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# AMAZING

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## STORIES



### LORD of the CRYSTAL BOW

BY DUNCAN FARNSWORTH

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*Title:* Destroyer from the Past

*Date of first publication:* 1942

*Author:* John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross) (1908-1960)

*Date first posted:* Aug. 13, 2022

*Date last updated:* Aug. 13, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220821

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

# *DESTROYER FROM THE PAST*

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Polton Cross.

First published *Amazing Stories*, May 1942.

*Something was desperately wrong out in the void, and Gregg had to track it down.*

Murray Gregg, veteran chief of the Earth-Mars Space Route, stood at the window overlooking the sprawling towers ringing the departure grounds. He was worried: every line of his strong cast face showed it. There was even a despondent droop to his usually erect shoulders.

He was alone in this great operations office, surrounded by the numberless instruments that kept him in touch with space ports the world over. And being alone meant that he was dictator of all space travel and its necessary safety. . . . That was why he was worried. Something was desperately wrong.

He turned almost in relief as the door opened and two men were shown in. Then his face fell as he gazed at them. They were so shabby, so apparently inefficient. The one huge, fat, round-faced and genial. . . . The other much shorter, keen eyed, with a comical seriousness about his face. Their clothes, such as they were, were ill-fitting. Rather than looking like men prepared to face death, they resembled comedians. To Murray Gregg the famous Laurel and Hardy of the Twentieth Century were mere memories, otherwise he might have been tempted to remark the similarity.

“You—you are the firm of Long and—er—Shortt?” he asked gravely.

The big one smiled reassuringly. “Don’t let that worry you, my dear sir. The names are assumed, of course, befitting our physical characteristics and also, might I say, covering up the names of two—hm!—unwanted members of the human race. Ex-hoboes, sir! But not afraid of danger, or of death. Where special agents fail, Long and Shortt succeed.”

“I see.” Gregg’s voice was dry. He felt he had made a damn fool of himself. But he went on colorlessly, “If you can make anything of the case I’m handing to you you’ll indeed show special agents something, since they can’t overcome the trouble.”

“Speak, sir—we are all ears,” Long invited, beaming, and his little partner nodded though he looked half asleep.

Gregg motioned to the reports on his desk.

“Four space liners recently have returned to Earth on their robot controls with all the passengers and crews dead! That means something like four thousand people wiped out by something in the void between here and Mars on the usual space route. I have had to cancel all space travel by that route until the mystery is solved. Special agents of the company have investigated—and never returned. Or if they have they have come back dead! Possibly you have heard of this, however?”

“Nothing,” said Long calmly, “escapes us. And realizing the matter was beyond special agents you called us in?”

"I noted in the professions index that you were spacemen able to tackle any danger, great or small. So I—" Gregg hesitated, looked at the two again unhappily. "So I sent for you. Maybe I made a mistake . . .?"

"Our firm," said Long with dignity, "will undertake anything from disinfecting a ship full of cultures to transporting a planet. We always deliver the goods—At a price!" he cooed. "For this, with such at stake, our terms are—"

"One million dollars," said the little one, eyelids drooping.

"My partner is, for once, right," Long agreed.

Gregg shrugged. "You will receive that sum when—and if—you completely destroy this menace, otherwise only a small expense fee for your initial tests. I think," he added grimly, "that is all. Make of it what you can."

He waited, an eyebrow raised, as both men doffed their worn civilian hats and went out together side by side. He shook his head sadly.

"I have a suspicion that route is sealed forever," he muttered. "At least until first class scientists solve the problem. *These* two mountebanks—" He gave up with a grunt of despair.

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But neither Long nor Shortt were mountebanks. As Long had intimated they were ex-hoboes and the owners of a battered space machine filled with all imaginable scientific gadgets, some their own idea, others politely "frisked" in years of wandering the various worlds of the System before they had teamed up to make money in the way they loved best—space roaming. Their down-at-heel appearance was part of their stock-in-trade—it made people talk about them—but there were brains aplenty under those oddly diverse exteriors.

"Have you any ideas, Mr. Long?" Shortt asked off-handedly, as they trudged together to the public space park where their bus was grounded.

"None, alas," Long sighed, his fat wabbling with exertion. "Unless it be the old trouble of a full-spot of cosmic rays. As we know, a nest of cosmic rays, blocked by some transverse radiation, can produce instant death to the tenants of any ship running into it."

"That," Shortt averred, "doesn't match up with the newscast reports. The people were found sitting or standing exactly as death had reached them. And they had no cosmic ray burns. Just as though they had gone to sleep and had all the life jerked out of them. . . . Definitely, Mr. Long, we are going to earn our million dollars."

"At least we shall collect it," Long answered ambiguously.

Fifteen minutes later they reached their space machine—a twenty year old model with "Jolly" inscribed shamelessly—and with no pretensions to art—on the prow. Inside it was a sight to make a trained pilot wince; but not so either of the partners. Long waved his hand airily to the airlock, left his colleague to shut it—then he wormed his ponderous mass in and out of the jam of instruments to the switchboard, sat down, put in the power.

The vessel climbed swiftly heavenwards in a flare of rocket exhausts, violent exhausts indeed. Long sniffed once or twice then said sagely, "Rice pudding. That smell means the off tube is hot, Mr. Shortt. No matter: at a later date we will 'borrow' one some place."

"Agreed," Shortt nodded; then he turned to the charts on the curved wall, studied them. Finally he commented, "This unknown destroyer might be anywhere in the lane. I think the reactor might tell us something."

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He set a delicate oscillating instrument in commission, studied it with his sleepy eyes, scratched his head once or twice, then studied it again. Designed to pick up energy

emanations, the instrument would immediately reveal the presence of anything in space which was not normally there from charting. . . . And it did.

Shortt whistled. "Hey—take a look at this!"

Long put in the robot control and lumbered over, breathed hard as he stooped to survey the pointer-needle. It was hovering around an unheard-of energy vibration, far above that usually relegated to planets, or even asteroids.

"Amazing!" Long declared, then as he studied it carefully he went on, "Do you realize, Mr. Shortt, that this wavelength does not belong to inorganic matter at all? It has the wavelength one gets from *organic* matter—protoplasm, amoeba, and so forth. But what can there be of a protoplasmic nature in *space*? For that means . . . life!"

"If we drive on," Shortt said with rare wisdom, "we might find out."

Somewhat huffily the big fellow returned to the controls and hurtled the ship onwards steadily. Quickly his eyes searched the void, but he could not see any trace of the thing recording itself so infallibly on the detector. . . . Space looked normal enough.

Away to the left was Venus, the planet which had been deemed unsuitable for space travelers. To the right was red Mars, partly colonized, cities rearing up by engineering miracles under domes of air filled glass. The Moon— That didn't count anyway. But this *unknown* was totally absent. Maybe it was space-black and absorbed all light-waves. . . . Hell, lots of things!

Still Long held onto the controls with podgy hands, sweeping along the deserted spaceway usually crammed with traffic, commercial and passenger, plying between Mars and Earth. And it was likely to stay deserted unless he and Shortt found out what was so haywire.

After some two hours of breakneck progress he frowned and rubbed his forehead, pushed up his hat. There was a pain in his brow, an unexpected one, as though his nerves had started to play hell with him. Queer! He had imagined his nerve was cast iron.

Then Shortt suddenly gave a yelp of anguish. He turned a face that was almost comical in its sudden drawn look.

"Something—is wrong with me, Mr. Long!" he gulped. "I could swear my heart skipped a beat—or something—" He doubled up abruptly in a paroxysm, then when he straightened up again his cheeks were ash-white.

"Something is attacking us!" he panted, and crawling to a chair he flopped into it and hugged himself.

---

By this time the massive Long was little better, but being bigger he held on longer. He mopped his round, sweating face and stared out bewilderedly onto the void. Still nothing— But no! There *was* something, gray, impalpable—away to the left, perhaps five hundred miles from the regular space lane but so low in albedo it was hardly noticeable. Indeed it had probably escaped attention from space pilots as a mass of cosmic dust or something. But it was there all right, giving off a queer pulsating glow.

Long twisted excitedly. "There! Take a look!"

Anguished, Shortt nodded weakly. "I am in no position to argue, Mr. Long. I'm dying! Let's get outa this—"

Long hesitated, then as he felt terrible pains burning into his ample chest he swung the vessel around in a blaze of sparks and drove away as hard as the ancient tubes would take him. And the greater the distance the less his pain, and Shortt's. At last they were normal again, with the ship coasting gently.

“What in cosmos was it?” Shortt panted, color flowing back in his thin face. “It felt like a pair of forceps trying to pluck out my heart and nerves.”

“Accurately put, Mr. Shortt,” Long beamed. “And remember that we only skirted it. Small wonder those on board the regular ships were killed. . . . Definitely we have a job to do.”

“I’m wondering if it’s worth a million bucks.”

“You forget our reputation, Mr. Shortt. We know that the asteroid or whatever it is is lethal. Very well, we will approach it again in protective suits. . . .”

Shortt nodded and moved over to the store cupboard, dragged out two suits that looked rather like old fashioned armor. The difference lay in the metal of which they were composed, coated on the inside with a furry asbestoslike substance which negated everything known in the way of radiation. Probably some harassed engineer was wondering right now where these two suits had gone. . . .

The two clambered into them, fastened up each others’ square helmets; then looking like a big and little robot they prepared for the return trip. Shortt kept on the lookout, and Long once more took the controls.

Again they moved toward that gray smudge, watched it loom ever larger. But this time they felt none of the sufferings of the earlier visit. They could study the unknown at leisure, unpaired, as they flew round it.

Its size was about that of a reasonably large asteroid. But from every position it appeared to be covered in the main by a grayish, moldlike substance.

“Looks like a rock gone bad,” Shortt commented through his headphone.

“Foul life,” Long agreed, then turning to the instrument board he dropped a scoop-trap attached to a wire from the safety sink in the ship’s floor. Withdrawing a scoop full of the stuff, he tipped it by mechanical means into a glasslighted globe and sealed it quickly.

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He and Shortt watched the curling, feathery reaction of the stuff against the light in the globe. Certainly it was alive for it writhed incessantly.

“Bacteria?” Shortt suggested.

“It has a similar formation,” Long agreed. “But what sort of bacteria is it which can destroy over a distance—and in space? Guess we’d better try again,” he decided, and once more the scoop dropped, this time bringing up samples of the basic rock itself under the sea of molds.

Carefully he stirred the gritty substance with a glass rod.

“Dirt,” Shortt sniffed. “Nothing more. Bits of ice, that’s all. All asteroids look alike anyway.”

“They look alike, but they are *not* alike,” Long corrected in a grave voice. “Asteroids, Mr. Shortt, are messengers, telling us exactly where they’ve come from. From their makeup one can tell what part of the system they hail from: if not that, then the planet from which they have broken away . . .”

He got busy with the analyzing equipment, a device which sorted out the atomic weights and components of the stuff he’d obtained. Hardly any personal work at all was called for, for automatic and infallible results were given. The pointer finally swung to the substance in closest parallel to it in composition.

“Venus!” Shortt ejaculated, his jaw lolling behind the face glass. “This meteor came from Venus! *That* can’t be right!”

"Instruments do not lie, Mr. Shortt." Long looked back at the asteroid, puzzling for a while. "I recall no reports of anything being torn from Venus recently. . . . Ah, but why recently!" he cried, after an interval. "Venus probably once had a moon!"

"Probably . . . So what?"

"Nobody knows what happened to it," Long elaborated. "If it followed normal laws it just broke up: why, we do not know. The chances are that this chunk of moldy stuff is part of the one time Venusian moon, which has drifted into our system—or at least to this point of the system—by cosmic currents. How the life got onto it we do not know."

"Where does it get us?" Shortt asked. "We can't do much about a moon which vanished so long ago nobody has ever recorded it."

Long did not answer: he was busy with the instruments again, checking the drift of the asteroid carefully, working out details on a "borrowed" adding machine. When he turned his big round face was worried behind the glass.

"It is drifting," he said slowly. "And it is slowly moving into the Earth's field. Within a very short time it will drop to Earth itself, and when it does, with those molds on it, God knows what will happen!"

"What do we do?" Shortt asked. "Incinerate it?"

"We might—but if it is created by special action, incinerators will only destroy it temporarily, then it'll re-form. However, we can but try—"

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Long switched one of the heat beams into action and trained it on the asteroid. Smoky trails blasted through the fluffy, disgusting stuff and left deep scars upon it. But they formed again with miraculous speed.

"No use, Mr. Shortt." Long switched off impatiently, his eyes narrowing as the problem absorbed him. "It attacks over a distance and it is indestructible. Remarkable! And it is moving toward Earth. . . ."

He turned to the radio, contacted the Earth-Mars Space headquarters. The voice of Murray Gregg came through. Briefly Long summed up his progress so far.

"And it is moving toward Earth?" Gregg repeated, his voice obviously horrified. "But surely something can be done? Can you not cleave it in pieces with sufficient gunpower? I will send out a fleet of cruisers if you—"

"Of little avail," Long sighed despondently. "If we broke it into small pieces the molds would still be upon it. Earth would get a rain of moldy meteors in various places instead of one huge lump—and the disease, whatever it is, might wipe out humanity. No; the better way is for you to train repulsive rays upon it the moment you sight it from Earth. Hold it at bay while we determine procedure."

"How long will that take?" Gregg asked uneasily.

"It depends—but it seems Venus might provide the answer. I shall contact you again later."

Long switched off and Shortt looked at him curiously. "Venus? What do you hope to find there?"

"Does it not strike you as possible that the Venusians might have gotten rid of their moon on purpose because it was deadly to them? If it was anything like ours is, it was airless and dead: maybe it developed molds which were dangerous to Venusian life. So they blasted the moon cut of the way—and bits of it swirled back to prove dangerous—like this asteroid. . . . If the Venusians did that they may know by this time what it is and how to deal with it. So far

Venus has not been properly examined. Now seems as good a time as any to get started. Only a theory—but worth following.”

Shortt nodded, none too happily. Long lumbered back to the controls, gradually pulled the ship away from the asteroid. Only then did they remove their stuffy suits. The small sample of mold by itself was powerless to do damage. None the less Long took the precaution of putting it in an open-topped culture jar. Later, Earthly chemists might be highly interested in it. . . .



## CHAPTER II

### Mystery on Venus

Working in shifts the two hurtled the vessel across the sixty million mile void to the glowing planet which lay dead ahead of them. Each in turn they watched it thoughtfully, wondering—as had many explorers before them<sup>[1]</sup>—just what sort of a history it really had.

[1] Grant, Munroe, Talbot—they had all had a look at it and pronounced it an ephemeral world—flowering gigantic verdure during the 720-hour day; and a mass of ice during the equally long night. A world that ran its seasons into a day's time. But of life, unless the explorers had landed in inopportune spots, there had apparently never been a sign.—ED.

The planet grew larger: the general mass of dense cloud was more distinct, blinding silver in the sunshine. Together now, both men watched the packed layers sweep up to meet them—Then they were in them, blanketed in dense mist, the total unknown on every side. Their speed was swift, so swift indeed they had left the daylight side of the planet before they realized it, were nosing blindly through murk, feeling their way.

Eyes on the instruments, podgy jowls tight, Long began to feel his way down. He realized instant destruction faced the pair of them if he cannoned into a mountain side or a glacier. Fortunately, the instruments revealed no such obstacles. . . .

Lower—lower— Then with a bump that stopped the machine with a sudden crushing shock, they landed. All was still—deathly still.

“Hm—not so bright,” Shortt murmured, peering into the abysmal dark. “Like a subway with the lights out.”

But Long was studying the instruments. “Air pressure a trifle denser than Earth's, but the mixture is the same. Nor is it so very cold down here on the surface—about twelve below zero. The frozen parts must be up at the atmosphere limit. Naturally the dense cloud will keep in the day warmth and make for slow dissipation—”

“I see something!” Shortt ejaculated suddenly, startled. “It looks like—a pair of headlamps!”

Long hurried over and stared outside. Not a thing was visible. The moonless, clouded night of Venus was absolute— He was about to give a derisive snort when he saw there *was* something out there in the dark—two bright little spots! And they were moving! In time there were two more spots—then three more— Finally a dozen pairs of spots were in a semi-circle.

“Cats?” Shortt volunteered.

“Or lights.” Long frowned. “Don't think they can be lights, Mr. Shortt, because they do not waver. We can soon find out. . . .”

He depressed the exterior searchlight button and swung the controlling wheel. A blazing beam seared the misty dark outside and for a second or two the bright spots were framed in demoniac outlines. Scrawny little bodies, all head and pipestem neck, went scurrying into dead branches and undergrowth—to reappear again, watching from a distance.

“Venusians,” Long muttered. “Eyes like those of an animal, reflecting the lights of our ship's ports. So, Mr. Shortt, Venus has got life after all! Amazing the places some people choose to evolve. . . .” He switched off and surveyed the dark. “We had better get a meal and

then wait for the dawn. I do not relish tackling those things in the dark. . . . In the meantime I will fix a compass guide on the ship so we can trace it however far we may roam. . . .”

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They ate, they smoked, they waited, then at long last pale gray began to filter through the density above. It increased very slowly. . . .

Interested again, the two moved to the window and surveyed once more. The queer beings of the night had gone now and the weary gray was throwing into relief a tangled wilderness of dry, sticklike vegetation, tall, bare trees; brown, iron-hard ground. . . . But beyond all this was something else—smashed and eroded stone columns, crumbled minarets, courtyards eaten to pieces by vines which hung dead at the moment. . . .

Here undoubtedly lay the shattered remains of a once fine city. Now dead, ruined, desolate.

“Something must be wrong with our Earthly science,” Long said finally. “We always understood Venus to be young and prehistoric: instead it looks as though civilization has been and gone. . . . Grab some tackle: we’re going to look. Though I doubt if we’ll find anything relating to that asteroid.”

By the time they were both ready it was full daylight—a blinding gray shade caused by the diffusion of piled-up cloudbanks. Outside, they found the hard ground had now deteriorated into a sea of sloppy mud in which green life frothed and burst. Ankle deep in it in their gumboots they moved along, packs on shoulders, flame-guns at their sides.

Every now and again they stopped, convinced of that uncanny feeling of being watched. Yet they saw nothing. Even so they felt sure a myriad eyes were watching their every move—a feeling lent added possibility by the shelter afforded now from vines and trees all sprouting into speedy life.

Then here and there on the stifling air came a chatter of laughter—the silliest laughter, like imbecile children.

“Uh-uh,” Shortt muttered uneasily, raising a sweating face.

“Definitely sinister,” Long agreed, fingering his collar—but they went on just the same, but with increasing furtiveness. They were on a planet completely unclassified, and that might mean death at any moment. If not—perhaps a million dollars!

In half an hour they reached the ruins of the city. Only their imaginations could tell them how immeasurably vast it must once have been. It stretched through the fast-growing vegetation for many square miles, parts of it still traced out. It could be pictured as thriving, industrious, devoid of all this vegetation now twining through its bones.

Buildings were without roofs; here and there walls stood in isolation, the tops crumbled. In other places machinery of no conceivable purpose lay rusted, abandoned, most of it out of shape from incessant exposure. Once, no doubt, science had held full sway here, and probably a high order of science at that.

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Then presently, as the exploration was continued, the two caught glimpses of that weird life of the night. Sometimes they saw a Venusian hiding behind an eroded column; or at times a group of them looking over a hill of smashed machinery up which verdure traced its leisurely way.

“Like a bladder on a string,” Shortt said, as they glimpsed a Venusian clearly for a moment.

“But their purpose?” Long muttered, his round face troubled. Instinctively he clutched his gun—and it was well he did so for as though with a prearranged signal a whole army of the creatures suddenly burst forth from a dozen hiding places, came speeding across the clearing.

They were queer all right—even hideous. Their bodies were only Earth-like in having trunk, head, arms, and legs. There all similarity ended. The bodies were like footballs with distended bellies. Legs and arms were scrawny, as were necks. The heads were topheavily big and bald, supplied with two enormous eyes which obviously were intended to compensate for the pitchy Venusian night. Extraordinarily enough, each one of them wore an incredible ornament in addition to a rough loin cloth. Sometimes the trinket was a glass radio valve tied round the neck with vine; in other cases it was copper wire, green with age, made like a bracelet. Still others had metallic parts linked together in a waist girdle, and the parts were clearly from a dismantled machine!

So much the two Earthmen had time to notice before they were overwhelmed. Long fired his gun and it blasted one of the beings to ashes—then he was flung over on his back for all his size, wriggled in nausea as he was pawed and gripped by hands as wet and cold as tripe.

There was tremendous strength in the skinny limbs too—almost blind animal ferocity. . . . For a few minutes both men gave back as good as they got, lamming their fists into cold, slippery flesh, injuring perhaps a half dozen of the little horrors—but finally they won the day from sheer numbers, brought lengths of vine from the jungle and trussed the two securely, laid them flat on their backs.

A war dance began—anyway it looked like that if the peals of idiotic laughter and mad shouts were any guide.

“Mr. Shortt,” Long said anxiously, twisting his big face to look at his partner, “I have the feeling we are at a disadvantage. Maybe we were foolish to hope for a million dollars!”

Shortt’s only response was a groan of dismay. Then Long looked back at the creatures with a vaguely scientific interest.

“Observe a few details,” he said finally. “They’re not animals. They have humanlike hands and feet—human appearance. They are not even highly evolved apes. I begin to think they are de-evolved from a more highly organized race.”

“What gives you that idea?” Shortt grunted.

“The city. Some memory tie keeps them close to it. They are like jealous guardians. Maybe they thought we intended mischief.”

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Shortt didn’t reply for the dancing and laughter had ceased. With a determined rush the creatures pushed forward, seized the two in their pipe stem arms—it took ten of them to raise Long—and began to carry them along. A journey into the jungle to places unknown began. . . .

At the end of an hour of this both men were beyond comment. The creatures seemed to be pursuing an interminable journey: but finally it did come to an end as they began to break free from the matured masses of sweltering foliage and entered a clear, rocky space. Here there was an extraordinary object upon which both men had time to gaze at leisure as they were tossed down.

The object was a squat, powerful affair of metal, somewhat weather worn, and looking rather like, an inverted bottle. The neck section was rigidly fixed into a platform, this in turn being raised from the ground level by four short pillars. . . . Beside it, like an immense cylinder, was a machine that defied analysis, particularly as its summit was fitted with an affair like a radio antenna.

Perhaps even more extraordinary was the fact that at this point—perhaps the only one on Venus—the sun was shining! To left and right of the clearing were titanic mountain ranges, but between them the clouds writhed and twisted incessantly, constantly thinning to permit one clear shaft of blazing sun to stream through. Like a pointing finger the ray settled exactly upon the queer machine on its platform. And round the contrivance the Venusians were dancing, their weird ornaments bobbing, their hands linked in each other's.

“At least it is clear what is happening in the clouds up there,” Long commented at length. “There must be an eternal wind from the night side over the mountains, bringing a vast temperature change which mingles with the hot side. Result is the clouds up there rupture and sunshine gets through—”

“But why the dance?” Shortt asked anxiously. “And what *is* that object anyway?”

“There, Mr. Shortt, you have me—Hallo, here they come!”

Once again they were both lifted, carried into that area of blazing sunlight. Their senses reeled for a moment at the impact of that orb, sixty million miles nearer than on Earth. This sunlit area was like a furnace, and the glimpse they had of the sun was that of a liquid blue-white ball that gave them pink spots before their eyes for several minutes afterwards.

Drenched in sweat, agonized by the blaze, they were bounced and bumped along as the Venusians carried them round the platform base in dizzying circles, themselves apparently heedless of the blazing tide pouring down upon them.

Dazed and sick, Long watched the platform going round in apparent circles; then he noticed that underneath the platform was a deep pit, the underside of the platform raised from it by the four short pillars. He was trying to fathom its purpose when to his alarm he was suddenly hurled forward violently, sailed right into the pit and fell headlong.

He dropped some twenty feet into an evil-smelling, revolting dark. Then Shortt fell on top of him, jerking all the breath out of him. . . . They both lay gasping and struggling for a moment, listening to the peals of idiotic laughter from above. . . .

Then slowly, gradually, the laughter began to die away. A dead silence ensued.

## CHAPTER III

### The Past Revealed

"If you could get your teeth into these vines, Mr. Shortt, I would be indebted."

Shortt stirred at the voice beneath him, at the heaving of his colleague's ponderous body. He shifted, obeyed the request, and some minutes later had got Long's wrists free. From then on it was easy. Finally they stood up, staring at the circular hole through which they'd dropped, and the base of the queer machine.

Shortt gave a sudden sniff. "Hm, it would seem the sanitation is pretty bad around here. Smells rather like a slaughter house."

It did. In fact the stench was appalling. Both of them began to move round to trace the cause of it, wondering if they had been tossed into a rubbish dump. Then Shortt gave a sudden cry.

"Say, there's something here like the end of a dog's nose! Must be a Venusian— Up you come!"

Long heard him wheeze with effort and moved toward him. He found Shortt supporting a Venusian nearly too weak to stand. His huge eyes were visible, catching the light from above.

"I suppose," Shortt reflected, "I ought to wring his neck? But seeing as we're in the soup together, I won't— Hallo, more of them!" he ejaculated, as getting accustomed to the gloom they could see three or four Venusians sprawled on the floor around them, apparently motionless—perhaps dead.

"Possibly they *are* dead," Long reflected. "That would account for the odor."

Shortt nodded, shook the Venusian he held. "Say, onion-puss, is there any way out of here beyond climbing?"

The Venusian responded with a chatter that meant nothing. Shortt gave a despondent sigh. But Long became active and went to the nearest wall, returning presently with the vine ropes they had cast off.

"Simple," he murmured complacently knotting them together—then tossing up the free end he let it fall around one of the pillars and so back to him.

"Being slightly heavy," he said; "I'll go first."

As daintily as an elephant he went up, while Shortt watched him anxiously from below. Then as Long motioned him to follow he tossed the Venusian over his shoulder and began to climb, emerged over the pit edge to find Long looking round him with his raygun ready.

There was no sign of life. Apparently the Venusians had gone.

"Just wonder why they went to all that trouble?" Shortt asked, tossing the Venusian down—then he gave a start of horrified surprise. Now the Venusian was in daylight it was apparent his absurd body was covered with ugly sores.

"Uh-uh," Shortt said, inspecting himself. "Don't like the look of this—"

"Apparently burns," Long pronounced, frowning. "Similar to those from X-rays. Not catching anyway, I fancy. . . . Tell me, sir, do you understand what I am saying?" he asked the Venusian.

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The creature simply gazed with his catlike eyes. But there was an expression close to gratitude on his queer face. And at length he did try to explain himself, but in an impossible

language.

“If only we could get him to talk sense we might be able to understand the set-up of this place,” Shortt sighed. “More than that, we might find something out about the asteroid. After all, that’s our prime purpose.”

“Proceed,” Long suggested gravely. “There can be nothing lost. . . .”

So Shortt started pointing out the various things around them, identifying them in the Venusian language as the creature gave it, then supplying the Earth equivalent. Shortt realized it was going to be a long tedious job—and he wasn’t made any more patient by the thought of a mold-smothered asteroid creeping ever nearer Earth.

However, he slugged on because it was the only line of action. Several Earth days elapsed, but there was no sign of returning Venusians. Now and again Long took a turn with the “education,” and gradually between them they began to get results. Besides, they rather liked the Venusian in spite of his skin trouble. He was quite obviously intelligent—and still grateful. And at last, to the infinite relief of the two, he got to the stage where he could sling words together to make sentences.

“Would—like to thank you—for food and water,” was his opening statement. “And for rescuing me from down there. Would have died like fellows otherwise. Was thrown there because of this—” and he pointed to the burned looking patches on his body.

“What are they?” Long questioned sharply.

The Venusian pointed to the sun, said simply. “Certain rays.”

“I imagine,” Shortt said thoughtfully, “that certain radiations of the sun, in excess, have gotten him into this mess. Just the same as overzealous sunbathers get ulceration.”

“Name of me is—Vilji,” the Venusian volunteered.

Long said paternally, “Mr. Vilji, we seek information. What race do you belong to? What are you all doing here?”

That took Vilji some time to explain and demanded pantomime, but from his mixed up metaphors and split infinitives it finally became fairly clear that he and his race were descendants of the original scientists who had built the now eroded city.

“We remember them little,” Vilji sighed. “Once there was greatness, but we know it only from records. Space travel was tried: the man who tried crashed on our moon. His body fell prey to a metallic life on that moon. A new sort of life so came into being—a moldlike life. It needed living people like us so it could live. It formed into a fog, came down to our planet here, and killed many thousands, leaving weak survivors. Our scientists built a gun to destroy that moon. . . .” And the pipstem arm indicated the queer “inverted bottle” on its platform.

“I was right,” Long breathed. “Degenerate survivors. They have only memories, and a hereditary instinct keeps them still near to the city where there was once such pomp and power. . . . Just what did they use in that gun to destroy a moon?” he asked wonderingly.

Vilji reflected, then said brightly, “Split power.”

Long frowned, then he beamed. “Split atoms—atomic force! Of course!”

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He paused as the Venusian apparently made up his mind on some objective, motioned them to follow him. They hesitated, wondering if it was a trick. Then Shortt gave a grunt.

“Might as well go with him. I think he is genuinely grateful for being dug out of that drain. We could do with new scenery.”

They accompanied him through the riot of jungle until he came to a tiny clearing. Without hesitation he went on his knees and burrowed in the ground, finally dragged to view a roughly

made box of tree bark. With all the reverence of finding a treasure he handed it over, a look of sublime trustfulness on his face.

Long took it solemnly, to find Shortt grinning.

“Sad,” Shortt said, “to think of a mighty race reduced to burying things like dogs! What’s in it? Cigarette cards?”

Long jerked up the lid and stared in surprise at the odd assortment. It was rather like the junk a child might collect—many trinkets, odd bits of wood, coils of wire— And finally a sheaf of stiff parchment paper on a drum, to which was affixed a handle.

“Say,” Shortt whistled, stirring his finger in the odds and ends; “there are diamonds here! The value of ’em. . . . Come to think of it,” he went on slowly, “the Venusians all wear something queer. Remember those scientific gadgets they had for ornaments?”

“Obviously they have plundered the city’s remains,” Long responded, then he fished out the diamonds, counted three to himself and Shortt, pocketed them with a complacent sigh. “A trifling security,” he explained to the Venusian, who didn’t seem to mind in the least. In fact he nodded urgently to the parchment drum.

Long examined it thoughtfully, turning the handle. The sheets instantly whirred and he gave a violent start.

“For you,” Vilji offered. “Special treasure—of mine.”

“I’ll take the diamonds—” Shortt started to say, but Long cut him short.

“Special treasure’s right! Look here—! This darn thing, if Vilji only knew it, is movie history. It’s one of those things where a selection of photographs, each advanced in action, gives a moving picture impression— Lord, if only we had all of it, Mr. Shortt! Even as it is it’s enough. . . . See!”

Shortt watched fascinatedly. As the handle turned the sheets flickered into a blurry movie of a city by moonlight—obviously this same city that now lay in ruins—for a good distance from it was a half completed device, unmistakable in shape. That atomic gun!

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In the moonlit streets of the city lay thousands of dead, or slowly moving Venusians, most of them struggling and milling away from the tentacles of a deadly fog reaching down from that moon.

Unhappily there was not much of the record, but it was enough to plunge both men into thought for a long time after they’d run it through several times. Finally Long summed up.

“We know the molds started by a metallic element absorbing the life of a dead Venusian. It needed more organic life to keep it going—so it bridged the gap to Venus. When that happened the gun was only half finished. Obviously there was time to complete it. It blasted that moon into bits, hurling the parts to all quarters of the System. The moldlike stuff no doubt went into a form of suspended animation, came to life again on one of the floating pieces when it realized life—inside spaceships—was near it. It absorbed that life over a distance and grew in consequence. If it hits Earth it will consume all life.

“But, Mr. Shortt, we also know from this record that the gun was built in sections—plate by plate. And it used the one thing we haven’t solved as yet—atomic force.”

“I don’t see the connection,” Shortt puzzled.

“If it blew a large sized moon into pieces it could reduce an *asteroid* to dust,” Long pointed out. “It might even be capable of destroying that mold life completely.”

“But how in heaven’s name do you propose to get a gun that size into space?”

Long smiled. "It is in sections! If we could dismantle it—!" He turned to the Venusian. "Tell me, Mr. Vilji, do you know anything of the art Of gun dismantling?"

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That was a teaser—but put in more simple language the Venusian began to ponder. Finally he led the way back to the gun-site and the two watched him as he climbed onto the platform. Exerting but little effort he pushed on one of the gun's curved plates— Amazingly enough it came away along grooves and dropped with a clang, exposing the gun's interior.

"Of course—a portable gun!" Long cried. "This site is much further away from the city than the one in the movie record. The thing can be moved—How very, very interesting! Come!"

They climbed up to the Venusian's side and peered through the opening into the firing chamber of the thing. It was complicated beyond belief, but all housed in weather-proof casing. This, and its superb workmanship, had effectually defied the ages.

"Atomic all right," Shortt said finally. "See, here are the firing electrodes—and here's the matrix in between. Then the power is concentrated here. But look, what would they fire? Shells?"

"Through a portable gun?" Long cried aghast. "My dear fellow! No; they wouldn't need to fire anything—only the ray or beam of force generated by atomic disruption. Probably they used copper blocks in the matrix and the resultant energy was trained upward. Shells indeed! Come to think of it we have copper aboard our ship which might come in useful."

They turned aside and looked further, discovered how easy a thing it really was to take to pieces. The bore itself was not in the least reenforced, proving beyond doubt it was only made to direct a force beam and not a shell. . . . That settled it. They went to work taking away plate after plate, piling them up into a small hill on the platform. Then when they'd gotten right down to the matrix itself Long gave a groan of dismay.

"We have no power to fire it!"

"Not so!" Vilji insisted, who had been watching the proceedings with interest. Indeed, he seemed to have grasped the scientific implications completely for he pointed to the odd-looking cylinder with the "radio antenna" on top of it. He made a motion to show it was dangerous, then pointed to the sunshine streaming onto it.

Finally he pressed a switch low down near the base. The result was amazing. The cylinder hummed violently and the electrodes at each side of the gun matrix began to glow. Invisible disruptive radiations collided with one another since there was nothing in between to be disintegrated.

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A recoil of hot air and choking dust all but pitched the three off the platform. Instantly the Venusian struggled over to the cylinder and switched off. Then he motioned to its various wires. Some led to the gun-matrix, and others sank into the ground.

"I think I understand," Long said slowly. "They erected the cylinder just here because of the eternal sunshine. It must absorb solar power and store it up as potential—a feat we have tried unsuccessfully for ages. And the earth wires take care of the surplus charge. . . . And from the look of it the cylinder can be moved too. Mr. Short, we have the power—and the gun. I see that million dollars coming much nearer!"

"How about getting this junk out of here?" Shortt asked.

"You must go and fetch the ship. And hurry! I'll do my best to get this firing cylinder detached."



Shortt nodded, vaulted to the ground, studied his compass for the way back to the ship, then hurried off with leveled raygun. Long watched him out of sight, then turned back to the job . . .

## CHAPTER IV

### Hero from Venus

Long had just gotten the cylinder free when a sudden hullabaloo arrested his attention. The Venusians were returning, their shouts and yells filling the air. And this time they were armed with weapons—deadly looking things like rayguns, only smaller. Long gave a start of alarm as the rays from one of them chipped metal clean out of the platform.

Immediately he drew his own gun, shot an anxious look at Vilji.

“They furious,” he explained. “This gun—sacred shrine to them— Don’t know real meaning of it. Not scientist like me.”

“Act of desecration, eh?” Long’s round face went grim. “Okay; but I’m carrying on just the same—” and he lashed round his gun suddenly. Two Venusians dropped in clouds of ash.

Long ducked, dragged Vilji down with him. The frightful force of the ill-aimed Venusian weapons were tearing chunks out of the platform, and less frequently the apparatus. Long’s anxious eyes wandered to the cylinder of potential force. If there was a direct hit on that he didn’t dare imagine what might happen.

“I suppose they’ve frisked these guns from the city?” he asked.

Vilji nodded worriedly. “That is why they have been quiet. They went to get them. Atomic force. Like big gun here.”

“Which means they have an almost infinite supply of power,” Long growled. “Nice going!”

He dodged again as more ray charges flashed around him. Pulling the Venusian down beside him he took careful aim, peering round the mass of the dismantled gun. Another wildly charging Venusian went down with half his body blown away.

Long looked troubled. There was something nauseating about all this. He’d sooner have a good clean fight with flesh and blood than a lot of *papier mâché* beings like this.

*Whang!* He flattened as a chunk of metal cleaved out, V-shaped, immediately over his head. Another charge flashed violently on the precious gun matrix—but nothing happened. Long breathed again. No damage done apparently, except for the smoky mark on the casing. . . .

After awhile, to his deepening horror, the Venusians began to close in more obstinately, reinforced by greater numbers from behind. All of them it was clear were hell bent on destroying the machinery and the defilers with it.

Time and again Long fired at them vigorously, but in any case he had not enough gun-charges to account for all of them— So his gun finally ran out and he tossed it away, lay waiting anxiously with his eyes searching the mob.

“This is going to be tough, feller,” he confided to the Venusian crouched beside him. “Once they realize we’ve run out of sugar they’ll make a mass attack. . . .”

His eyes searched the sky desperately, hoping for some sign of the spaceship. So far nothing so pleasant was visible. . . .

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Fortunately, the pile of metal from the gun was an ample protection, and the wariness of the Venusians took up further time. Then, gradually realizing that all opposition had collapsed

they fired their guns with withering force, beams flashing in all directions, chipping metal from a dozen different points.

The din of their cries made the clearing echo—then it was gradually obliterated by another noise, the glorious roar of rocket tubes! In a sudden rush *Jollop* appeared over the glade, circled it twice, then let loose its incinerator rays. Screaming, yelling, the Venusians tore pell mell for safety with burning tracks whipping on their heels.

Long stared upward, waving his arms frantically. Shortt's amplified voice bawled down at him.

"Put yourself on that heap of gun metal—and better bring onion puss with you. I'll use the attractors and lift the lot!"

Long nodded, clutched the wet coldness of the Venusian to him and scrambled up on the pile of dissembled gun. Inside three minutes the powerful grapple magnets of the ship descended, clutched the metal in its magnetized maw and lifted the pair upward to the ship's belly. The rest was easy. . . . In five minutes they were in the control room and the floor airlock closed securely. . . .

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"Nice going!" Long said approvingly, pulling himself into shape.

"And we made it. . . . Next thing to do is to assemble the gun on *Jollop*'s exterior—on the roof. Gravity from the ship and magnetic anchors will hold it in position. Guess I'll start getting busy."

He donned his space suit and scrambled like an elephant through the emergency lock in the roof. Gaining the top of the ship he attached his life line and unbuckled the belt of instruments about his waist. It was a queer sensation standing thus on the hurtling vessel in the deeps of space, with sheer nothing on every side of him, and Venus rolling away into the gulf below.

Accustoming himself gradually to a balance he went to work, drawing up the plates as, released from the anchor and held only by the ship's own gravity, they floated around the vessel. . . . The lack of gravity helped him in the assembling for one thing: for another it was a drawback because of the tendency for the plates to fly away from him. However, he kept on doggedly, fitting section into section so that the thing was horizontal, parallel with the ship's upper surface.

Nor did he manage it all in one sweep. Four times he rested: four times he worked—but at the end of the fourth effort it was completed, matrix in position, and potential solar power cylinder fully wired and reposing in the control room below. As for "food" for the matrix he stuffed it with copper filings. Satisfied, he came back below.

"All we have to do now," he said, pulling off his space suit, "is point the ship the way we want the gun to fire: we're all set for aim. . . ." He broke off and looked through the port. "Hmm looks like we'll reach that moldy asteroid in an hour or so. Right?"

"Seventy minutes," Shortt answered. "And from the look of things it has drifted a lot nearer to Earth— Better see what they've done to help things," he added anxiously. "Take the controls while I radio."

"That," Long said coldly, "is my task. Continue your own!"

---

He switched on and made Earth-contact. After awhile Gregg's voice came through—irritable, acid.

“Oh, so it’s you again! Look here, where the devil have you and your colleague been all this time? How far have you—”

“The matter is well under control,” Long stated calmly; and went into the details.

“And—and you really believe you’ll be able to destroy this asteroid?”

“We hope so. We try to give service.”

Gregg’s voice changed to despondency. “Well, it’s the last chance, I guess. While you’ve been away we’ve had repulsion rays trained on the asteroid, but they are by no means powerful enough to prevent it falling inward to Earth. It’s slowed down, but it has not stopped. . . . Nor can we get a scrap more power.”

“You may leave everything to us,” Long said serenely, and with that he switched off and added dubiously, “I hope!”

“At any rate—” Shortt started to say; then he stopped and gave a yell. “Hey there! Lay off!”

His order was directed to Vilji who was fingering the culture jar in which swarmed the deadly life Long has taken from the asteroid on the trip out.

Long lumbered over. “Don’t you realize this stuff is the very disease which struck down your race so long ago?” he demanded.

The Venusian put the culture jar down slowly, pulled away his two fingers which had been immersed in the fluid. There was an odd look in his huge eyes.

“I thought—it might be,” he said slowly.

Shortt turned suddenly. “Time to get busy! We’re all set for our protective suits. Asteroid’s very near.”

They scrambled into them quickly, using the spare one for Vilji; then Shortt sent the ship sweeping ever nearer the deadly asteroid. Long waited with his hand on the potential cylinder switch as the maneuvers went on. At last the nose of the ship was directly pointed at the asteroid. . . .

Long closed the power switch, sending the terrific force streaming into the matrix of the gun on the roof.

There was a brief stabbing ray, then a violent recoil that jerked the vessel with terrific force, sent them all sprawling. At the same instant an explosion glared space from somewhere outside, transmitting its concussion through the ship.

Hastily Long got up and switched off, looked at Shortt in baffled wonder. He scowled for a moment inside his helmet, then bundling on his space suit over his protective coverings he floundered up once more through the emergency lock. When he came back his big round face was unusually grim.

“Mr. Shortt, we lose one million dollars,” he announced forlornly. “The thing’s failed us!”

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“But what’s wrong?” Shortt asked in dismay.

“For one thing the recoil has torn it away from the anchor hold and it is floating comparatively free. For another, there’s a crack in the matrix casing which lets power escape and gives us only twenty five percent down the gun barrel. I expected it—it’s the work of those blasted Venusians when they attacked us! One of their rays weakened the casing and under sudden strain it fissured.”

Shortt couldn’t find words to say: he was too stunned.

“We’re licked,” Long shrugged. “Of course, if we got this atomic gun back to Earth it could be quickly repaired, and with a firm foundation it would be okay. Since it once blew a

Venusian moon in pieces it could surely wreck this asteroid— But that is not the point.

“The pieces, molds and all, would still fall to Earth and spread death among the human race—”

He stopped rather impatiently as Vilji tugged him. He had his communicator in action.

“Can I—look at gun? Outside?”

Long stared at his little face behind the visor. “I guess so. But what in heck can you do?”

“Idea,” Vilji said simply. “Give me space notebook please.”

Long puzzled for a moment, then he nodded and handed over the incased stylographic instrument with which space-engineers made notes in the void, through special traps in the instrument. Vilji took it, nodded, then clambered into a space suit. Finally he went up through the emergency lock, leaving the two men watching him in puzzled silence through the roof port.

Presently something gleamed in his hand.

“It’s his knife,” Shortt said in wonder. “What the hell does he think he can do with that, I wonder? Hallo! Now what?”

Vilji was kneeling down, writing slowly through the traps of the stylograph. It took him a long time, and finally he lifted up the emergency trap momentarily and dropped the stylo through into the control room. Both men glanced at it, but were too interested in watching him to bother about it, immediately . . . For he was doing a most surprising thing.

With a sudden sweep of his knife he slashed right through the life line holding him. Instantly the superior power of the deadly asteroid lifted him upwards—or rather downwards—hurtled him head over heels through the void, faster and faster, towards that gray and merciless surface.

“He’s broken loose!” Shortt screamed. “He’s—”

“Wait!” Long snapped. “He hasn’t finished— Look!”

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As he keeled into the growing remoteness they saw his knife flash once more. Instantly the remains of his space suit and protective coverings burst open. His body, dead certainly, broke free and hurtled faster and faster, tattered ends of garment fastened to it.

The body vanished in distance, but in their imaginations the two men thought they saw the faint disturbance he made as he fell a lifeless wreck into that mass of mold.

“The fool! The little idiot!” Shortt groaned. “He did that deliberately! Committed suicide? But why?”

Long frowned at the stylograph instrument on the floor, whipped it up and jerked out the engraven metal plate. He read in growing amazement, then handed it over.

*“You saved my life. I save yours. See culture jar. I prefer it this way. Have no planet worth while. Do not desire Earth. So will die of service.”*

Both men looked at each other in surprise then hurried over to the jar of molds the Venusian had been examining. Long whipped it up, tapped it—but to the amazement of both of them the feathery stuff remained motionless at the jar’s base. It did more; it slowly disintegrated into powdery sediment.

Hurriedly Long fished out some of the stuff onto the slide, stared at it through the binocular microscope.

“It’s dead!” he whispered incredulously. “But—but—”

“Wait a minute!” Shortt cried, thinking. “Didn’t Vilji have his fingers in the fluid when we spoke to him? His *sore* fingers?”

“I guess so—” Long started. “Good God, man, you mean the disease he’d got, caused by solar activity, was fatal to this mold?” Then he answered his question himself. “Why not indeed? A malignant disease to cure another form of malignant disease. Isn’t that the fundamental basis of all serums and antitoxins?”

“And that heroic little devil, realizing his disease could kill the mold, realized also what his whole body could do,” Shortt said slowly. “So he sacrificed himself in order that the stuff might die—that it might form a cancer capable of smashing it!”

“Yeah . . . That’s the answer!” Long stared before him. “Can you imagine the courage of that little guy . . .?”

The same thought in both their minds they hurried to the port and started down. The judgment of Vilji had plainly been correct, for even as they watched they could see a brownish area beginning to spread from the bottom right hand limb of the asteroid. Quite obviously the blight was progressive, would gradually spread over the entire mold-surface and destroy that foul life forever.

“And we,” Long said slowly, “can go back to Earth, get the atomic gun repaired, then blast this asteroid to hell when we know all the mold is gone. All Earth will get is a brief rain of small meteors which means nothing. . . .”

“And a million dollars,” Shortt nodded. “Long and Shortt always deliver the goods, I guess . . . But I guess we wouldn’t have but for that little hero.”

Long sighed. “Makes one feel sort of guilty taking those diamonds like we did . . . However, one must live.” He gave a last look at the asteroid, straightened up.

“Home, Mr. Shortt. Our largest assignment is complete!”

THE END

[The end of *Destroyer from the Past* by John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross)]