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"THE MOON DEVILS"
by John Beynon Harris

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THE MOON DEVILS

By

John Wyndham

Writing under the pseudonym John Beynon Harris.

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You have read of suspended animation in many stories, and in this one it is used in working out a plot filled with thrilling action and perilous adventure.

Scientists agree that the moon is now a dead world. But who can say that it was not peopled in its early days when it was young and mature while the earth was yet a boiling sphere of hot liquid? The moon, being a smaller globe than the earth, would naturally cool sooner and die sooner. Our earth will ultimately become as our satellite is today.

CHAPTER I

The secretary of the Lunar Archeological Society approached his employer with a nervous diffidence. His method of stating his business was, to put it mildly, indirect. The president was a man who hated circumlocution. He became testy.

“Come on, man. What’s the trouble? Out with it.”

Still the secretary hesitated, then, with a sudden decision, thrust a packet of papers clumsily towards his chief.

“These came this morning, sir. I thought you ought to know. They’re a bit—er—peculiar.”

“All right. I’ll look at ’em.”

The secretary departed with some relief and the president turned back to his interrupted work. Half an hour later, he remembered the pile of papers and took up the covering letter which lay on top. A name standing out amid the type caught his eye. He stiffened, stared at it, and began to read more carefully. The heading was a Liverpool address, and the date a fortnight old.

“Dear Sir,” it began. “On the sixteenth of June last, the S. S. *Turkoman*, to which I was medical officer, rescued a man at a point not far from the Solomon Islands. He was found drifting in a native canoe and, judging from his condition, had been in it for some days. The results of such exposure were aggravated by the serious ill-treatment he had received in the form of severe cuts and wounds. At first it appeared to be impossible to save him, but his body eventually responded to treatment though his mind still wandered. He was a man of considerable education and gave his name as Stephen Dawcott. Upon arrival here I placed him in a mental home. During the next four months I was absent, and when I returned, it was to find that he had made good his escape. The authorities were mystified and handed to me the enclosed manuscript which he had left behind. They saw it as the raving of a madman, but to me it seems a matter requiring a less facile explanation. I await your reply with interest.”

The signature was “John Haddon,” and to it were appended the letters, “M.D.”

The president frowned as he set aside the letter and took up the manuscript. There had been a Stephen Dawcott, an anthropologist of some note, aboard the *Scintilla*. But the *Scintilla* was lost. From the day she had left the flying field on her maiden trip to the moon, nearly a year ago, not a word had been heard from her. She had roared from Earth into mysterious non-existence. But Stephen Dawcott had been aboard her—he was sure of that. He and others of the Lunar Archeological Society had seen Dawcott’s among the faces at the windows before the *Scintilla* took off. And now the man was reported as picked up in Melanesia, of all unlikely places. The president’s frown deepened as he began to read the manuscript:

. . . The *Scintilla* behaved in an exemplary manner on her outward journey. She justified the high hopes of her designers by the smooth swiftness with which she leapt out from Earth. Captain Toft was delighted with her performance and swore that there could be no sweeter ship to handle in all the ether. Those of us who had taken part in earlier space-flights agreed unreservedly. The new Danielson acceleration compensators had proven their worth and ridded space-flying forevermore of the starting strain and its unpleasant effects. In design, furnishing, and facilities for carrying such fragile relics as we might find, the *Scintilla* was a credit to the Lunar Archeological Society who had built and so lavishly equipped her. The

perfect start, followed by the peaceful smoothness of our voyage could have raised no apprehensions in the most psychic soul. Indeed, what possible cause could there be for apprehension? The silver globe before us was worn out, arid and still with the supreme stillness of death. No ship cruising above that gutted shell of a world had seen sign of as much life as lies in a blade of grass. Even the crater of Linne, which had been suspected of harboring the last vestiges of life, had been found as barren as the rest.

“Dead,” I murmured as we gazed out of the living-cabin windows at the withered satellite. “All the ‘fitful fevers’ done and gone; a whole world mummified and at rest.”

But I did not know Luna then, I did not know to the full that desperation with which life strives and clings

We made first for the North-East Quadrant and sank to a gentle landing on the glittering, metallic dust which makes the crater of Aristarchus the brightest spot on the face of the moon. This was to be a preliminary trip. Our object was to survey the ground for future operations rather than make them ourselves. A number of sites were to be examined and reported upon with a view to deciding which would be the most profitable to excavate. Aristarchus held little of interest for us save the almost obliterated remains of a small settlement upon the northern side. The details of our trip are of little interest here, so I merely record that we moved next, unprofitably, to the Mare Crisium and thence across the equator to Tycho. Next, Clavius, greatest of all the craters, provided quantities of material and showed indisputably that a great civilization had once flourished in what is now only a vast bowl of sand and rock, a hundred and forty miles in diameter. Thus we came at last to the Mare Serenitatis, the Sea of Serenity

Who named this immense oval plain? I cannot remember, but I do know that he saw it only through a telescope, two hundred and thirty-nine thousand miles away. He did not see it as we did—a huge sterile stretch, grey-floored and gloomy. Had he been able to stand upon one of the tortured mountains at its brink and look out across that somber desolation of sand, he would have called it not the Sea of Serenity, but the Sea of Foreboding

We sailed slowly across to the North-West. Every member of the expedition was at the windows scanning the featureless floor for any sign the ancient Lunarians might have left. Until now we had felt no uneasiness. All the moon is bare, but the harshness of its vistas had not played upon our nerves; it was only what we had expected and could scarcely affect us, but now the monotony of this great dry sea bed seemed to impress us all in greater or lesser degree. Unromantic scientists though we were, we felt a misgiving which none of us was willing to put into words.

And then, less than twenty miles from the far side of the sea, the steady throbbing of our rockets was interrupted. The firing tubes began to stutter uncertainly. I was with Captain Toft when the chief engineer rang through and reported that it would be necessary to descend for repairs. The hasty glance which Toft gave through the control dome windows told me that he had conceived the same distaste for the locality as had the rest of us. He decided swiftly to make for the cliffs now looming ahead at the sea’s edge. There could be no better landing surface than the level, grey sand beneath us, but he preferred to stop near its confines. With some anxiety, he inquired the extent of the failure, but was told that this could not be ascertained while in flight. The *Scintilla* continued to forge lamely ahead, gradually sinking. She took the sand at length some two hundred yards from those high perpendicular cliffs which once had stood like the ramparts of giants against a beating sea.

The Captain left the dome to interview the engineer, and I made my way to the central saloon. A deal of chatter greeted me as I opened the door. My colleagues were peering excitedly at the cliffs; all signs of their depression had vanished. Robson, the leader of the scientific side of the expedition, drew me forward and thrust a pair of field glasses into my hands.

“Look at those cliffs, man. Just look at them.”

I focused eagerly. The sand in the immediate foreground was dotted with rocks of all sizes which had fallen from the heights, and beyond them was a line of darkness which hid the cliff-face in deep shadow. The meager, reflected light was just enough to show regular markings of some kind. I fancied that I could make out the carved figure of a man.

“Wait a minute,” cried Robson as he turned and dashed from the room.

A moment later, a searchlight was playing a flood of brilliance onto a scene which caused us to gasp incredulously. The surface of the granite-like rock to the height of some seventy or eighty feet was covered with carvings in high relief—an involved, ingenious ordering of the figures of men, animals, and conventional forms. The first astonished silence was succeeded by a babel of excited talk. Everyone spoke at once, and no one listened. And no wonder; compared to this revelation, our earlier discoveries dwindled to mere nothings. It seemed that we might have found the lunar Book of the Dead carved upon this mighty stone page.

CHAPTER II

Frozen Corpses of the Moon

Robson came back and started to tow me in the direction of the space-suit lockers. He continued to babble excitedly as he lifted the clumsy garments from their hooks. The suits were essential, for though contrary to expectation, it had been found that some air still existed upon the moon, and in the deepest craters was almost breathable during the lunar day. Yet the rarity of such as lingered in the beds of the vanished seas compelled artificial aid.

As we left the ship and drew near the cliffs, I think that there was no doubt in any of our minds that the design was a picture-writing of some kind. The irregular repetition of certain glyphs practically established the fact. None of us, of course, could yet attempt any translation, but the photographers were already arranging their cameras to provide a record for more leisured study. I watched them work with an untraceable sense of uneasiness creeping over me. I have said before, and I repeat, that although I am a hardheaded scientist, I was nevertheless aware of a distinctly unscientific misgiving

The rest were too enthusiastic, too occupied with pointing out details and symbols which might, or might not, be analogous with similar symbols on earth, to share my anxiety. And I did not mention it—it was too irrational, illogical.

It was Robson who made the great find. He had gone close up to the cliff and was examining a floridly incised square of the surface. Presently his cry sounded in all our receivers:

“A door,” he said. “There’s a door in the cliff.”

We crowded up to him and found that the square was bordered all around by a narrow crack. Millennia ago, when there had been a wind upon the moon, the grey sand had drifted up at the foot, but it took only a few moments’ scratching to lay bare the threshold of the stone panel. Already, at the ruins in Clavius, we had established that the lunar practice had been to swing a door upon a central pivot so that it turned sidewise through ninety degrees, leaving a passage to either side. Accordingly, Robson flung himself upon one side and pushed. Finding it immovable, he transferred his strength to the other. It moved back an inch or so and then stuck. Spurred on, he brought every ounce of his strength to bear, and slowly the great rock door which would have defied the efforts of three men on Earth, swung around. Without hesitation, he switched on the light at his belt and walked in. We followed him for ten yards; then he stopped.

“Another door,” he complained irritably. “They certainly meant to preserve whatever’s inside. Let’s have some more light on this.”

The second door was plainer than the outer and the only sign on it was a deep-graven circle. As I looked at that circle, my premonitions intensified. The circle—the world-wide sign of infinity, eternity—could it be possible that here, on Luna . . . ? I almost called upon the others to stop, but realized in time how weakly my warning would fall before their exploring zest.

“It’s sealed,” some one discovered. He pointed to a dozen or more blobs of black, shiny composition fixed across the jambs. On each of these, too, was impressed the sign of the circle.

To the non-anthropologist, it may seem strange that I should have attached an Earthly importance to the sign of the circle here on the moon. But it is, with the possible exception of the cross, the earliest and most widely used of symbols. It was significant of man's will to immortality in all parts of the globe from far back in prehistory, and it remains significant still.

It had dominated the lives of many races, and now here it was again—on the moon!

I stood unhappily aside and watched the rest break the seals. But the door still refused to yield, even to the efforts of five men. They drew their knives and fell to scraping out a tight-plugged paste around the edges. They tried again, but still the stone square stood adamant. Robson suggested a small charge of explosive.

"The door has no value," he pointed out. "There's no carving on it except the circle."

The rest agreed after a momentary hesitation. Ten minutes later, the face of the door was cracked across and a crowbar was levering the fragments apart. The barrier soon succumbed and we scrambled over the ruins to arrive in a large hewn room. Here and there, black openings in the walls suggested corridors to further rooms, but we gave them little attention at present, for our interest was centered in a scatter of long boxes lying on the floor. They were made of some grey metal which reflected the rays of our lamps only dully. One, close by the door, had suffered from the explosion. The lid was loosened and lay awry. Through the space it had opened, there hung a human hand.

Robson laid hold of the battered edge and wrenched the lid clean away. As his eyes fell on the contents, he started back in surprise. We hurried to his side and stared down in astonishment—men of Earth looking for the first time upon a man of the moon!

He was perfectly preserved, and we, poor fools, wondered at the artistry which had been able so to conserve an unshrouded corpse that after thousands—perhaps millions—of years, it could have appeared to have lived but yesterday. Not one of us guessed the truth about that body. We were sufficiently conceited to believe that no race could have surpassed us in any branch of knowledge. We looked down upon that moon-man, noting his almost unbelievable chest development; remarking his brown pigmentation and the Mongolian slant of his eyes; observing that he was a little shorter than the shortest of us and telling one another that he was brachycephalic; classifying him. If anyone of us happened to notice that the lips were drawn back in a smile, he did not mention it—of what interest to a scientist is a dead man's smile . . . ?

When we returned to the *Scintilla* for rest and replenishment of our oxygen supplies, Captain Toft greeted us with the information that the wear in our firing tubes was more extensive than had been suspected. It would take, he thought, nearly twenty-four hours to effect the replacements. The delay irritated him, for he had meant to follow daylight around the moon to the invisible side. The present situation would cause night to overtake us, for the flaring sun was already not far from the horizon and the dark line of the two weeks long Lunar night was crawling towards us, a bare twelve hours away. But we did not share his anxiety to be off. Indeed, we welcomed the delay, for it gave us some time for investigation. Night or day would not matter to us in the rock vault.

A dozen specimen coffins were loaded aboard the *Scintilla* after we had opened them to assure ourselves that they contained the bodies of six men and six women. With these safely stowed away, we felt at liberty to examine the vault more thoroughly.

There was little to repay detailed investigation of the place itself. No carving or decoration graced the interior, but we found that it and the subsidiary chambers contained a surprising quantity of coffins—altogether, more than four hundred of them. Each one, when opened, revealed a puzzling device whose purpose we could not guess. As the lid was raised on its hinges, two secondary occurrences took place. At the first loosening of the catches, something inside dropped with a musical tinkle. Investigation revealed the fragments of a small glass globe, smashed to pieces. Then the actual pushing up of the lid thrust, by means of an ingenious arrangement of levers, a slender hollow glass spike deep into the corpse's flank. This was automatically withdrawn as the lid passed the perpendicular. Robson and I examined the device curiously, but could make nothing of it.

“I guess it's something to do with preservation,” he suggested vaguely, and turned his attention to the other contents.

CHAPTER III

From Out of the Past

Many of the coffins enclosed not only trinkets and trappings upon the still forms, but also sheets of withered writing material covered with a quasi-pictorial script. This obviously must be collected, but since prolonged work in space-suits is inadvisable, we came to an arrangement of shifts. My turn came some six hours before sunset, and my companions were Jay Royden and Walter Greg, good men both.

We were not unduly depressed when we left the *Scintilla's* lock. My own earlier misgivings had all but disappeared under the cheering influence of the others, and if I thought at all, as we made for the vault entrance, it was of the good luck which had caused the *Scintilla* to have her misadventure here. But for that, we might never have seen the rock carvings.

The three of us were soon scrambling once more into the hewn tomb. For an hour or more we worked quietly. Necklaces, bangles, daggers, and rings which would soon be proudly shown in the museums of Earth were methodically stripped from their owners' still forms. The Lunarians, it seemed, did not know clothes as we do. What little they wore was not for covering, but for ornament in the way of worked belts, intricate breast plates and the like. Very soon our miscellaneous collection began to form a sizable pile, and I decided that it would be more convenient to remove it from the chamber where we were working to a spot nearer the main entrance. Two journeys were necessary, and as I made the second, I came upon a sight which brought me up with a jerk.

One of the coffins by my way lay open and the inmate's hand rested on the edge.

I stared in shocked horror. It had not lain so during my previous journey. I hurried past with a thumping, painful heart. I dropped my burden with the other plunder and turned to scan the vault with the awful intensity of growing panic. My ears strained to listen, though I was cut off from all external sounds. Something seemed to flicker just beyond the rays of my lamp. I jerked stiffly towards it, but the light showed nothing amiss. I turned on, scouring the place with my lamp. Nothing . . . Nothing . . .

Then I looked back to the first corner. My arms fell weakly; my heart hammered in panic. A corpse sat upright in its coffin.

I must have cried out, for I heard Walter's voice in my receiver.

"What is it?" he was calling anxiously.

"Come here, quick," was all I could manage.

The urgency in my voice started them without further question. I stood with my back to the main entrance and turned my light on the passage-mouth from which they must emerge. Something moved again outside the circle of light, but I dared not throw the rays upon it. The two grotesque space-suit-clad figures came hurrying into sight.

As they saw me, Walter demanded again: "What is it?"

I did not answer him; instead I shouted: "Look out!" A dimly seen shape was moving in the shadow behind them.

Walter snatched at his knife and made to turn, but swift as he was, he was too late. A naked brown arm came snaking over his shoulder. Its elbow crooked under the front of his helmet and dragged his head back. Another brown hand shot groping for his knife. And even

as Jay turned to help, another pair of brown arms came twining about him and I had a glimpse of a slant-eyed face leering beyond. The hand which sought Walter's knife tore it from his grasp. I could hear him grunt as he struggled to keep it. Then clearly through the microphone came a tearing as the knife ripped the space-suit and the following whistle of exhaling air. Walter gave one choking cry

The whole affair had been too sudden for me to give any help. Before I could take more than a step, came a second tearing sound and I knew that Jay, too, was past help. I stopped suddenly—no use to go on. Then I saw that the corpse which had caused my fright was no longer sitting—he was climbing out of his coffin, his face leering towards me

I turned and sprang for the open, racing for my life across the sea bottom.

They didn't believe it. Already I had shown signs of queer behavior, and now I was babbling fantastic nonsense. Dead men coming to life! Dead men fighting the living! Obviously my brain was turned. The doctor attempted to soothe me. Robson vainly attempted to reach Walter and Jay on the radio. There was an odd expression on his face when he turned back to look at me.

"Can't raise them," he said. "Something's certainly wrong. Do you think—?" He broke off and nodded suggestively towards me.

The rest looked serious. They did not put their thoughts into words, but they were plain enough on their faces. Three men alone—and one of them a madman!

Two volunteered to go out and search. The rest began to help them into their space-suits. I begged and besought them not to go, but they only cursed me for getting in their way. Others dragged me back and held me penned in a corner.

"Good God, you fools," I raged at them, "wouldn't they have called you if I'd run amuck like you think? Can't you see that I'm telling you the truth? If you go over there, they'll get you, you fools, you bloody fools! They'll get you!"

Nobody gave me a scrap of attention. The men were clad and their helmets affixed. As they left the airlock, Robson switched on the radio to keep in communication. My anger passed as I helplessly watched them trudge towards the search-lit cliff face. Nothing I could do would save them now. We saw them pause by the open stone door and heard their voices in the speaker as they settled who should take the lead. Then they disappeared. For a few seconds there was nothing but the sound of breathing. Suddenly a voice with a tinge of nervousness spoke.

"What was that? Something moved."

"Nothing," answered the other. For our benefit he added: "We are just climbing over the remains of the second door—now we're in the vault. There's—God, what's that?" His voice was suddenly shrill—and then it broke. "Quick, out of this, quick man—back, for heaven's sake!"

After that it was a jumble—hard breathing mingled with odd phrases. "—dozens of 'em." "—got him." "Keep together." Then: "Look out, he's got a knife!" Horror-stricken, we heard the sound of stout cloth ripped asunder—gasping cries. After that, all was silent. . .

My companions turned shamefaced, wondering eyes upon me. Their eyes were full of uneasy fears. Robson murmured something which might have been an apology. He begged for the whole story. I told him as calmly as I could all that I knew. He found it meager.

"Have you any theories?" he demanded.

I had been thinking, but I hesitated. "It's rather a fantastic theory," I admitted.

"Of course it is. The whole thing's fantastic. Let's have it."

"You remember what happened when we opened the coffins? A globe of something dropped and smashed. Then, too, there were those glass needles . . . There must have been a purpose behind them."

Robson looked hard at me. "You mean that the needles might have been some kind of hypodermic?"

"Something of the sort," I nodded.

"And that they revived what we thought were corpses?"

"There were the glass globes, too," I reminded him.

"But it's ridiculous, preposterous. After thousands of years . . . There might be a possibility of suspended animation for a short time, but this . . ."

"Why should it be impossible for an indefinite length of time? The fact that we don't know how to do it doesn't prove its impossibility. Those coffins were airtight; they may have been full of preserving gas, for all we know. We couldn't notice that while we were wearing space-suits."

"But—"

"Oh, all right," I said. "I'm only offering a theory. Can you think of a better one?"

Robson turned to contemplate the cliff.

"But why?" he murmured. "Why?"

"Why do men put up memorials?" I asked. "It's a habit, an instinct to perpetuate. I should say these people had just the same instinct. Their world was dying; the race was dying. Perhaps they thought that it was only a phase and that the moon would become fertile once more. Anyway, on the face of it, it looks as though they decided to take a chance and try to save some of their race for whatever future there might be."

"But how can they live?" asked someone. "There's hardly any air."

"But remember the enormous lung capacity," suggested Robson.

CHAPTER IV

The Return to Oblivion

With the suggestion of a rational explanation, the fears of the party grew less intense. Some of the more adventurous even volunteered to undertake a further investigation. They could go prepared and well armed. Robson vetoed the idea at once. He pointed out that there were over four hundred of the Lunarians ready to over-run them faster than they could fire.

“But we don’t mean them any harm.”

“Nor did the others, but they got theirs. It doesn’t seem to have occurred to you that they must have food. There was nothing to eat in the vault.”

We looked at one another. This implication of the immediate capture of our men had not struck us before. It did so now, unpleasantly.

Robson summoned Captain Toft. This was a danger which concerned the whole ship, not merely our scientific group.

The Captain’s incredulity was easily beaten down by our massed conviction. He was all for action and rescue until he realized that the space-suits had been slit and that the men were past all help. Robson pressed for the immediate removal of the *Scintilla* from the Mare Serenitatis to a less dangerous resting place in some crater, but Toft shook his head.

“The engines are down for repairs. Even by forcing work to the limit, it’ll take another ten hours.” Our faces looked anxious enough to make him add: “I’ll do my best, gentlemen, you may depend on that, but I can’t promise a minute less than ten hours.”

Robson thought for a while. At last he spoke.

“We must keep them penned up as long as we can. I want two men to go outside and take rifles. Every man or woman who tries to get out of that vault must be shot.”

Two volunteers were immediately forthcoming. They hurried into space-suits, and were on their way to the lock when a shout from a watcher at the window stopped them.

“Too late,” he called. “They’re out.”

A knot of a dozen or more moon-men had just emerged. They halted a few paces from the cliff and stood on the grey sand, shielding their eyes with their hands from the glare of our searchlight, and looking about them. Now that they were erect, their differences from Earthmen appeared more pronounced. The large ears developed for catching sounds in the thin air seemed to dwarf their heads, and the huge bulging chests were so disproportionate as to render all the limbs skinny and spindly by contrast. They looked bewildered by the barrenness of the world they now faced. Not only did it fail to fulfil their expectations, but it was obviously different from their last view of it. One man raised his arm and pointed to a distinctively distorted crag as though it were a recognizable landmark. The rest nodded and let their eyes wander, searching for other familiar sights. More of their kind came out of the vault and joined them. After a short conference, they seemed to reach a decision and the whole group turned towards the *Scintilla*.

The doctor, standing next to me, was watching them with close attention.

“They’re not doing too well,” he murmured. “Even those great lungs are laboring a bit. The atmosphere must have been a great deal denser when they went in. I wonder just how long ago—”

Robson's voice cut him short. He was addressing the two in space-suits.

"They mean mischief. You two get up into the control dome and take your rifles. We'll evacuate the dome and then you can open the windows and pick them off, if necessary."

The two men left the room and we heard them clattering up the metal ladders. Robson was right. The moon-men and women did mean mischief. It was in their gleaming eyes and bared teeth as they approached. They had resumed the trappings that we had pilfered. Each wore the broad worked belt of Luna, and about their necks and ankles glittered metal bangles. Black hair, held back from their faces by ornate circlets, depended in a lank mane upon their shoulders and down their backs. One man, slightly taller than the rest, appeared to be the leader. As they drew close, he turned to incite the rest. A moment later, a volley of rocks and stones clattered futilely against the *Scintilla's* metal sides.

We took heart. The primitive simplicity of such an attack encouraged us. Half a minute later, two moon-men dropped inert. Our men in the dome had gone into action. The attackers, by now a hundred strong, were thrown into momentary confusion. But the wavering was brief, and in a few seconds, they were running towards us. They had seen in a flash that once beneath the ship's overhanging sides, they would be safe from the marksmen above.

A well placed rock put the searchlight out of action and plunged the cliff face into intense shadow. It became impossible for the riflemen to pick off the reinforcements which would pour from the tomb. They would be all but invisible until the line of sunlight was reached—and that line was crawling slowly closer to us with the sinking of the sun. Another searchlight was switched on, but it, too, was swiftly obscured. The main body of the attackers was now out of view from our windows, though a large number of stragglers continued to dart from the shadow towards the ship. Of these, a number fell to the guns, but a larger number won through unharmed.

From down the corridor came the sudden clanging of an attack upon our outer door. We looked at one another and smiled. There was precious little to be feared from that direction. Nor were the moon-men long in realizing that the steel would defy their utmost efforts. In a very short time, they came clustering around the window, hungrily gloating and excitedly jostling one another as they peered in.

The leader picked up a prodigious rock which could not have been stirred by one man on Earth. He flung it with a mighty heave against the fused pane. The pane was unharmed, but Robson looked serious.

"I don't know how much of that sort of thing it will stand," he said doubtfully. "If they try two or three of those rocks simultaneously—?"

The same idea had occurred to the moon-men. We saw them collecting the largest rocks they could handle. There was a leering look of triumph on the face of the leader as he regarded us through his slant eyes. Robson rushed back and opened the door.

"Quick, out of this," he shouted.

We left in a headlong rush, and as the last of us came through, we heard the crash of the shattered window. The door snapped to behind us automatically as the air pressure fell.

Within a couple of minutes, a furious battering began towards the stern. Half a dozen of us raced down the ship. As we clattered through the engine room, the chief engineer looked up, spanner in hand. He was working all he knew. The grime on his face was trickled with sweat and his hair lay damp and flat.

"Clamp on the emergency plates," he called as we passed.

There had been no time in the main cabin to fix the heavy steel plates across the windows, but now we seized them from their racks and set to with a will. No sooner was a plate fixed over one porthole than the moon-men turned their attack to another, and we had to rush that also to cover with an emergency plate.

In the middle of our activity came word that the men in the control dome were abandoning their position. The place was becoming untenable on account of the bombardment of rocks, for while the rocks could be thrown on a trajectory which kept the throwers concealed, the riflemen must have direct vision before their shots could be effective.

For what seemed several hours, we lived in a nightmare of rushes from point to point. As fast as we made one spot safe, another was attacked. Then, at last, when we were weary to the point of exhaustion, we became aware that the frenzy was lessening. The batterings grew fewer and feebler until at length they stopped altogether. We waited, puzzled. It was almost an hour before we cautiously removed an emergency plate and peered out. Only then did we understand the abrupt cessation of hostilities.

The sun had set and the sea bed shimmered coldly in the pale green-blue Earthlight. Of the moon-men, only a few still, crumpled forms were to be seen.

“They’ve gone,” I said. “But why?”

Robson pointed towards the cliff, and I saw that the stone door was now closed.

“The cold,” he explained. “Right now it’s colder out there than anything you’ve ever known. In a little while, it will be so cold that what little air there is left will freeze solid.”

“And the moon-men?”

“It means the end of them. Even in their vaults, the air will freeze—though they’ll freeze first.”

“Poor devils,” I said. “To wait all those thousands of years just for this—to freeze to death.”

I had an unhappy vision of the last luckless moon-men and women huddled together in their lightless tomb, waiting without hope for the creeping coldness of death. Robson’s voice broke my mood.

“All hands on the job,” he said briskly. “We’ve got to get ship-shape again. Captain Toft, what are your orders, sir?”

CHAPTER V

The Twelve Coffins

It was decided that we would make for Earth. The morale of the *Scintilla's* company was too shaken to undertake the exploration of Luna's hidden side on our present trip. Since little or no calculation was necessary, Toft waited only until the engines were repaired before he headed straight for the great pale disc of Terra. The ground fell away and we looked for the last time on that misnamed Sea of Serenity. A few scattered brown figures were visible in the Earthlight—they seemed like a sad symbol of the littleness of that passing phase of worlds which we call life.

With that final glimpse, those of us not on duty turned away and sought our cabins for overdue rest.

I slept long. It was all of twelve hours before I reopened my cabin door. My way down the passage led me past the chief engineer's room and I hesitated outside his door, wondering whether to take him along for breakfast or whether to let him have his sleep out. My hand was on the knob when the door opened abruptly and in the doorway stood a woman—a moon-woman! I stood frozen with the shock, staring at her. She returned the stare, white teeth and dark eyes glinting. She crouched slightly, becoming the more grotesque and horrifying. Her right hand slid forward and I saw that it held a knife which was red with blood. I lunged to grip her wrist, but she was too swift. With a twist and a cry, she had passed me and was away up the corridor. I hesitated and then turned into the engineer's cabin.

One look at him was enough—that moon-devil must have slashed and slashed . . .

For a moment I stood irresolute. The engineer's fate might well have been mine—and I was not safe now. I ran into the corridor; the rest must be warned.

At the threshold of the living cabin I checked in horror. Five still forms lay on the floor, each of them horribly mutilated. I recoiled and fled to the control dome, hoping desperately. My fears were not vain. Just in the entrance, I stumbled over the bodies of two officers. Beside a third figure crouched a moon-woman. At my entrance, she arose and whirled towards me; I could see that the man at her feet was Toft, alive, but bound and helpless. She faced me like some terrifying Medusa, stepping catlike, a knife in either hand. I backed and grasped a chair intending to use it as a weapon—I had forgotten that all furniture on the ship must be fixed. She gave a cry, semi-human and chilling. A door on the far side of the dome opened suddenly to reveal a group of the grotesque moon-men and women. It was more than I could stand; I fled, bolting the door behind me.

For the next twelve hours, I remained locked in my cabin. There was plenty of time to review our folly. How could we, even in our excitement, have overlooked the possibility of menace from those twelve coffins that we had taken aboard? And not only had we taken them aboard, but we had even opened them to assure ourselves of their contents. Surely, some of us should have foreseen the danger! Either Robson or myself ought to have fastened down the lids, or, better still, have jettisoned them upon the moon. And in the middle of my self-blame, it came to me that this was not the end. They must have taken the ship completely by surprise and murdered every man they had found except Toft—they would make him show them how to work the ship, or else force him to guide the *Scintilla* back to Earth himself. The moon-

people had planned thousands of years ago their bid for survival, and it had not yet failed. A dozen of the Lunarians might yet be let loose upon Earth.

I was unarmed, for all the weapons were kept in a cupboard off the main living-cabin. I would have to get there before I could avenge my comrades and wipe out the moon-folk. I crept to the door and listened. One hasty glance up and down the corridor assured me that it was empty, and I made stealthily in the direction of the bows. I reached the main cabin undetected, and slipped inside. Averting my eyes from the shambles on the floor, I sought the armory cupboard.

Its steel door was locked . . .

Footsteps rang on the floor beyond the opposite door. In a flash, I was across the room and back by the way I had entered—weaponless, and perhaps the only survivor unless they had permitted Toft still to live. What could I do? I could think of nothing but that I must live and carry my warning. And to live, I must have food.

By devious ways I gained the storeroom and piled the necessities of life into an empty case. I had lugged it half-way back to my cabin when misfortune overtook me. Rounding a corner, I came face to face with a moon-man. His surprise was greater than mine—I got in a good drive to the chin while he still stared. He went down with a cry which was half shout and half groan. It was not loud, but it served to alarm his fellows. There came a din of feet pounding down the corridor behind me. Leaving my case of food, I jumped aver the prostrate man and fled.

Running and sliding on the metal floors. I made for the only safe place I knew; my cabin. The clatter of pursuing feet grew louder, spurring me on. Turning at last into the final alley, I found my way blocked. But I was desperate, and there was only one thing to do. I put my head down and charged like a bull at the four brown figures before me.

There was a brief whirling nightmare of kicking and hammering, and then somehow I broke out of that mêlée and gained my cabin. With a final effort, I slammed the door in my pursuers' faces. My chest and face were bloody and lacerated. I remember pulling free a moon-man's dagger which lodged in my left shoulder; and after that—nothing . . .

The jolt of a rough landing finally roused me from my sleep or coma. With an excruciating effort, I raised my stiff body to look through the small porthole. Outside was a stretch of white sand and beyond it a line of frothing breakers glistening in the sunlight. Somehow, the moon-men had brought the *Scintilla* back to Earth. I was a sick man and it took me a long time to move. When at length I managed to stagger down the passage, it was to find the entrance wide open and the ship deserted. Somewhere in the green forest which fringed the beach, the moon-folk were prowling and hunting.

I made my difficult way to the fuel store, and close to the tanks I lit a slow fuse—at least, there would be no *Scintilla* as a safe base for the moon-devils' operations. Then as fast as I could, I made my way along the shore. A few days later, I found a long-neglected canoe. I repaired it the best I could and paddled it out to sea.

The President of the Lunar Archeological Society frowned. He pulled his ear reflectively, and shook his head slowly. He turned the bunch of papers over and, still frowning, began to read them again.

Preposterous, of course, but—well, there *had* been a Stephen Dawcott, and he *had* sailed on the *Scintilla*. . . .

THE END

[The end of *The Moon Devils* by John Wyndham (as John Beynon Harris)]