straight for the center of the pool, still clinging to the turtle king’s support. It came with me, as Jay and Ralph and Hal responded to my command. Straight out over that blazing pond we leaped and suddenly we were falling!

Falling! But the pool was above us, and the cavern roof beneath! The repulsion of that pond, taking the place of gravity, had reversed directions for us, and while to the astounded turtle men we were shooting upward to our own senses we were dropping as rapidly.

Straight for the black aperture we went, and a squeal of rage came from the palanquin. I looked up at a vast thicket of agitated tentacles and saw a blue

mound whirl and scuttle toward the building against which the screens were folded. The prime minister, rushing to cut off the pool's power and bring us back to vengeance.

I jerked out my trinite gun, aimed carefully upward, past my feet, at the huge plates that hung down from the ground. I winged the trinite pellet with a prayer.

It struck, by the Pleiades! It struck squarely on the slowly unhinging screens, and they shattered into a million fragments!

Even above the shattering crash of that destruction I heard a vast high-pitched wail from the tossing multitudes above, and saw them rush headlong into the pool, saw them hurtle downward after us. Then we were in the obscurity of the shaft; falling, falling, falling toward the surface of the red planet.

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“**T**hey’ll blow up the shaft with their bombs,” Sanders cried out. “That’ll cut off the pool power, and we’ll be trapped here in mid-earth.”

“They won’t do that as long as we have their king with us. I thought they might use some such means of stopping us. That’s why I brought him along.”

“Gurd!” Jay’s voice. “We’re accelerating rapidly. We’ll crash at the top. Now that you’ve destroyed the screens there’s nothing to stop us except the roof of the entrance cave.”

“We’ll slow up with our gas-tubes.”

“Yeah? And give the turtle men a chance to catch up with us?”

“Pluto! I didn’t think of that! Well, it’ll be a clean death, anyway.” I was licked.

But not Jay. “Try shooting at it,” he yelled. “Maybe we can blow off the top of the peak.

“Good boy! Shoot!” We emptied our guns past the discoid resting place of the turtle king. Then we waited with bated breath, as we continued the headlong rise that, to us, seemed a fall. We knew the pellets we had loosed were speeding ahead of us, that they would surely strike the overhanging rock that threatened us. We knew the tremendous atomic power compact in each of the eighth-inch globules. Would it be sufficient to blast away the black peak?

Thunder rolled back upon us, deafening. We were thrown violently from side to side of the shaft as the disturbed air soughed past us, and I heard a squeal of pain from the turtle king. I tried to see past the platform edge, for some gleam of light that would tell me our attempt was successful. But the darkness was complete.

“No go, fellows. We’re in for it.”

“Good-by, Gurd. It was a grand fight while it lasted.”

I reached out, groping, and my hand-fork met Jay's, gripped it hard.

Suddenly I was flung against the underside of the palanquin! I heard a squashing thud, a high-pitched scream, gurgling horribly into silence. I was one of a writhing mass of human arms, legs, bodies, and was joining my voice to a chorus of shouted, husky curses and objurgations. Something was around my neck, holding my head as in a vise. A heel beat a tattoo on the metal of my space suit.

"Hey, let up! Get your toe out of my eye!" That was Jay. I shook my head to clear it of the dizzy whirl that scrambled my brains, realized that we were no longer falling, that we were piled atop the bottom of the platform that had preceded us in all that long descent, that we were miraculously alive!

"What—what's happened?" someone gasped.

"That's easy!" I had figured it out. "The back-flash of the explosion of our trinite pellets against the roof slowed us up a darn sight more than we realized. And the eight-foot mass of jelly the other side of this sedan-chair did the rest. That turtle king made a swell bumper."

"Whew! Let's get out of here. That mob will be on us in a second."

"Gad! I'd forgotten them. How is it they haven't caught us already?"

"The explosion slowed them up also. But they'll be here, too quick for comfort."

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**I** pushed to the side of the platform, reached around, and got a grip on the under surface. I pushed out under the rocky floor of the tunnel. Instantly directions were reversed. I hung now, from the disc that had just been under me. What was down was now up, up, now down. I knew then that miles of solid ground was between me and the repulsion of the pool, that I was definitely out of the shaft. I let go, dropped, sprawled on solid, grateful rock.

Jay landed beside me.

"Next time I come here," he grunted, "I'm going to paste a label on me, 'This side up, with care.' Am I on my head or my tail now?"

"Hustle," I yelled, and took it on the run. The others were close behind.

Our stratocar still perched, birdlike on the outer ledge. We piled inside. The motor took hold sweetly, and the stratocar zipped out of reach.

The *Phobos*' power was triple that of the *Luna*. She lifted easily through the crimson clouds.

"Where now?" Hal Sanders queried. "How are we going to get back?"

"The same way Jay did, through the ether eddy."

"I suppose you've got a chart of the route," Jay scoffed. "Just issued by the Interuniverse Flying Board."

"I have."

"Quit your spoofing."

“I’m not. The blind luck that attends children and drunks brought the eddy in your path, when you were here before. I, being somewhat more intelligent, know enough to look for it.”

“I suppose it’s all set for you?”

“Exactly,” I responded drily. “There it is, straight ahead. Look.”

And so it was, shimmering discreetly, a vague intangible veil across the black curtain of this other-space. But now it breathed promise instead of fear. The *Phobos* plunged straight for its heart.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Cavern of the Shining Pool* by Arthur Leo Zagat]