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SPACE TRAP

By John Russell Fearn
Writing as POLTON CROSS

First published in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*,
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When his space travelers revert to apes and his lovely fiancée vanishes, Ken Richmond grimly buckles on his ray gun and goes forth to break up an alarming conspiracy!

CHAPTER I *Space Pocket*

In the controlling office, Aero-dynamics department, of the United Nations Government Building, Ken Richmond sat watching the antics of a small spaceship zigzagging down from the heights. It was night, and the floodlights were on. Yet they did not obliterate the glare of sparks, firing haphazardly. From the wild curves, the machine was making, it was obviously being guided by inexperienced hands.

Ken Richmond was Chief Dispatcher for the Government. The whole business was queer because Ken Richmond, in his official capacity, never permitted inexperienced astronauts to fly Federal machines. Of late he had been especially watchful of this because of the secret enmity of Reekah Lothar, Martian representative who had the adjoining field.

As the space ship finally dropped awkwardly on the distant grounds, Ken Richmond frowned. He turned and snapped on a switch, getting direct contact with the grounds of the United Nations.

"Find out what's wrong with that ship which just got in," he ordered. "The pilot must have cosmicosis or something."

Within ten minutes the answer came—an excited one.

"Chief, get down here quick! It's ship Forty-seven-C, one-man flier, Scientist Mason Hall. He left in it three days ago. Now he's turned into an ape."

Ken Richmond let out a yelp. "Turned into what?"

"Come and look. It's incredible."

Hurrying to the roof, Ken jumped into a low level glider and pushed the catapult button. The powerful spring hurled his glider aloft and a few minutes later he disembarked on the United Nations space grounds. Elbowing through a swarming mass of people, he soon reached a place which already had been roped off.

He caught the Airport Manager by the arm.

"Well, where is it?"

"This way." The manager moved to the open airlock of the ship. Ken's gray eyes widened in amazement. There, sprawled in the leather driving seat was an ape in a lounge suit. It was playing with the switches, breathing noisily and baring its fighting fangs. One of its wrists had been handcuffed to an upright stanchion.

“It’s Mason Hall himself, all right,” the Manager said. “Somehow he’s reverted to an ape. First we padlocked him. Then we checked up. Those are Hall’s clothes and Hall’s papers are in the pockets. He’s wearing Hall’s signet ring. It’s the devil!”

Ken withdrew his head. “You’re telling me!” He scowled.

“The people are alarmed over this, Mr. Richmond.” The Manager’s voice was glum. “When a man sets out for Venus and returns in a few days, changed into an ape, it’s enough to cause a panic.”

“Shut up and let me think!” Ken snapped. He gestured. “Keep the cordon around the ship and calm the people down. I’ll get to the bottom of this somehow. It’s probably just another one of Lothar’s plots. He’s a scientist-inventor, you know, and pretty much of a phony at that. He’d like to get the Government to use his new type of space ship. But I never have thought it was much good.”

As Ken turned away, he overheard a remark of one of the spectators.

“Reekah Lothar always has said the spaceways were dangerous without his patented shield. It looks as if the Martian was right.”

Ken paused. This was the very type of propaganda which he didn’t want spread around. It was Ken’s business, as Government Dispatcher, to promote better understanding between the people of all the planets. The scientist of Venus had donated to Earth some valuable discoveries. Unrestricted travel between the planets was of paramount importance.

Lothar was not only trying to promote his own space ship. He was after Ken’s job, too.

Now Ken watched with worried eyes as dozens of potential travelers lost all interest in going to Venus and began to file out through the gates of the field toward their various homes. Soon there wouldn’t be a space ship leaving and Ken’s record would be ruined. That was what Lothar wanted. If Ken Richmond lost his job, Lothar would be able to pull some strings and have himself appointed in Ken’s place. Then it would be only a matter of time when the space ship of the Lothar design would be adopted and become the standard type of conveyance.

“Is Lothar going to gloat over this!” he muttered. “He’s been itching for a chance to ruin me.”

Furious at this mysterious development he hurried back to his office. Here he found the lanky, habitually placid Cliff Bomont waiting for him. Bomont was a physicist, the scientific end of the Federal Department. Right now he was stroking his big forehead in a troubled manner.

“What’s this nonsense about a gorilla?” he demanded. “Is it a new trick hatched by Lothar and his mob?”

“No, it’s the truth,” Ken answered. He told what had occurred. Cliff was silent for a while.

“Sounds crazy to me,” he said finally. “Space is tested, proven and tried. Superficially it resembles atavism—such as used to happen before they made the Kresler Chart of Space. But not today. Why, space is perfectly safe now. Are you seriously trying to tell me that that ape is really Mason Hall? If so, how could he drive a space ship back to Earth?”

Perplexed, Ken rubbed his dark head. “How the devil can I explain it? The ship was flying badly when it came down. It would, with that thing at the controls. Look here, Cliff!” He thumped the desk. “There’s an atavistic radiation at work somewhere at some point and our Space Lane must go right through it. Mason Hall got the works, atavized, and came back with what intelligence he had left. That’s the only explanation. We’ve got to locate the fault quick. Hop to the observatory and see what you can find out.”

“Okay. Mebbe I’d better.”

Cliff hurried out. Ken turned to the window and scanned the starry sky. Nothing wrong up there, so far as he could see. Throwing a scare into his connection of regular travelers would undermine fifteen years of grueling work and force him to resign from his Government post. That was a horrible thought. Reekah Lothar wanted the appointment so badly his tongue was hanging out. Not for the salary either. He already was a wealthy man.

A signal buzzed. Ken switched on and waited.

“Private report from Serviceman Adams,” intoned a voice.

“Sure—put him on!” Moodily Ken watched the visiplat. Presently it pictured the big, good-humored reckless face of “Flip” Adams, the ace of the Interplanetary Secret Service.

“Hi-ya, space bug!” he boomed. “Say, while working for the I.S.S., I learned a titbit which may interest you. Did you know Reekah Lothar is erecting a space ground ways in the Arctic?”

“In the Arctic?” Ken looked his bewilderment. “What for? It’s a cold frozen region of ice floes. Why should he establish an experimental space port way up there?”

“Don’t ask me, feller. But I thought it might interest you.”

“Well—thanks,” Ken said.

“Odd looking field,” Adams went on. “Lothar’s got a huge metal plate on floats, all lighted up in the Arctic night. There’s a directional guide tower and everything.”

Ken shrugged. “Lothar pulls so many tricks he gets me dizzy at times. Thanks a lot, Flip.”

The visiplat darkened. As Ken turned away, the door opened to admit a deputation of men and women. They came surging in. He recognized most of them—wealthy people, mostly, with interplanetary interests.

A man with a red face seemed to be the spokesman.

“Mr. Richmond, what’s wrong with the Government route?” he demanded. “It’s against the law for us not to use the directional beam because of those dangerous meteors, and yet that gorilla business looks mighty bad, too.”

“Forget it.” Ken forced, a smile. “Accidents do occur, now and again. Why should you get panicky over a solitary case of atavism? The route is quite safe.”

“You’re sure?”

Ken didn’t even hesitate. “Definitely! The Assignment Office will detail ships for you right away. Thanks for your confidence, folks.”

Talking excitedly, the people trailed out. One young woman was left behind—a slender blonde of perhaps twenty-five.

“Betty!” Ken exclaimed in delight, hurrying around the desk. “I never noticed you among that mob.”

“I wasn’t among it. I came in after them.” The girl’s face was serious. “What’s the truth, Ken? You wouldn’t try and fool your future wife, would you?”

“Never!” He caught her hands ardently. “You’re intending to take a trip too, then?” He could not conceal his uneasiness.

“I must.” She shrugged. “Mother and Dad are in Hotlands City, Venus. Mother’s contracted hotlands fever and Dad sent for me.” She betrayed anxiety. “Ken, you’re not sure about the route. You’re worried. You lied to those people.”

“Yes—a little bit.” Ken nodded. “What else could I do? A case such as Mason Hall’s will never happen again, and I don’t dare take time to investigate, because, under Regulations, a

certain number of ships must leave every day or I'll be up on serious charges. If I lose my job, remember, our marriage is off, and we've waited so long for it, Betty dear. If I wasn't so certain there was no actual danger, I'd never have let the ships go. Lothar's just trying to scare all travelers away."

The girl smiled. "Yes, probably you did right. I guess my fears were silly. Anyway, I've got to start for Venus at once."

"Single-seater? Sure you don't want a pilot?"

"No. I'll use one of those spiffy triple-ejector buses."

Ken pressed a desk button. "Reserve a B-Twenty and equip!" He switched off and glanced at the girl again.

"Listen, Bet," he said. "While in space keep your eyes peeled and be prudent. If there's any hint of something atavistic, turn around and return immediately. Throw on the repeller shields. Lothar says they're inferior to his, but nevertheless no atavism rays can penetrate them. If you sense anything strange, don't wait. Come back."

"Correct." She smiled, but her gray eyes were grave. "I'll radio if anything happens. Wavelength thirty-Jo."

Ken kissed her gently, watched her hurry out. Again uneasiness stirred him. He inwardly cursed the duties which kept him chained to his post. He didn't dare leave now. The unscrupulous Lothar would ruin him.

In the next hour Ken found the faith of the people in his word was gratifying. He watched spaceship after spaceship hurtle up from the grounds and climb to the Government space beam. Soon he saw Betty Dransfield's B/20 follow and vanish amid the stars.

He switched on his space-radio to Betty's frequency.

"I hope to heaven I was right," he muttered, then he looked up as Cliff Bomont came, his big forehead dark with worry.

"You'd better give a stand-by order to the groundsmen, Ken," he said. "There's big trouble blocking the beam."

Ken jumped up in dismay. "But I've let a lot of ships go!"

"You've what?" Cliff Bomont's calm deserted him. He caught Ken's arm tightly. "Listen, Ken—that overconfidence of yours has gummed things up for fair. Right in our beam—about one-hundred-twenty-thousand miles from Earth—is a space-pocket. The reflectors show it as a black smudge. Similar 'sink holes' are the enigma of science. The Black Hole of Cygnus is one of them. Just pits of—of nothing."

Frowning, Ken stared at Cliff.

"How does that make Mason Hall a gorilla?" he snapped.

"Plenty of ways. In such pockets anything can happen. As a rule those Holes form the entrance to an unknown universe, so it's queer that Mason Hall managed to return at all. He must have slipped several degrees backward in Time and become an ape. Ken, you've got to recall all the ships that have left. Then we can go out and take a look at this Hole ourselves."

Ken nodded and gave the order for recall through the broadcasting system. He looked again through the window at the stars.

"I can't understand it, Cliff! A sink-hole doesn't just—develop."

"It can." Cliff's main interest was on physics as usual. "With a grouping of space radiations in a state of fusion, you get primal space substance—Eddington figured that out long ago. And what happens? Space, matter, radiation, time, light—all such things cease to be

as such. There's a piece of Nothing left. The whole thing is possible, but it's awkward to have it develop right in our space line. Nor can we steer round it, because of meteor danger. Even a small one can wreck a ship."

"And Lothar wins!" Ken's eyes flashed. "He's certainly got the right deck of cards this time."

He broke off as the space-radio came on. Betty Dransfield's face was mirrored in the plate. She looked surprised.

"What's the idea of the recall order?" she demanded.

"You've got to obey it, Betty!" Ken urged. "There's real peril ahead. A sink-hole! You know what that means."

"You mean that black spot I can see further on?"

"That's it! Turn back—immediately!"

"Not immediately," she answered. "First I'm going to take a look at it. Don't worry about me, Ken. I'm not alone. Two other ships have ignored the recall order and are flying right beside me. If they can risk it, so can I. I'll tell you what I find out."

"Betty!" Ken insisted. "For heavens sake, do as I ask!"

Her answer was a solemn wink. Then she cut off. Ken glared wildly at Cliff.

"She's taking an awful chance," Cliff sighed. "Radiations from that hole can be mighty treacherous. There may be a central magnetic vortex which will drag ships into it."

"What can we do?" Ken asked desperately. "We can't overtake her now. She's too obstinate to listen."

"Trust to luck!" Cliff waved his hands. "Maybe she'll come through."

CHAPTER II

Atavism Increases

The opening of the office door made both men turn. A big man came in. He was big in every way, like an ox. His neck flowed over the edge of his collar, and his red face hung in folds. His paws were hairy and swollen with good food. He was about six feet, proportionately broad, and massive-stomached. Across it stretched a solid gold watch chain with a black jewel dangling from the center.

“Thought I’d find you in,” he said in a heavy voice. Then as he took off his hat, the expanse of head revealed where the intelligence lay. What remained of his gray hair was clipped to the closeness of plush.

“What’s the idea, Lothar?” Ken demanded. “You know you’re not welcome here.”

A smile twisted the big man’s lips. He focused his cold blue eyes on Ken’s taut face.

“I’ll overlook your rudeness,” he answered. “I suppose you are feeling the drag, eh? The space service is all messed up. Poor management. Atavism traits. That’s bad.”

He stood there, slowly twirling the black jewel on his watchchain. As Cliff Bomont watched that action, a vague interest began to kindle his eyes.

“What do you want, Lothar?” Ken demanded.

The Martian was calm. “You ought to know by this time. I’ve been telling you long enough. I want the Government to adopt my new space ship. It’s of better design and has superior shields. They’re safe. No atavism rays would ever get through the safeguards of the Lothar Whippets.”

Ken Richmond restrained his irritation. “That’s bunk, Lothar,” he said. “Your ships aren’t as fast as the present ones we’re using and they’re much harder to control. They’re so complicated, too, that they constantly get out of order. They’d be in the work-shops half of the time.”

Lothar waved his big paws. “Bah!” he snarled. “You’re prejudiced. You never wanted to give my buses a fair trial. The Government needs a new Dispatcher.”

“It wasn’t my opinion,” Ken answered steadily. “What you object to was the considered opinion of Investigating Committee of Scientists who thoroughly tested your machines over a period of months under every possible condition. If you don’t like the report, talk to them.”

Lothar’s face turned purple. “I won’t stand for it!” he roared. “You can’t fool me. You’re the one who’s to blame. The Government needs a new Dispatcher. You’re in a spot. The whole city is talking about that black hole blocking the beam and you’re incompetent to handle the situation. Sink-holes have a habit of sticking—and the longer this one sticks, the worse off you’ll be. Why don’t you resign?”

“You’re wasting your time,” Ken said. “Just because there’s been a cosmic accident, doesn’t mean the situation is hopeless. I’ll use science, astronomy—everything—to crack this hole. You’d like to liquidate me just as you liquidated Conroy, Shelton, Ob Thursor and that Jupiterian researcher, Brak. You’d like to become Dispatcher yourself because you think you’d have everything your own way. But it won’t work, Lothar!”

Lothar’s face twitched. He was about to speak again when the space-radio came on. His cold eyes flashed to the plate as Betty Dransfield’s face mirrored again.

"I'm still traveling, Ken!" she said eagerly. "That black hole is quite large now. At the present speed I'll reach it in about twenty minutes. Hello! Is that Mr. Lothar there with you?"

"Right." Ken spoke coldly. "Keep right on talking."

"This Hole is just like a circle," the girl resumed. "It's blacker than space itself—totally devoid of all signs of light. Inside it there seems to be just nothing—not a ray, not a trace of luminous radiation—plain nothing. There's something queer about it, somehow. Reminds me of the blackest tunnel ever conceived."

"Betty, for the love of Pete come back!" Ken cried. "If you go too far towards that sink-hole you're a goner. Turn around! You hear me?"

"Not while these other two ships fly with me," she answered. "I'm no quitter. Gosh, I'm beginning to feel something," she went on, wonderingly. "Yes! Like cramp! A pricking sensation."

She stopped speaking and the three men watched the plate fixedly as an astounded expression came to her face. She seemed about to scream, but no sound came forth. Simultaneously the visiplat went blank. The communication had been sheared off clean.

"She's—she's gone!" Ken gasped. "Something out of that Hole cut the contact."

"And you still think you oughtn't to resign?" Lothar asked dryly.

"You've had my answer!" Ken roared, wheeling on him. "Get out of here, Lothar, before I kick you through the door."

Lothar shrugged. "You're welcome to try. Do that, and I'll make this town hotter than a grill for you. Whether I do so or not depends on whether you see reason."

"I don't scare easy," Ken retorted. "Now beat it!"

The big man hesitated, then released his hold on his watchchain fob and picked up his hat. At the door he looked back, spoke slowly.

"Richmond, I'll break you. No cheap, narrow-minded Federal flunkey is going to stop me. Better think twice."

Ken watched the door close, then turned to Cliff Bomont.

"We're leaving," he announced in sharp tones. "We are heading for that Hole right now. Come on."

Cliff caught his arm. "Wait a minute, Ken! Think what you're doing. If you head into space, that's just what Lothar is waiting for. He'll see to it that you never come back. He can spread the tale that you met your death in the sink-hole. Then what? He'll have your job in no time. Think man! Think!"

"Right now I don't give a hang for Lothar." Ken clenched his fists. "Betty's in deadly danger. She has just been scooped into that blasted Hole."

"We don't know that for certain," the physicist insisted. "The stoppage of communication doesn't prove it. Radiations from that spacial quirk might have swamped all radio-waves. You can't leave, Ken. You'll play right into your enemy's hands. Doubtless Lothar came here to goad you into that very act."

"What can I do?" Ken's eyes were glittering. "Just sit around here and let things drop to pieces? Let Betty die so that I can keep an eye on Lothar? For what? I'll lose the Service anyway, from the way things are going."

"We'll figure something. At the moment I'm interested in a closer inspection of that ape. I don't see how any man atavized that far could ever have driven a spaceship. Let's take a look."

The lanky physicist was insistent. Together they took gliders to the space grounds, crossed the depressingly quiet stretch of tarmac. Most of the ships were grounded, unwanted. But over on the adjoining grounds of Lothar, men were testing out the Lothar “Whippets.”

“Okay,” Ken said briefly to the men guarding the ship. “Let’s have a closer look at that ship, boys.”

As he spoke, he was moving towards the ship with Cliff beside him. At that same moment with terrific and totally unexpected violence, the spaceship exploded. Force and heat rolled across the intervening stretch, sending the men reeling backwards to crash into the hard fusilage of the next nearest spaceship.

That was all Ken remembered. . . .

Ken had a dim idea for a long time afterwards that he was dreaming. It was an odd dream, too, shot through with lifelike visions of silent people in white. The only sounds were the clink of instruments. Then out of the half formed patchwork he began to drift back to realities, became quite rational, all of a sudden, and realized that Cliff Bomont’s keen face was watching him earnestly.

“Good!” Bomont said in satisfaction. “You’ve pulled through it all right. Eh, Doc?”

“Definitely.” A white-coated medico smiled. “And remember, Mr. Bomont, not too long.”

“What happened?” Ken muttered, too dizzy to stir.

“Delayed action time bomb blew the spaceship to bits,” Cliff Bomont answered bitterly. “I escaped with cuts but you got concussion and three cracked ribs. You’ve been delirious. But you’ll soon be okay again now.”

Ken breathed more rapidly. “How long have I been unconscious? What about Betty?”

“Take it easy,” Cliff insisted. “No excitement You’ve been laid out for four days, and in that time things have happened—grim things! You’d better hear about them though.” His voice slowed a little. “The B-Twenty came back along with those other two ships, only—”

“Apes were inside?” Ken whispered in horror.

“You guessed it.” Cliff nodded somberly.

Ken closed his eyes. “Betty coming back—that way!”

“A she-ape, dressed complete to her wristwatch.”

“I could have saved her,” Ken insisted, opening his eyes again. “I could have, I tell you, but for your stopping me.”

“Wait a minute—I’ve more yet. Each of the ships which returned—the B-Twenty included—blew up just after we’d dragged the apes from inside them. That discounts the idea that Lothar knew somehow we were going to examine that first ship and planted a bomb ready for us. What I now believe is that time-bombs were put there to blow the ships up once they had disgorged their atavized inmates. The first bomb was badly timed, but the mechanism has been rectified since. Allows just interval enough for the ship to land and then—boom! Obviously done to prevent any thorough investigation of the ships’ controls.”

Ken lay puzzling. “That’s reasonable.”

“It’s as I said at first,” Cliff went on. “How could an ape drive a spaceship? Answer is—it couldn’t! The ships were sent back to Earth by remote control, with bombs installed to blow up the works before we could find out. In other words somebody apparently is turning that sink-hole to account—is deliberately atavizing human beings for the sole purpose of discrediting you. Lothar is in it some place.”

“But how could any man cash in so quickly on a cosmic accident?” Ken demanded.

“I don’t know. Yet a man with the scientific ingenuity Lothar has, could do plenty. By some method or other he can produce atavism. Or else the sink-hole does it. Anyway he profits from it by sending ships back by remote control from some pirate headquarters in the void. Owning most of the spacelanes he could easily do that.”

Weak as he was, Ken Richmond felt his anger rise.

“If that’s so, I’ve got to get well in a hurry,” he snapped. “As soon as I’m able to move around again, we’ll go out and have a look at that ‘sink-hole’ ourselves.” He gave Cliff Bomont a sharp glance. “But first we’ll have to find some way to take Lothar along with us. I can’t leave him behind to plot against us.”

He stopped talking as a genial-faced giant in flying togs came into view, a bunch of magazines in his hand.

“Flip Adams!” Ken exclaimed, smiling. “Well, well! How’s tricks?”

Adams grinned. “Came to ask you the same thing. Getting along, eh? Good. Here’s a few things to read, though I guess you won’t feel much that way in view of what’s happening to the route. Thought I’d drop in to give you some more news about that Arctic space ground of Lothar’s. It may help you.”

“Slipped my mind in the rush,” Ken sighed.

“What Arctic space ground?” Cliff demanded. “Spill it, Flip.”

The Serviceman told him and Cliff Bomont frowned thoughtfully.

“Where do you head next?” Ken inquired.

“Well, the chief detailed me to look into two puzzles. One is concerned with a lot of queer nursery rhymes that have been space-broadcast recently. They might be code. I’ve to track ’em down.”

“When did they start?” Ken asked abruptly.

“About a month or so back. I don’t remember exactly. The other assignment I’m on is to trace the whereabouts of one Clinton Drew, an inventor mixed up in metallurgy and things. He went to Pluto to do some research work and then mysteriously vanished. Always some person or other up to a dirty trick somewhere, I guess.”

“Any suspicions?” Ken asked.

“Only personal ones—not official. Lothar maybe.” Adams’ big jaw squared. “That fellow’s got intrigue splashed around in every part of the System. Some day I’m going to bump him where it hurts most.” He rose to his feet. “Well. I’ll—see you when you’re on your pins again, Ken. ’By, Cliff.”

He went away with vigorous strides.

CHAPTER III

Into the Black

After Adams had gone, Ken Richmond turned to Cliff Bomont.

"Flip sure gets himself some queer assignments," he mused.

"Eh?" The physicist awoke from his abstraction. "Oh, sure he does. Y'know, I was just thinking about Clinton Drew. I recall that he went to Pluto to look into the extraordinary properties of Polarium-X, an isotope which forms part of Pluto's surface. If we could discover just exactly what Polarium-X is we might be half way to solving the mystery of this sink-hole."

"I heard it has something to do with light-polarization." Ken frowned. "Say, Cliff, maybe that's it!"

"Yes, it might fit in somewhere," Cliff Bomont said. "First we get an unusual space ground at the Arctic, with directional towers—where all the Earth's natural power can be utilized, remember. The space ground may be a disguise for a real motive, particularly since the ground itself is illumined, apparently from beneath. It could be energy in the metal facing itself. Second, we get nursery rhymes which form a code. They could be applicable to agents in the void—agents of Lothar. And lastly, an inventor, engaged in research with Polarium-X, vanishes. What is there about Polarium-X which necessitates the liquidation of the discoverer?"

"I'm more interested in getting to that sink-hole and learning what's wrong," Ken said, struggling to a sitting posture. "I've just got to find out. Then I'm going to avenge Betty and those others. I'll dedicate my life to it—so help me!" He sank back again, exhausted.

"You'll be here a week at least. Then you'll be all right. This is no cosmic accident, Ken. It's a deep laid plot."

"That's why Lothar will have to come along with us into space."

"He won't fall for it," Cliff Bomont objected. "He's sure to refuse, especially if he's been up to some trickery."

"Then he stands self-confessed as a plotter," Ken went on grimly. "I'll get him. I'll bluff him by suggesting I mean to resign."

"No!" Cliff was horrified. "Ken, you wouldn't do that?"

Ken smiled. "Not really. I'll fool him by offering to show him the route we'll take, all the private signals, everything. He wants to be Chief Dispatcher so much he's sure to agree."

"I hope you know what you're doing." Cliff Bomont got to his feet "Well, Ken, you spend your time getting well while I have a look around. If I can't find something to pin on Lothar, I'll chase a comet."

By the time two weeks were up Ken was almost well again and chafing with impatience to be on the move. So he left the hospital, hurrying back to headquarters.

Here there was little to do. Space travel had dropped to zero, thanks to the "sink-hole." Through the observatory mirrors he scowled at that dark, sinister eye athwart the route. Bitterness, resentment, sorrow all raged through his brain at the thought of the dreadful fate of the girl he had loved. His anger at the factions at the back of it increased.

Where was Cliff Bomont? That worried Ken, too. He had not seen Cliff for some time. Ken had almost reached the point of starting a search when the physicist came into the office,

tired and drawn.

“A long chase,” he announced, pouring himself a drink. “I had to question a lot of Clinton Drew’s research assistants. Now I know what Polarium-X is. It’s an isotope and an absorbent metal. Drew made it synthetically at first and then found that it existed naturally on Pluto, created there by the battering effect of ceaseless radiations out of space.”

“Which signifies?” Ken’s voice was impatient.

“Lothar knew about it too,” Cliff went on. “Records show Lothar went to Pluto, bought some ground, and established a research laboratory near Drew. Since then Drew has never been seen. Stated briefly, Lothar gained complete control of the entire mineral output of Polarium-X.”

Ken Richmond nodded approval. “Good work, Cliff,” he said.

Bomont flushed with pleasure at the praise and finished his drink.

“The idea occurred to me when I watched Lothar fingering his watchchain that evening,” the physicist went on. “Did you notice the stone on it? Nothing anywhere to resemble it. It wasn’t carbon or hard platinum dust, the rare black diamond or agate. It was an unknown jewel. Lothar had that piece of hard mineral-like substance ground into a jewel by Latham’s, the none too scrupulous jewelry experts downtown. And the jewel was—and is—Polarium-X. Now do you get the picture?”

Ken Richmond’s face lighted up. He slapped his hand down on the top of the desk hard.

“Get it?” he cried. “You bet I do. I may even be a little ahead of you. I noticed that stone myself. It absorbed every bit of illumination as easily as a sponge soaks up water. It’s not a far cry from a sink-hole in space and a jewel that won’t reflect light. Possibly they are identical!” He stopped suddenly and stared at his chief physicist. “If the sink-hole’s a phony, the atavism must be also.”

Cliff Bomont nodded. “Exactly. That’s what we’ve got to find out.”

“I see something else, too,” Ken cried. “A metal element that can absorb light, might possibly absorb other radiations. Such as the vital ones from the sun, for instance. If that happened, we might devolve in no time—go backward in evolution—become apes again. Why, an hour inside a globe of that stuff might turn anyone into an amoeba. It’s fiendish!” Ken Richmond set his firm jaw. “Yes we must visit that sink-hole and investigate. And certainly we will take Lothar along with us. Wait!”

Reaching forward, he pressed the televisor switch on his desk. Lothar’s ugly, flabby visage soon appeared on the screen.

“Lothar, I’ve thought things over,” Ken said. “I’ve decided perhaps you were right about me resigning. I’m in a corner. There’s no use fighting you any more.”

Lothar bared his ugly teeth in a ferocious grin. “You’ll have to sign a statement accepting responsibility for those people who were avatized. You sent out those ships, you know.”

Cliff Bomont uttered a protesting cry but Ken Richmond silenced him with a gesture.

“All right, Lothar,” Ken said. “Come to my office. We’ll discuss the details.”

Lothar grimaced. “It’ll be a pleasure.”

Tight-lipped, Ken lifted the switch, cutting the connection.

Within ten minutes Lothar arrived. As usual he threw down his hat and began to finger his watch-fob. Ken watched it, this time with fascination. Though the sunshine was full upon it, the gem remained a black mystery, almost like a hole burned in the man’s puffy fingers and heavy body. It had a depthless, fathomless beauty all its own.

Ken caught himself just before suspicion had time to take root in the big man's brain.

"I'm taking your offer, Lothar, because there's nothing else I can do. It includes everything, of course."

"Naturally," Lothar retorted. "I had your statement and resignation prepared before I came here. Here it is. Sign it."

He threw down a sheet of stiff paper on the desk.

"Not yet," Ken said. "First, I think you ought to know just what you are getting. There are tricks in my job just as there are in yours."

Lothar sneered. "Generous of you to tell me. Why worry over that? I'll have my engineers find out all that's necessary."

"Engineers won't do," Ken said steadily. "It demands an expert scientist like yourself to appreciate what I want to show you. You'd better come along the course and see for yourself."

Lothar hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "Okay, if that's what you want. I'll 'phone my office."

He did so, then picked up his hat. "Hurry up," he snapped.

Inwardly somewhat dubious at this ready acquiescence, Ken led the way from the office to the roof gliders with Cliff beside him.

In a few minutes they were inside a three-passenger spaceship streaking swiftly into the sky. . . .

The black Hole, formerly blurred by atmosphere, was now quite clear. As Betty Dransfield had said, it looked just like a tunnel at the end of the space lane.

Lothar stood in the center of the cabin, with his massive legs straddled against the gravity pull, staring ahead.

"I have been checking up on that Hole," the Martian inventor said, while Cliff and Ken exchanged surprised glances. "I can tell you what it is even though the knowledge won't do you much good. It is an ether-warp, a point where the known universe ends and leaps the gap to the beginning."

"Meaning what?" Cliff Bomont asked sharply.

Lothar grinned contemptuously.

"You're a scientist, Bomont—you ought to know. Einstein's theory says that space is curved. In that case it must at some point return to its starting point. When that happens, there is a black nothing which represents the end of one course and the beginning of another. Naturally, anything inside that Hole will also shift back to its primal state. Hence man becomes ape and, if he stays long enough, amoeba. Later on, he might change into a pure radiation out of which he was originally born. The difficulty in such a Hole is to find the way out. Presumably there is a way because some have so far got back, although devolved."

"Clever theory," Ken Richmond observed. "Only it happens that your theory doesn't work this time. Scientifically, your explanation is right—only it does not apply to that Hole! That Hole is a trick, and Polarium-X has a good deal to do with it!"

Lothar appeared surprised. "Polarium-X?"

He frowned. Then, apparently understanding, he held up his watchchain jewel. "Oh, you mean this? Rather good, don't you think? Unique for a watchchain. Say, wait a minute! Are you suggesting that my watch jewel and that sink-hole are the same thing?"

"What do you think?" Ken asked him.

“You must be crazy,” the inventor said. “That is a second Cygnus Hole, believe it or not. And the nearer we get to it the less I like it.”

“We’re going right into it, Lothar,” Ken Richmond said. “Why else do you suppose we brought you along? All of us are going into that Hole.”

“But—but you said you only planned to show me some tricks?”

“There are no tricks,” Ken answered, smiling tautly. “You are the only man who uses tricks. We’re here to examine that Hole. If it is a phony and you want to avoid the fate of the others, you’ve got but one chance. Tell us everything and we’ll turn back. If not, we go through.”

“Now wait a minute!” Lothar protested. “I haven’t anything to do with that Hole! I admit all about Polarium-X. I bought the secret from Clinton Drew on condition that he’d cease research work. I’ve an idea for making light-absorbing spaceships, invisible to space pirates. But that Hole is the door to the unknown. Only those who have come out of it really know what is inside it. You’ve got to believe that.”

“Did those time bombs get into the spaceships all by themselves?” Cliff Bomont asked dryly.

Lothar swung to him. “I don’t know anything about the time bombs. I swear it. Perhaps there is alien life in that Hole. They could have arranged time-explosives. You’ve got to turn back! Where’s the sense in taking this risk?”

Ken shrugged. “Makes sense to me. Lothar, you are either a champion liar, or else circumstances have got you painted blacker than you are. Either way we’re going to find out. Here goes!”

He put on speed and the Martian inventor stood with popping eyes as the immense maw of black began to loom nearer. He prattled again about infinity curves and Einstein, but Ken Richmond took no notice. He drove at top speed, only began to slow down when the black started to grow huge enough to blot out the stars.

Then came queer sensations, just as Betty Dransfield had described them—a feeling of tautness about the skin, a pricking on every exposed part. Ken felt as if his hair were standing on end.

“Radiation—of sorts,” Cliff Bomont said. Then as he closed a repulsion shield round the vessel, the effect diminished.

“The more I look at this Hole the dizzier I get,” Ken muttered. “Seems to be without proper dimensions—like nothing laid on top of nothing. No break in it, yet it’s nothing but a Hole.”

“Look here!” Lothar gripped Ken’s arm savagely. “Why in blazes don’t you two fools realize that these sensations are the beginning of avatism? We’ve got to turn back!”

Suddenly it was too late for his words to have meaning. Darkness—utter and complete—closed round the ship. In fact it was more than darkness. It was a solid, crushing barrier which lay on the eyes like invisible wadding.

“What the devil?” Ken’s discomfited voice floated from the abyss.

He fiddled with the switchboard lights, but nothing happened. Next he put on the searchlights, but no light came forth.

Then Cliff mumbled something and there came the scrape and splutter of a burning match. But no match flame could be seen! That it was there, all right, was evidenced by Cliff’s gasp as the invisible flame scorched his fingers.

“Have we gone blind, or what,” Ken yelled. “See if it’s any better with the shields off.”
He rammmed the switches and that tingling, inexplicable tautness of the flesh came back.
But no lights.

“My stars!” whispered Cliff, horrified.

“You fools!” Lothar raved out of the dark. “You idiotic fools! You’ve flung us into devil knows what universe!”

“Oh, shut up,” Ken retorted. “We’ll figure something. I’m going to try and land somehow.”

“In this?” Cliff gasped.

“Yes. Sense of touch. And Heaven help us if I miss!”

CHAPTER IV

Intrigue Defeated

Ken's intention was forestalled, however. With abrupt and overwhelming violence the ship cannoned into something in the blackness, rebounded with dizzying force. All three men recoiled against the padded walls, then picked themselves up. They realized they had escaped with nothing worse than bruises.

"Landed somewhere, anyhow," Ken breathed. "Are we all here?"

Cliff and Lothar answered in shaky voices. "If only something would light up," Ken muttered desperately. "I don't understand this setup at all. Hang on a minute. I'll see if there's air outside."

"Don't be an idiot," Cliff shouted. "If there's a vacuum out there, the air in here will be gone in a second."

"We can't stop here in the dark," Ken retorted. "We can't see our gauges. The only way is to trust to luck."

He felt his way round the wall to the airlock, spun the screws, then moved the door very gently back until he knew a thin crack must be present. He waited for the tell-tale whistle of air sucking out into the void, but no whistle came.

"That's queer," he said, puzzled. "There must be air outside, too. We're not in a void, after all! How do you account for that?"

"It disproves your idea of a space-warp, Lothar," Cliff observed. "There couldn't be air in a warp. Only explanation is that it's a planet. A planet of total darkness."

"But at least we ought to see the stars," Ken argued.

"Not necessarily. If this planet emits radiations which absorb light—as we know it does—we couldn't see them."

Ken suddenly realized the significance of what Cliff had said.

"Lothar!" he yelled. "Lothar, you double-crossing liar. This is a mass of Polarium-X. The whole thing ties up. Lothar, where are you?"

There was no answer from the blackness. Ken whirled round and felt his way to the limits of the control room. He finished up gripping Cliff as they both stood in the airlock.

"He's skipped," Ken breathed. "Probably knows this blasted place as well as he knows his own home. Just wait until I get my hands on him!"

"You mean his frightened act was a trick, too?"

"Sure, it was. He did it deliberately to make us all the keener to go on. Now he's got us here, there's no telling what he'll do. It probably struck him it was an easy way to get rid of us if we came here. Don't you get it, man?" Ken went on urgently. "This is a monstrous hollow globe of Polarium-X, specially made. The size doesn't signify, because it could easily be assembled in space piece by piece. It is between Earth and Moon—and since we know there is a phony space ground at the Arctic, it's possible that field is actually a magnetic device for keeping this thing steady. Yeah, we're inside a globe of Polarium-X all right, and its radiations are such that it kills light of all types. Whether it also causes atavism or not, we can't tell yet. All we've got is a prickling sensation, but so far no primitive instincts."

"Seems to me we've got to get out of here," Cliff muttered.

“Sure—but how? We probably entered easily enough through a prearranged trap which closed afterwards. Right now we’ve as much chance of finding the exit as a worm has of flying. But at least there is air, so that’s in our favor. The other favor is that if we can’t see in the dark, neither can Lothar, so he can’t take pot shots at us. Our job is to find him somehow and screw the truth out of him. Come on!”

Cautiously they felt their way outside. The truth of Ken Richmond’s theory was substantiated now as their boots scraped on metallic ore. They moved slowly, sensing emptiness ahead of them, aware that the basic mass of the substance was apparently dense enough to produce a tolerable Earth-norm gravity.

“If only to goodness there were a light,” Cliff moaned. “This darkness is so thick it hurts! Surely there is some sort of light which will work?”

“Depends. This stuff polarizes all the light we know apparently. All we can do is—What’s that?” Ken broke off amazedly.

They both came to a halt, gripping each others’ arms and staring ahead. Something was there, floating in the cavernous gloom, something vaguely luminous. Nor was it alone for it was presently augmented by others.

“Looks like a ghost,” Cliff muttered. “Since ghosts don’t exist, it’s just a light of sorts.”

They went on again with infinite care. As they did so, the mystic apparition revealed itself as a living figure—a woman. Fair, slim and beautiful, she was. Nor was she alone. There were others, perhaps a dozen people of both sexes, roughly dressed in shirts and space slacks. Around them were the hazy, ghostly outlines of a room and furniture. It was like looking into another dimension.

“Jumping comets!” Ken cried suddenly, as the woman turned and wafted gently by. “Look! It’s—it’s Betty!”

“What?” Cliff stared harder. Then he whispered, “You’re right! It is she. And fellow over there is Mason Hall.”

“Betty!” Ken shouted, oblivious to everything else. He raced forward in the dark towards her, then his cries ended in a thud and a gasp of pain. Cliff caught up with Ken to find him faintly visible in the glow from the mystery area. He was rubbing his forehead furiously.

“I ran into something,” he panted, scrambling up. He felt in front of him. “Yes, it’s glass,” he shouted. “No wonder they didn’t hear us. Thick glass. Hey!” he yelled, thumping on it. “Hey, open up there!”

The people beyond took no notice. In fact, they seemed to be watching a distant figure, which grew clearer. It was Lothar. He was holding a ray gun in his hand.

“Ah-ha!” Ken snapped, clutching Cliff’s arm. “I get the idea now. This is a sheet of polarizing glass, same as they use on dip-lamps back home. It’s not as perfect a light-absorber as Polarium-X and some of the light gets through. The light itself is probably phosphorescent in basis, therefore different to ordinary emitted light. Looks as though this planet is divided into two parts—one black and a trap. The other is tenanted.

“Sure, I get it,” Cliff said. “You’re right, Ken!”

“The fact that Betty and those others are alive, proves the avatism was a trick, too,” Ken went on. “The apes were put there deliberately. I’m going through the glass.”

He whipped his ray gun from his belt and aimed a charge at the barrier. Instantly there was a monstrous cracking sound as the searing heat fused it. Another charge and it opened up, leaving a wide crack.

Immediately light of blinding brilliance flooded the two men. They went down with their heads spinning, eyes gripped as if by white hot pincers. While they were still stunned, with their hands over their eyes, they were seized and dragged forward.

It was several minutes before they could see at all. Slowly their eyes became accustomed again to a fairly strong illumination of chemical origin in ceiling bowls.

The first thing they noticed was that they were looking into steadily leveled ray pistols. Lothar held one, and tough looking men with villainous faces were holding the others. Space drifters, Ken realized—scum of the lanes.

He looked around slowly. Cliff and he were in a large room. A wall of glass apparently black, formed one side of it. Its length had been split from top to bottom where the ray gun charge had struck it. The prisoners around him, under threat of the guns, were all passengers he recognized—those who had supposedly vanished in the Hole.

“Betty!” he exclaimed thankfully, starting to move towards her. “Thank Heaven you’re not dead after all.”

“Stay right where you are, Richmond,” Lothar commanded. “One step further and I’ll finish you.”

“Seems to me you’ve had plenty of chances to do that already,” Ken retorted. “What’s the idea?”

“Believe me, I’m surprised to find you two men in this room,” Lothar interrupted. “I figured when I left you in the next compartment that you’d walk over the floor trap that would have dropped you out into space, there to die. Evidently you missed it. Fortune favors fools, you know. Anyway, now that you are here, it means the end of all these people. Otherwise they could have lived—at a price. I was just deciding on that price,” he added grimly, waving his gun. “The muzzle of a ray-pistol can boost the sum amazingly.”

“What the devil are you talking about?” Ken demanded.

A malignant expression distorted Lothar’s face.

“I’ll tell you. You guessed right when you figured that the sink-hole is really Polarium-X. It is a complete sphere of it, the Earthward side fitted with traps which admit of entrance and then close again, leaving the victim in the dark. Usually the force of arrival stuns the traveler. He or she is then brought in here—the ‘better half’ of the globe. A living ape is then sent back by remote control, and a time-bomb fitted to destroy the evidence.”

“So I figured it out right,” Ken answered.

“Sure.” Lothar’s grin was horrible to see. “Only it won’t do you any good. I had my engineers fashion this globe on Pluto once I had bought the Polarium-X site from Drew. All they had to do was drag it through the void to this spot—easy enough in free space. It was anchored half way between Earth and Moon gravity, accomplished by a gravity unit operating from the Earth Arctic, which you know of—and a gravity unit on the Moon which you don’t know about. These picked, trusted men were left here to deal with the incoming people and arrange the ape returns. I’ve always worked with space pirates. That’s how I get all my money. Pretty smart, eh?”

“Pretty low down, too,” Ken retorted, clenching his fists.

“My main object was to get the pair of you away from Earth so I could ruin you as Chief Dispatcher,” Lothar went on. “If the fate of atavized people did not stir you unduly, then the apparent death of the girl you loved might. I sent a message to Miss Dransfield via my Venusian agents. It purported to come from her parents. She set out for Venus as I expected,

and I knew that if she too turned into an apparent ape you'd travel hot-foot along her self-same course—provided you were not killed by the time-bomb on Mason Hall's ship beforehand. You missed the time-bomb, went into space—and those two 'reckless' people who, like Miss Dransfield, apparently wanted to see the Hole at close quarters, were some of my disguised space pirates, detailed to see that she finished the course."

Lothar shrugged. "So it worked out as I had planned. You decided to trap me. Had I given in, I would have had you knocking around alive. So I pretended to be frightened, knowing your obstinate natures would do the rest. It worked—only you didn't fall through the floor trap. Instead you blasted your way in here. As for these folks, it was my idea to let them return home, as I said, after they'd paid me a huge ransom. It would have worked if they hadn't seen you, here. Now there can be no ransom. All of you must die to insure my own safety. A pity, but there it is."

"Just try it," Ken snapped. "You daren't do it. You'd have the whole of the space police on your tracks. This floating prison will be found."

"No." Lothar shook his close-cropped head. "I've only to give orders to the Arctic unit to cut out their power and this globe will drift Moonwards, there to settle gently on the lunar magnetizer. That I am going to do. Once it is there, I shall leave you, depart with my boys here in the one remaining machine in the next compartment. There will be no way out of the tangle for you as the Moon is never visited. You will be left with a useless radio, without food, and on a world without air. And the Government beam will be clear of the mystic peril. What your fate will be is obvious. Since it will be believed you turned into apes, who is going to look for you?"

Desperate, Ken looked around at the others as Lothar turned to a radio apparatus and spoke briefly. He used a short nursery rhyme. Then bringing his gun butt down on the delicate equipment he smashed it in pieces.

"So Adams had you figured out dead right," Cliff said slowly. "Nursery rhymes for instructions."

"I am fully aware of the activities of Serviceman Adams," Lothar said gravely. "I'll deal with him later—fully. Right now, my friends, you can make yourselves comfortable. We have a short journey to the Moon's surface, and then—death! But why should I dwell on that? You can think about it later."

White-faced, constantly kept apart from each other by the gunmen, the assembled men and women sat down. A sensation of falling crept through all in the globe. Lothar continued to leer at them, gun in hand, his attention never relaxing.

Ken and Cliff sat near Betty Dransfield trying to figure out some way to master the situation. But there was none. Lothar was holding all four aces. The hands of a nearby clock told how quickly time was running out. Once left on the long disused satellite, all hope would vanish.

It seemed eternities before, at last, there came a slight jolt. Lothar cackled in triumph.

"Get the ship ready, boys," he told his men. "Call in the boys from the magnet-house outside, and don't forget your spacesuits." He watched them go out, glanced round the taut-faced assembly. "Air may escape when the ship leaves," he said callously, "so perhaps you won't have long to wait before the end comes."

He broke off. Ken, realizing that only one gun menaced him now, suddenly catapulted from his chair and hurled himself across the room. He lashed out with his fist, as the ray gun's

fire seared across his shoulder. Lothar stumbled backward. Cliff came up and hit Lothar again. His fist struck the fat man clean in the jaw and sent Lothar stumbling against the wall—but he still held onto his gun.

Before Lothar could raise the weapon, Ken Richmond sprang after the fat man like a cat. Wrenching the ray gun from Lothar's grasp, Ken knocked him flat.

"There!" Ken panted, staring down at the dazed man at his feet. "I knew you'd make a slip. Smart rascals such as you always do. There are plenty of charges left in this gun. If you make a move or call out to your pals, I'll burn you to a crisp."

But Lothar was past resistance. His face was pale, covered with sweat. He held up his fat hands pleadingly. There was no pretense about his terror now.

"Don't kill me, Richmond," he pleaded. "I give up. I'll do anything to square matters. I'll even promise to go back to Mars for good."

"Bah," said Ken, in disgust, spurning him with his toe. "You're just a cowardly rat, after all. I always thought so." He frowned, thinking of the other ruffians outside, and the fight before him. It would be one lone ray gun against many.

Cliff Bomont stepped closer and grasped Ken by the arm.

"What's that noise outside?" he muttered. "Maybe it means we're going to have some help with this. You know I told Flip Adams two days ago that the I.S.S. ought to investigate the Moon. I didn't mention it before because I didn't want to raise up any false hopes."

The sounds outside now became more distinct. They were caused by blasting ray guns.

Ken uttered a wild whoop. "That's it—Adams is here with his men!"

Even as Ken spoke, a second voice was heard.

"You are under arrest, Reid Lothar, for piracy, conspiracy and murder. Okay, boys. Take him out and chain him up to those other prize thugs of his. Go on—move."

"Hello, Flip," Ken said, gripping the Serviceman's arm. "I'm glad to see you. But where's your spacesuit? How come you and your boys can walk about like this on the Moon?"

Adams laughed. "We're not on the Moon, feller. We're on Earth. It's all quite simple. I was working on the Lothar case. The authorities ordered the annexation of that illegal 'space ground' in the Arctic, and our men took it over. We soon solved the nursery rhyme code and made certain that Lothar is a scientific criminal. So the authorities seized the Moon as well. It was easily captured."

"Go on," Ken urged him.

"We decided to catch Lothar red-handed," the Serviceman continued. "His going to the Hole did the trick. We got his radio order to pull his Polarium-X globe to the Moon, but switched on our magnets and pulled it to Earth instead. Now Lothar will get life imprisonment for his crimes."

"Nice going," Ken said.

Adams grinned. "Space travel will have a new boss. Ken, the Government has promoted you to the post of General Director in Supreme Charge. Lothar can remember that, while he's doing his life sentence. Also, Cliff isn't going to fare badly, either. Where you go, Cliff goes too, like Mary's lamb. That Polarium-X has vast possibilities in the hands of a physicist who had no dishonest complexes."

Ken chuckled, caught Betty's arm.

"Hear that, Bets? You're going to marry the chief of all inter-planetary communication—and like it!"

[The end of *Space Trap* by John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross)]