

# TO OUTER SPACE

CAPTAIN  
W.E. JOHNS



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“Wonderful! Wonderful!” exclaimed the professor, “Vargo, why have you never told me of this?”

# TO OUTER SPACE

by  
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

*Illustrated by Stead*

London  
HODDER & STOUGHTON

**THE CHARACTERS IN THIS BOOK ARE  
ENTIRELY IMAGINARY AND BEAR NO  
RELATION TO ANY LIVING PERSON**

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TO OUTER SPACE

The fourth Space voyage of  
Rex Clinton

by

CAPT. W. E. JOHNS

*author of*

KINGS OF SPACE  
RETURN TO MARS  
NOW TO THE STARS

CHAPTER I  
STRANGE NEW WORLDS

“WHAT are you looking so serious about?” Group-Captain ‘Tiger’ Clinton put the question to his son.

“I was wondering,” answered Rex, vaguely, turning his eyes away from a fast-diminishing globe of light below the spaceship, the planet from which they had departed a few hours earlier. As a traveller on Earth, setting out on a voyage, takes a last look at his native land, perhaps a little fearful that he might never see it again, so Rex had regarded the world he called his own.

“What were you wondering?” inquired Tiger, possibly for the sake of making conversation, to pass the time now that the long run to Mars was fairly begun.

Rex smiled wanly. “If the people at home are any happier for knowing that their world, instead of being flat as they once supposed, is round. That the blue moon the crooners moan about is merely a lump of dirt. That a diamond is only a piece of carbon, a pearl a bit of lime, and a rose just a lot of atoms of this, that and the other.”

“If you’re going to talk like that,” put in Doctor ‘Toby’ Paul, “are they any happier living in a house, with everything laid on, instead of a cave, aware that an enemy on the other side of the world could, if he so wished, reduce them to atoms with a hydrogen bomb?”

“The point I was making,” returned Rex, “is this. Assuming that happiness is the thing everyone is looking for, are people any nearer to it than they were, say, five hundred years ago, before chemists started to take everything to pieces to find out what it’s made of? Does it matter what things are made of as long as we have them to enjoy?”

Brushing back his lank hair the Professor gazed at Rex over his spectacles. “I see you’re becoming quite a philosopher. Mortals cannot have everything. The physical discomforts which, knowing no better, they once endured, have been exchanged for mental discomfort, fear of the present and uneasiness for the future. For the mechanical toys they now possess they bartered their peace of mind, and as apparently you suspect, lost on the transaction, getting farther away from true happiness instead of nearer to it. They demanded, and still demand, too much. Unless someone soon puts the brakes on they will end by having nothing.”

“For which they have the scientists to blame,” murmured Rex, softly.

“Not at all. Scientists and engineers merely gave the people what they, like children, were crying for. Not satisfied with a beautiful world they now demand the Moon. Very soon, no doubt, they will have it.”

“Having seen it at close quarters I hope they enjoy it,” said Rex, cynically.

“It wasn’t the people who wanted the Moon,” asserted Tiger. “The scientists started that nonsense.”

“I was not speaking literally,” stated the Professor, with a tinge of asperity. “Considering what you yourself are doing at this moment you should not criticize the people who made it possible. After all, you are here from choice, not compulsion.”

“I wasn’t thinking so much of space travel as these atom-busting thermo-nuclear experiments,” explained Tiger.

“You know my views on that,” rejoined the Professor. “When men were wise instead of being merely clever there was a saying that curiosity killed the cat. It was, no doubt, like all old sayings, based on human experience. The curiosity of a certain type of scientist will in the end destroy him, and everyone else. In his delight at having discovered the atoms of which Earth is composed he now amuses himself by breaking them.”

“Regardless of the people on other planets who have an interest in this matter,” put in Vargo, the Martian, in his thin, precise voice. He had been listening to the conversation. “Such folly is not to be believed. Don’t they realize that should Earth be vaporized, or even moved in its orbit, the whole Solar System, as you call it, would be involved in a catastrophe beyond imagination? They are asking for a repetition of the horror that followed the fragmentation of Kraka. Other worlds are watching these explosions with alarm. These rockets you have been sending up are a menace to everyone. Ships, which you call Saucers, have been sent to watch, and have, I believe, been observed from Earth. Now, you tell me, it is proposed to create artificial satellites, to the peril of all space travellers. You have become the most dangerous planet in the galaxy, and if you continue, your people will have to be destroyed for the safety of others. That is the argument of Rolto, and many now believe him. Why do your scientists do this?”

“To find out what is beyond our atmosphere,” answered the Professor.

“You could tell them.”

“They would not believe me.”

“I, as a man of Mars, could tell them.”

“They would not believe you, either. Don’t forget that Rolto, the only Martian to land on Earth, was put under restraint as a madman for making such a claim.”<sup>[1]</sup>

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[1] See *Now to the Stars*.

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“We could show them a spaceship, and demonstrate it.”

The Professor shook his head. “It is too early for that, for which reason I have said nothing about my voyages. No man could say what effect the shock of knowing there are other peoples in the Universe would have on our civilization. All beliefs, in the past, the present and the future, would crumble, and the result would be chaos. At present, on Earth, the people are afraid only of each other. Fear of attack from space might throw them into a panic, or a state of despair.”

“They are inviting such an attack.”

“It would be no use telling them that.”

“They will have to know one day.”

“It will come with time. At present only a few have the intelligence to grasp the meaning of space travel, and all that it involves.”

“It is not easy,” conceded Vargo. “In early space travel, the most difficult thing is to remove from the mind comparisons with other forms of what you call speed, or velocity. There is no comparison. People must accustom themselves to think of movement faster even than that of light. That is the first step.”

“How did you do that?” asked Rex.

“It comes from a study of the stars. Once they are understood the impossible at once becomes possible.”

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“Let us put it like this. Every star, every planet, including your Earth, is moving through space faster than it is possible to imagine. You may say, truly, I know that Earth is half a million miles away from where it was at this time yesterday. That is hard for the brain to accept. Yet it is only the beginning. It is even harder to imagine anything moving faster than light. Yet that is slow compared with some movements in the Universe. The day came when our scientists said, if a great body of matter like a star can travel faster than light, why not a small, man-made body? So they made what you call a spaceship.”

“That was a big jump forward,” said the Professor.

“But you did that yourself, with your first ship, the *Spacemaster*. It was, like all first things, a crude device; and a dangerous one, as was demonstrated when it broke up.<sup>[2]</sup> But it was a step in the right direction.”

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<sup>[2]</sup> See *Return to Mars*.

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The Professor smiled sadly at the memory.

“Space travel is not difficult,” continued Vargo. “Making allowances for the strain of initial acceleration, it is only necessary to place an object within the power of the forces that govern the Universe, by which I mean gravity, cosmic and other rays, to move with them. The longer the journey the swifter can become the movement. There is no known limit to velocity.”

“Having advanced from twenty miles an hour to a thousand, by Earthly terms of measurement, in a mere hundred years, we are beginning to realize that,” said the Professor, soberly.

Vargo continued. “Just as you, at this moment, are unconscious of movement, so, from what you have told me, are the people of Earth unaware of the velocity of the world on which they stand.”

“I would not say that. They are told, but the brain does not comprehend, probably because their lives are not affected.”

“Yet the slightest variation in momentum would hurl them all to destruction.”

“They are not concerned with that, and rightly so, for should such a thing occur they would know nothing about it; so why worry? I doubt if some of them would believe it, anyway.”

“Exactly. Disaster on such a scale is too fantastic for belief. It is hard to prove these things. If they cannot be understood they must be accepted.”

“Generally speaking, our civilization has not yet reached a full understanding of these tremendous—one might also say—terrifying—possibilities,” averred the Professor.

“What is this thing you call civilization?”

The Professor thought for a moment. “It is a state on that part of the Earth most advanced in art and science.”

A shadow of a smile, a somewhat cynical smile, softened Vargo’s taciturn features. “Yet, from what you have told me, these are the areas of

the greatest confusion, where men are constantly at war.”

The Professor sighed. “I must confess that is true.”

“And now, to turn confusion into chaos, your scientists behave like little boys with hammers. They must break something. I fear you still have a long way to go to reach real civilization.”

“We have come a long way.”

“Too fast. That is your trouble. Science must proceed with caution or it will take more than it gives, as you yourself have said. How old is your scientific knowledge?”

“Perhaps two or three hundred years.”

“There are planets,” said Vargo, with slow deliberation, “such as Ando, where you wish to go, where scientific thought has been developing for how long no man knows. Thousands of years. Perhaps tens of thousands. The end of yours, as you now proceed, is in sight. Thus claims Rolto, who would destroy you before you destroy others. It is a thought on which you would do well to ponder.”

“Are you telling us that the degree of scientific progress on a planet depends upon its age?”

“No. Neither age nor size bear any relation to the birth of intelligence in the creatures that dwell on it. That includes the species you call man, should it be there; although, to be sure, it often is, perhaps in a very low form. Sometimes the dominant form of life is something quite different. It can be what you would call an insect, or a reptile; but where man appears he invariably, sooner or later, assumes command. At what period he ceases to behave like an animal seems to be a matter of chance.”

“Do you mean it is in the nature of an accident?” queried Rex.

“You might call it that,” answered Vargo. “Put it like this. What you call civilization can only begin when a man is born who employs his hands and brain to do something that has never been done before. Let us say he makes a tool, or a weapon. Why this should happen is in the nature of a mystery. Parents are not responsible, for they can only pass on to their children what they themselves know. However, once such an invention appears other men copy it. One day a man improves on this weapon, or tool, and from that moment begins the slow process which produces men like us, able to invent a vehicle such as the one we are in. Your Earth is æons of ages old, yet, as you have told me, your records go back only for five or six thousand years. For millions of years, therefore, Earthmen must have remained unchanged, each succeeding generation making little or no progress on the previous one.

That is not unusual. There are men nearer to animals than any you saw on your last trip. They have got no further than making hunting tools of stone.”

“Earth went through a Stone Age,” said Rex.

“All worlds go through it before they reach the Age of Metals,” declared Vargo. “Thereafter the course their development takes depends on local conditions, what is needed and what is available. Of course, all people out of touch with others, knowing nothing better than what they have, believe themselves to be the most highly civilized—as you do, on Earth. But all this ends when space flight is achieved and new worlds are open for comparison. Then one world learns from others. There may be exceptions to this rule, however.”

“Why should that be?” asked Toby.

“Because, as it seems, some men cannot think for themselves and will not learn from others. Such a world is Marlok, which I could show you, for it is within our galaxy. It is much larger than Earth, and I would say older, yet the man species there live like animals, awaiting that spark of intelligence that will set them on the road to culture. They have physical strength beyond belief and can cast great stones with accuracy, but nothing more. Their bodies grow but not their brains. Nor is it possible to help them, for they attack on sight any ship that lands there. These poor creatures live without clothes, without houses, without cultivation, without anything.”

“Then obviously they have all they need,” declared the Professor. “Progress does not begin until there is a desire for something better. It would be interesting to see a world at the level of the Stone Age.”

“They might claim to be nearer true civilization than your machine makers,” averred Vargo. “Who shall say who is right? The question is to know when to stop. Ando has stopped. Once the Andoans made marvellous things, but when they saw how they caused more trouble than they were worth they put them aside. Now, they say, having reached perfection, they will stop.”

“Until some foreign influence induces a wish for what they do not possess,” said the Professor drily. “Then they will move on again.”

“They are the most contented of all the peoples I know, having much knowledge even before the explosions of Kraka,” said Vargo.

“In the matter of explosions we have one comforting thought,” remarked the Professor. “Should we, on Earth, blow ourselves up, we shall know nothing about it. There will be a flash, and we, and our world, will be as if such things had never been.”

“I don’t find much comfort in that,” muttered Rex.

Silence fell.

The ship sped on through that region of eternal emptiness which men call space, towards the unheeding stars.

The spacecraft was the *Tavona*, the Minoan ship which had brought them home from Mars, and had now, at their signal as arranged, picked them up from the lonely Highland hill, in a corrie of which, at Glensalich Castle, the Professor had made his home.

Three months had elapsed since their return from the last journey into space, time that had been occupied by the Professor in developing his many photographs, writing up his notes and preparing for the next flight of survey. This, it was agreed, should be the acceptance of the invitation extended to them by the Andoans whom they had found marooned on the planetoid which, by reasons of the pleasant conditions they had found there, they had named Arcadia. It was from Ando, a planet beyond the Solar System, that the Minoans obtained their spaceships. Being of great age it had reached—if reports were correct—a wonderful state of development, a word used in preference to the Earthly term ‘civilization.’

The crew of the *Tavona* was unchanged. Borron, Senior Navigator of the Minoan Remote Survey Fleet, was in command. With him, to act as interpreter and adviser, was Vargo Lentos, a man of Martian origin who had been found desperately ill on Mars, the sole survivor of a party of Minoan volunteers that had been landed on Mars to find a method of exterminating the hordes of insects with which that planet had become infested following its near-destruction by the exploding planet Kraka, the remains of which now existed only in the form of small bodies called planetoids. The rest of the crew of the *Tavona* were those who had shared with them the perils of the planetoids.

“How do things go on Mars?” asked Rex, after a little while.

“They go well. You will see changes, and feel changes. There is more oxygen.”

“Where did it come from?” inquired the Professor.

“It must have been picked up in space. There is more than could have come out of the ground, although there it is always forming.”

“On Earth we knew there was much free hydrogen in space but I don’t think anyone anticipated currents of normal atmosphere,” said the Professor.

“You mean atmosphere normal on Earth?” queried Vargo. “In the galaxy as a whole there is no such thing as a normal atmosphere. It varies almost everywhere, in density and composition, yet life can exist in any of them. From what you have told me many of your scientists have a fixed belief that

life can only flourish in your particular form of atmosphere. It is a fundamental error you should correct. Atmospheres are always changing, although usually very slowly. Where do you think yours came from in the first place?"

"It is assumed to have always been with us."

"But that is absurd! It could not have been with you when you were a star, burning like the sun. The burnt-out decaying suns which you call planets both produce and collect their atmospheres. The air of Mars is not quite in the same proportions as yours, and I would not expect it to be. What gases have you?"

"We have four parts of nitrogen to one of oxygen, but there are also small quantities of carbon dioxide, argon, helium, neon, krypton, xenon, and perhaps others."

"Exactly. Did you believe in this theory that only such an atmosphere, an accidental mixture, could support life?"

"No. I was never a supporter of that theory," answered the Professor.

"Why not?"

"When I considered the amazing forms of life on Earth, in their infinite variety, flourishing in every conceivable habitude, even under colossal pressure in the eternal darkness of the deepest seas, it seemed to me ridiculous to suppose that life could not exist on other planets however remarkable the conditions might appear to us. The belief that neither Mars nor Venus could support life because they have lower and higher temperatures than ours, on account of their relative distances from the sun, was never acceptable to me. If our highest form of life, man, could live at any of our extremes of temperature, from ninety degrees below zero in Siberia to a hundred and forty degrees in the Sahara, I could see no reason why he should not have survived greater extremes had he been called upon to do so."

"We were talking particularly of atmospheres," reminded Vargo.

"Men chose to live in a mixture of nitrogen and oxygen. If other forms of life, fish and marine plants, could live in the mixture of hydrogen and oxygen which we call water, whether pure or containing various salts, I could see no reason why other creatures should not be equally happy in any mixture of gases in which they might find themselves."

"Given time life can adapt itself to any mixture," asserted Vargo.

"That may be seen on Earth," declared the Professor. "Men have made their homes in the rarefied air of the High Andes, having developed large lungs to cope with that particular environment. Had higher ground been

available they would, I feel sure, have moved up to it to secure the land, adapting their lungs still further.”

“That is intelligent thinking,” stated Vargo. “Not only does the mixture vary in its proportions on every world, as one would expect, but everywhere it changes constantly as fresh supplies are manufactured by soil and water or are picked up in space. Your atmosphere being deep and dense it would need a large quantity of fresh gas to make a noticeable difference. Where the free gas in space comes from we do not know for certain. It may be discharged by stars, like our Sun. It may be torn from a planet by a passing comet, left in space when the comet expires, to be gathered later by another planet which happens to have an orbit that encounters it. You may be blowing some of yours away, beyond the field of gravity, by these great explosions you are making. Borron will tell you he has often passed through belts of gas in space, even air that could be breathed; but as these are always moving they cannot again be found.”

“I confess I had overlooked that possibility,” admitted the Professor.

“From what you have told me you yourselves must be changing your atmosphere, your millions of engines turning good air into bad,” warned Vargo. “Unless you can find a way to re-convert this bad air into good you may eventually poison yourselves, unless, the process being slow, your lungs adapt themselves to the new mixture.”

“People are beginning to suspect that,” returned the Professor. “Some have already been poisoned by a mixture which they call smog when it is held in a concentrated form by low clouds.”

“Your machines will kill you if you continue with them,” said Vargo, “Answer me this question, for I have often thought of it. How did your machine age begin?”

“I think it can be said to have started when a young man saw the steam of water boiling in a kettle lift the lid. He realized that here was hidden power.”

“The spark of genius of which I spoke a little while ago,” said Vargo. “From that small thing your way of life on Earth was changed, whether for good or bad remains to be seen. Of all the men who must have seen that same thing happen this one alone had the intelligence to read the message. Has it made your lives easier? Are you happier?”

“That question would be difficult to answer,” returned the Professor.

“That message which came from the kettle has not, to my knowledge, been read anywhere else,” averred Vargo.

“You mean, you have never seen steam used for power?”

“Never. It sounds clumsy. With us it was never necessary.”

Tiger stepped in. “It made possible all our other sources of power, such as engines in which wheels are turned by the explosion of gas or oil in cylinders.”

“To me,” said Vargo, “that is more remarkable than the employment of the energy that operates the universe, power that is eternal and indestructible, which you are now approaching in a roundabout way.”

“You jumped straight to that without intermediate machines?”

“As far as I know that is true,” replied Vargo. “If these machines happened with us it must have been so long ago that they have been forgotten. We no longer convert good air into poison.”

The *Tavona* shot on towards its first objective, Mars.

Rex dozed.

## CHAPTER II

### REX STARTS AN ARGUMENT

EVEN at the astronomical velocities at which the Minoan ships moved through space time was needed for even the shortest journeys within that system of planets and planetoids governed by the Sun, called the Solar System, and to Rex one of the problems of space travel was how to occupy himself during the period of transition.

The argument that ship voyages on Earth, such as from the United Kingdom to Australia, still took a month, was not relevant, he felt. On a ship one could move about freely for a change of surroundings, from cabin to lounge and from deck to deck. The crew of the *Tavona*, he observed, appeared to have found the answer by sinking into a condition near to coma, neither moving nor speaking for hours on end, half asleep or deep in thought; for once the ship was on its course there was nothing for them to do until the time of arrival.

Rex spent a good deal of time reading, but when this palled he sought relief in conversation, and it was natural that this should take the form of questions put to Vargo or Borron concerning their adventures on other worlds. This topic usually brought the others into the conversation.

It was on the second day out—although day and night had ceased to exist as such—that, after being startled by the noise of the *Tavona* encountering some particles of meteoric dust, he said to Vargo: “To prepare us for what we are going to see don’t you think it would be a good idea to tell us more about Ando?”

“There is so much to tell,” answered Vargo. “How would you start to describe Earth, its population and physical features, to someone who had never been there?”

“There would be a lot to say,” admitted Rex. “Give me a rough idea. What is the atmosphere like?”

“Very good. Special clothes will not be needed. I would say Ando has a better atmosphere than most places.”

“How could it be better? Ours is perfect—anyway for us.”

“So you believe, and it may be true. I can only tell you that the atmosphere of Ando contains a modicum of some rare elemental gas which makes you feel good and energetic, although at first it can be a little strong.

That is the effect on our men who go there. But as you know, the atmosphere of Earth is for us somewhat heavy.”

“Is it warm or cold?”

“It is always comfortable.”

“Always? What about the winter?”

“There is no winter. The temperature is always the same.”

“How can that be?”

“The Andoans have achieved complete climatic control. This was largely made possible by having two suns, so no artificial heat is ever needed to warm the body. One sun is larger than the other, but the smaller one is nearer. It is never dark, so no artificial light is needed, either. Rain falls only when they wish, and as the time is known to everyone there is no inconvenience.”

“That sounds fantastic.”

“To you, but not to the Andoans. Again I say you must not compare conditions elsewhere with your own elementary knowledge of the Universe, so recently gained. In outer space there was advanced intelligence long before, within our Solar System, men in our form came into existence. Compared with some we are newcomers. You must be prepared for strange things, things stranger than those you have already seen on the smaller planets.”

“Evidently.”

“At one time, long ago, the people of Ando may have had the troubles your people are having now; but gaining wisdom they controlled their progress, and instead of making life more complicated they strove for simplicity in all things, discarding those that demanded labour and concentrating on those that gave contentment with the least effort. Now everything is under control, whereas on Earth, man, for all his skill, is the only living creature that fills his days with labour, working without stop to make more things that make yet more work.”

“With nothing to do you make Ando sound a dull place.”

“You cannot have both harmony and confusion. It must be one or the other. From what you have told me Earth has rushed on to a state of confusion, each tribe working against the other.”

“I’m afraid it’s true,” admitted Rex, ruefully.

“Then how can you call that culture? Civilized? It is not even intelligent. Unless your people work together they will move ever farther from the happiness all men seek.”

“How big is Ando?” asked Rex.

“Not big. Perhaps half the size of Earth. But there are other, smaller planets, within easy reach, under the same control, so Ando is really a cluster of planets. Spaceships travel from one to the other constantly, and, of course, quickly.”

“A sort of interplanetary bus service,” suggested Rex, smiling at the idea.

“Exactly. There are no other vehicles. None are needed.”

“Are there any seas dividing the land?”

“Not as you have them. All water is organized where it is required.”

“What about the people?”

“They live in small towns where everything is standardized. There is no difference, except that a family is allotted a house according to its size. Everyone has a home, for that has always been the basic unit of a happy community. Some have better brains than others, naturally, but there is a general level of education. They study much astronomy, realizing that at the end everything depends upon the stars keeping in their places. Every child is taught to read the heavens.”

“On Earth most people ignore them.”

“So you have told me. It is a sign of ignorance that they should disregard the things on which their existence depends. But then, every world goes its own path to what it thinks it wants. All start the same way. A world, as you know, is born in heat. It cools. It becomes solid. Life appears. What happens after that depends on the dominant form of life. If there are no men, as with some planetoids you have seen, there is little change. Should men appear, that world becomes what they make of it. Earth goes one way, Ando another, although in the distant past it may have gone through your phase for all I know.”

“How did the Andoans arrive at their present state?”

Vargo thought for a moment. “I think by removing from their natures the original animal instincts.”

“Such as?”

“Greed, for one thing. Do away with money and you have no crime. Without crime you need no laws; just unwritten rules that everyone knows from birth.”

“Does nobody work in this happy land?” inquired Toby, who had been listening.

“Yes, the young men do tasks when their turn comes. Mostly food production. The people are vegetarians. The eating of flesh was abandoned as barbaric long ago. There are no wild animals or birds.”

“How about eggs?”

“The Andoans make their own, in a great variety of flavours. The idea of dependence on birds for them was perceived long ago to be ridiculous. The Andoan eggs have this advantage, too. They will keep indefinitely.”

“Is there any room for a doctor on Ando?” asked Toby, whimsically.

“No. There is no disease. Once the causes, the result of ignorance, were removed, there was nothing to cure. Thus with the soil. If you have no harmful microbes or virus in the soil your crops are disease free. There must, of course, be bacteria to break up dead matter into its original form.”

“I would call that a dangerous situation,” said Toby. “If ever Ando is invaded by a new microbe there will be no method of dealing with it. I imagine that was the reason why the Andoans couldn’t help you to rid Mars of its mosquitoes. It needed a man from that backward world, Earth, to do that,” he concluded slyly.

“You make a point there,” conceded Vargo.

“What do these people do to prevent themselves from dying of boredom?” Tiger wanted to know.

“They grow many flowers, as you will see. Every house and every street is decorated with flowers. They bathe in the public baths, or watch the sky through public telescopes. They have athletic sports, and a theatre where there is singing, dancing and juggling, which are arts practised by everyone. They watch the notice boards for news of births and deaths and the movements of the stars.”

“Does that mean there are no newspapers?”

“There is no need for them if the things people should know are written in public places. On your last voyage you were a long time without newspapers. When you arrived home you found everything going on as usual, so it seems that newspapers are of no real importance.”

“We have more to report than the Andoans,” said Rex. “You couldn’t get it all on a notice board.”

“I have seen one of your newspapers,” continued Vargo. “The news was mostly of wars. On Ando there are no wars. There is nothing to fight about, and nothing to fight with. There must have been fighting long ago, for I have been told there are weapons, swords and spears, in the museum.”

“Do the Andoans have a king, or head man?”

“No. There is a Council of Elders to answer any problem that might arise.”

The Professor put in a question. “How is domestic power produced for the people? Have they coal, or oil?”

Vargo almost smiled. “All power is derived from Solar and Cosmic rays, which are eternal and free for all to use for any purpose, from the fusing of metals to the cooking of a meal. With such energy always available the construction and operation of a spaceship becomes a simple matter, as you can see.”

“This promises to be a particularly remarkable voyage,” averred the Professor, polishing his glasses. “I would very much like to see this Stone Age world, Vargo, which I believe you called Marlok.”

“There would be no difficulty about that, but if you landed I could not accept responsibility for your lives,” stated Vargo. “The inhabitants are little better than beasts, and as I have warned you, they resent intrusion and meet it with force.”

“It is a natural instinct to guard what one has, particularly if one is satisfied with it,” stated the Professor sagely.

“Marlok sounds a bit brighter than Ando,” opined Tiger.

“We may liven things up there,” murmured Rex.

“How do you propose to do that?” inquired the Professor.

“Well, we could introduce some new games, for instance.”

“Such as?”

“Football. I put a ball in my bag.”

The Professor looked at Rex suspiciously. “What else have you smuggled on board?”

“Oh, one or two little things,” answered Rex airily. “Nothing to hurt.”

“What is football?” inquired Vargo curiously.

“You’ll see. You have two sides. The idea is to kick a ball through the other side’s goal.”

“I don’t think the Andoans will like that.”

“Why not. It’s good fun.”

“The Andoans, wearing only soft shoes, would hurt their toes. The only sound you will hear on Ando will be the patter of feet.”

“I’m not talking about a stone ball, or a wooden one. A football will bounce.”

“What is bounce?”

“You’ll see. I’d forgotten you had no rubber.”

Toby looked at Tiger. “Does this place Ando sound like a hand-made paradise to you?”

“It does not. I may be old-fashioned but I can’t imagine a world without animals and birds.”

Toby went on: “I’d say they’ve carried this simple life project a bit too far. With no incentives they’ll go to seed. It’s trouble and competition that keeps people virile. We may blow ourselves up, but we shan’t die a lingering death from boredom, wondering what to do next.”

“The idea of being weaponless sounds delightful in theory,” said Tiger, looking at Vargo. “What happens if Ando is invaded by men from another planet bent on world conquest? Culture wouldn’t help. The Andoans would end up by becoming slaves. You say the Andoans aren’t the only people with spaceships. Think of the mischief we would do if we were looking for a world to conquer.” He pointed to his rifle. “You have seen me use that. Have you ever seen anything like it elsewhere?”

“Never. You talk like Rolto.”

“There are such men on Earth, so we may suppose they are to be found on other worlds.”

“The Andoans are good people,” said Vargo. “No one has ever attacked them. They live to a great age. Three hundred sun-cycles at least. Living as they do their bodies last longer, and the age-length increases.”

“What’s the use of that if you don’t know what to do with all this time on your hands?” argued Toby.

“The idea that a man must always be doing something with himself shows how backward Earth is in its thinking,” stated Vargo. “Why should a man wear out his brain with the problem of how quickly he can wear out his body? Is that intelligence?”

“Perhaps not, if you put it like that,” admitted Toby. “But what is the use of living at all if your life has no purpose?”

“The purpose of life is to accept happiness when you find it, and enjoy it,” declared Vargo. “A man cannot have more than that. On Earth men are pursuing what they imagine is happiness. Always it is just in front. They never catch it. They never will unless, like the Andoans, they stop. Now, striving harder and harder they do more and more work, rushing through life faster and faster. Surely the aim of an intelligent creature should be to do less and less, and so leave himself free to enjoy what he had, enjoy nature as it was intended to be, not as generations of false thinkers have made it. The day may come, if true wisdom opens your eyes, when your men will rise up

and destroy the machines that have made them slaves, and thereafter live lives of tranquility.”

“I suggest we reserve judgment until we have seen for ourselves how life works out on Ando,” said the Professor.

Silence fell.

The *Tavona* sped on towards its still distant objective.

CHAPTER III  
VISITORS FROM WHERE?

THE voyage to Mars, the first world of call, was marked by two incidents, the first startling but understandable, the second astonishing but not, at the time, so alarming.

The first was a collision with a meteorite. It could only have been a small one, certainly not larger than a small pea, Vargo thought, or not even the heavy double skin of orichalcum alloy could have saved the ship.

Rex was well aware that this risk, while remote, was always present in space travel. Vargo said that as there could be no precaution against it the danger had to be accepted. There were always meteors in space and presumably there always would be, some areas being worse than others; but so vast was space that the distances between these missiles were astronomical. The chances of collision, therefore, were so small that they could be almost ignored. It was a factor of space travel about which Rex preferred not to think.

It seems likely that he actually saw this lost projectile as it passed through a belt of gas an unknown distance away. If so, the gas may have saved them by reducing, by friction, the size of the meteorite. At all events, while gazing out of his observation window, slowly revolving as the ship turned alternate sides to the sun to equalize its heat, he saw a flash in the deep blue void. Before he could even begin to wonder what had caused it there was a terrifying crash and the ship spun sickeningly, the result, Vargo afterwards said, of the object striking them a glancing blow.

There was a moment of confusion, of heart-shrinking fear as far as Rex was concerned, while the *Tavona* was brought under control. By that time the crew were on their feet, seeking a possible puncture. But none was found. The pressure was maintained, and Rex, somewhat pale, breathed again. Why the fear of death in space should seem worse than fear on Earth he did not know, but it was so.

“A meteor,” said Vargo calmly. “I think no damage has been done. We will look for the mark when we land.”

What shook Rex was the knowledge that had the ship been holed the pressure and artificial atmosphere inside the ship would have been lost before space suits could have been donned. One could either accept the risk

of sudden death, he perceived, or by travelling in a flimsy garment spend the voyage in discomfort. The only reassuring thing about meteors was Vargo's assertion that it would need a large one to make a hole too big to repair.

The second incident was more remarkable, and somewhat disconcerting in a different way. Again, possibly because he spent a lot of time looking out of the window at the ever-changing patterns of stars, and the object happened to appear on his side of the ship, Rex was the one to receive the first shock of discovery.

A short distance away, and evidently moving at the same velocity as the *Tavona* since it looked stationary, appeared a spaceship, but such a vessel as he had never imagined. Where it had come from, and how it had got there without its approach being observed, he did not know. At one moment there was nothing in sight except some distant stars; then, blotting most of them out with its bulk, it was there, a gleaming white object at least ten times as large as the *Tavona* although not very different in its overall design.



See [here](#)

There was a terrifying crash and the ship spun sickeningly.

For a few seconds Rex stared at it uncomprehendingly, wondering—stupidly, as he was presently to realize—if the phenomenon was a shadow or a reflection of themselves. Faces at the several portholes told him that it was not. Finding his tongue he cried: “Vargo! Vargo! Come and look at this!”

Something in his voice must have conveyed his apprehension to the others, for there was a rush to his side of the ship.

“Wonderful! Wonderful!” exclaimed the Professor. “Vargo, why have you never told me of this?”

“Never in my life,” answered Vargo, slowly, “have I seen or heard of such a ship as this.”

“Then you have no idea of where it could have come from?”

“I have no idea at all,” said Vargo, staring, shaken for once out of his inscrutable self-control.

“What are they doing?” asked Rex, anxiously.

“Obviously, they’re having a good look at us,” said Tiger.

“They look as if they might be going to attack us.”

“If that is their intention I don’t see what we can do about it,” put in Toby. “If size is anything to go by we should have about as much chance as a yacht taking on a battleship.”

Vargo snapped an order for maximum velocity.

It made not the slightest difference to the relative positions of the two ships. The *Tavona* might have been fastened to its huge consort.

It stayed with them for what Rex judged to be about five minutes; then it shot ahead faster than the eye could follow to vanish as miraculously as it had appeared.

“That was a sight worth seeing,” declared the Professor enthusiastically. “It is a revelation to me that there are ships of such size. Yet why not? Ships of all sizes sail on our oceans on Earth. Why should not the same development occur in space?”

“There are no such ships as that in our Solar System or I would have known of them,” stated Vargo. “It must have come from outer space. In performance as well as size it is far ahead of anything I have ever seen.”

“What I’d like to know is what it was doing here,” said Tiger.

“Exploring, I’d say. What else could it be doing?” averred Toby. “After all, aren’t we doing the same thing?”

“That ship was a long way, a very long way, from home,” contributed Vargo, looking puzzled.

They continued to discuss this strange visitation for some time, nothing else occurring to interrupt the normal passage of the *Tavona*. It gave Rex something to think about, and he was not sorry when the orange-yellow globe of Mars began to fill his window.

Very soon he could pick out the now familiar landmarks, and was able to observe the progress that had been made not only in the reopening of the canals but the areas of cultivation on the banks. Presently, as they touched down on the central landing square, he saw two ships already there, one of them Rolto’s, conspicuous by its blue stars. He pointed it out to Vargo.

“For his misbehaviour Rolto is no longer Captain of the Remote Survey Fleet,” said Vargo. “He now only operates between Mino and here, for there

is a regular service to bring in men, and food for them.”

When they stepped out, as Vargo had claimed, an improvement in the atmosphere was at once noticeable. Nor did the air, being less thin, feel as cold. After a few minutes of slight breathlessness, and instability produced by a gravity lower than that to which he was accustomed, Rex found himself able to move about freely. Actually, possibly as a result of experience, he found these factors less of a handicap than had been predicted by theorists on Earth. All were agreed on that.

Where all had been lifeless when they had first set foot on the planet<sup>[3]</sup> was now a scene of activity as men moved about on their various tasks, removing the accumulated dust of centuries from the town, repairing the stonework, excavating the water-courses or tilling the land. Crops, some of them strange, growing on the reclaimed land, at once gave the place a look of healthy occupation. It amazed Rex that so much had been done in so short a time. It astonished him still more that for this promising state of affairs one man, and, moreover, a man from another planet, had been responsible. To have saved a planet from death, he pondered, was an achievement of which few men could boast, or ever would boast.

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<sup>[3]</sup> See *Kings of Space*.

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“Do you think the astronomers on Earth will have noticed any changes yet?” he asked the Professor, who was taking some photographs.

“I don’t think so, Rex,” was the answer. “But if the work goes on at this rate it won’t be long before they do. That big twenty-inch telescope on Mount Palomar will presently produce a photograph that should give the astronomers something to get excited about.” The Professor chuckled. “Tut-tut. They’ll make all sorts of guesses and every one will be wrong.”

“And if you told them the truth they wouldn’t believe you.”

“That, my boy, would be the last thing they’d believe. I don’t really know why. But don’t blame them, for there are moments when I can hardly believe it myself.”

Seeing Rolto standing by his ship Rex walked over to him. “Have you been to Earth lately?” he inquired mischievously.

Coldly and unsmilingly the Minoan space ship Captain answered in his hard voice: “I never again want to see that place of ignorant madmen.”

The smile which Rex had failed to suppress turned to a frown. “What a grumpy fellow you are. You think my people are mad because you don’t know them. Had you come to me instead of slinking in like a spy I would have taken you on a conducted tour. You would have found that very interesting.”

“I preferred to go alone.”

“I know. And you went to the trouble of learning our language for that very purpose. You had covetous eyes on Earth and would have invaded us had you been allowed to have your way.”

“It is only that I seek peace.”

“That’s what all dictators say. That’s their excuse for making war.”

“The day may come when the High Council will regret they did not take my advice.”

“What do you mean?”

“Big trouble is on the way.”

“For whom?”

“For us, on Mino. By going to Earth we might have escaped.”

“Escaped what?”

“You will see,” said Rolto, mysteriously.

“But you can’t go around grabbing other people’s worlds because you’re not satisfied with your own!” protested Rex.

“Other people have done it and may do it again.”

Rex stared. “For goodness sake! You talk as if you were expecting an invasion.”

“I am.”

“You certainly are a man for getting ideas,” scoffed Rex.

Rolto turned his penetrating, luminous eyes, full on Rex’s face.

Knowing the strange power possessed by his people Rex said: “Are you trying to read my mind?”

“I am reading it,” answered Rolto.

Rex shrugged. “Very well. Go ahead. I have no secrets to hide. What have you learned?”

“You saw one of their big ships on your way here.”

“One of whose big ships?”

“I don’t know. But you saw a big ship.”

“We did. It came close to look at us. Vargo could not identify it. Have you seen such a ship?”

“Several have been seen.”

“Always the same ship, no doubt.”

“No. Different ships.”

“What of it?”

“I don’t like it. They are about for no good purpose.”

“Where are they coming from?”

“I don’t know. No one knows. I lost my command because it was said I was a man of war. Now you see why. I tell you, unless we fight these strangers they will take our world, and perhaps yours.”

“You said that Earth was a danger to you.”

“Earth, with its mad experiments, is a danger to itself and everyone else. But now these big ships have appeared we may be in even greater danger, although I think Ando will be the first victim.”

“Victim! What are you talking about? We are thinking of going to Ando. We have been invited.”

“Keep away. There is danger.”

“From what?”

“These great ships. They watch it always. If they land Ando can do nothing.”

“Vargo told us they have no weapons.”

“It is true. If they are attacked they are lost. Are you going straight there?”

“We were going to call at Marlok on the way.”

“That dreadful place? The men are animals.”

“I think I had better tell the Professor what you have told me about these big ships,” said Rex. “Excuse me.”

He turned away and walked to where the others were surveying the work of restoration. “I’ve been talking to Rolto,” he informed them.

“We saw you,” answered Vargo. “Why were you talking to that dangerous man?”

“He gave me some alarming information. It begins to look as if men will settle their national disputes only to be faced with interplanetary wars.”

The Professor pushed up his glasses. “What are you talking about?”

“Rolto says he has seen several of these super-spaceships.”

“Why not. If there is one there must be others.”

“That isn’t all. He says the Andoans are afraid they’re about to be invaded.”

Tiger looked at Vargo. “If there’s any truth in that they’ll be in a mess without weapons.”

“Dear-dear-dear,” muttered the Professor. “Even here there seems to be no escaping these horrid rumours of war. Is interplanetary conquest a natural sequence to world conquest? What a dreadful thought.”

“There have been such rumours before,” averred Vargo.

Said Tiger, “What are we going to do about it?”

“I suggest we push on to Ando and get to the bottom of this tale,” advised Toby.

“I wanted to see this strange place Marlok, of which Vargo has told us,” said the Professor, frowning. “Of course, we shall have to call at Mino to pay respects. We might learn something there about these big ships.”

“Rolto says no one knows where they’re coming from,” put in Rex.

“Look!” cried Tiger, pointing. “Look what’s coming.”

All eyes were turned to the direction indicated by the pointing finger. Descending in a slow spiral was one of the great ships of which they had been speaking.

The workers stopped working. No one moved. All faces were upturned. In the silence that had fallen Rex detected, or thought he detected, a feeling of fear. Knowing that strange faces were looking down at them he himself felt anything but comfortable. Then, suddenly, at a velocity faster than the eye could follow it, the stranger had gone. He drew a deep breath of relief.

“Wonderful,” said the Professor, in an awe-stricken voice. “I would not have missed seeing that for anything.”

“It begins to look as if there was something in what Rolto said,” remarked Tiger, seriously.

“It showed no sign of hostility,” protested the Professor.

“In war,” answered Tiger, “the job of a scout is to look and report what he sees. It is not his business to start a battle.”

“For my part,” returned the Professor, “I hope to see more of these splendid ships.”

“You may,” put in Rolto, who had walked up, “see too much of them.”

“You always were a pessimistic fellow,” the Professor told him. “I can’t believe that men as far advanced in scientific knowledge as the builders of

those fine ships, would indulge in such a futile enterprise as war.”

“We shall see,” concluded Rolto, and strode away.

## CHAPTER IV

# STONE AGE MARLOK

WHEN the *Tavona* arrived on the planetoid Mino it was to find the usual atmosphere of placid contentment replaced by one of uneasiness, anxiety, and even alarm. The reason for this was not hard to find, for there was only one general topic of conversation. It was the appearance of the unknown spaceships and what the visitation portended, although, as it happened, none was in sight when the *Tavona* landed.

It seemed to Rex, when he spoke to his girl friend Morino about it, that the root of the fear lay in the fact that whatever the visitors intended there would be no way of preventing it. True, so far there had been no indication of evil intent; but the common belief was that the purpose of the newcomers in the Solar System was not good, or they would have landed and made themselves known. Wherefore the growing feeling of helplessness.

The business had begun, it turned out, when a Minoan ship had returned from Ando with a report that the planet was in a state of something between despondency and terror. Some of the people were in favour of evacuating their homes and seeking a new one elsewhere, although, as Rex argued when he was told, it was hard to see what good purpose could be served by this? If the new arrivals were bent on conquest they would, in their bigger and better ships, follow them, no matter where they went.

Ando, admittedly, had greater cause for alarm than Mino, for at least one ship was usually sitting over them, motionless, watching or waiting . . . for what? Rex had to allow that this constant surveillance would become unnerving. The Andoans, he perceived, were playing mouse to a big cat. He did not say so, but tried to comfort Morino by pointing out that the visitors were doing no harm by watching—as long as they stopped at that.

“But you don’t understand,” answered Morino. “How can people live and be happy in the expectation of death at any instant? If these big ships mean harm, when they strike it will be all over in a moment.”

“How can you say that when you don’t even know if they carry weapons?” argued Rex.

“People who can make great ships like that must be all-powerful,” returned Morino. “The Andoans, who have always been friendly people, have no weapons.”

“I think the Professor will go to Ando, anyway,” asserted Rex.

“But you have no weapons, either.”

“Let’s not talk of weapons until the need for them arises.”

“Then it will be too late.”

“Well, worrying about it won’t help,” contended Rex. “Let us do some wing-flying.”

But Morino did not want to play. She went off to talk to Borrón, her father.

Rex walked over to where the others were discussing the situation with members of the Council, Vargo acting as interpreter.

The Professor was talking. “I see no reason why you should distress yourselves with what are as yet only rumours. It may all come to nothing. These ships may depart as mysteriously as they arrived. Nothing can be done. Let these strangers strike the first blow if violence is their purpose.”

Said Tiger, grimly, “In the sort of war I visualize here the first blow will probably be the last.”

“That’s what Morino has just told me,” put in Rex. “People who can build space ships will have long passed the days of bows and arrows.”

“To carry that argument to its logical conclusion, neither would such people be so ill-advised as to employ weapons likely to jeopardize their own existence,” resumed the Professor. “Even if, as has been suggested, these strangers are looking for a new planet to colonize, where would be the sense of destroying it by an atomic explosion, if that’s what you have in mind?”

“In my opinion,” said Toby, “such people will have developed weapons capable of destroying life without injuring the planet. Moreover, if these people intend invasion they won’t stop at Ando. If they do start anything they’ll probably take over the entire Solar System, in which case Earth will go west with the rest. If so happens, I imagine, that Ando and its neighbours are the first places on the line of march, so to speak.”

“Well,” decided the Professor, “as there’s nothing we can do about it, while we’re waiting for our unwelcome visitors to make up their minds what they’re going to do we might as well entertain ourselves by having a look at this Stone Age world Vargo told us about—Marlok.”

“Why not go to Ando?” suggested Tiger.

“With the people upset by this crisis we should not see the planet at its best. We might even be regarded with suspicion. No, I suggest a visit to Marlok. By the time we get back conditions may have returned to normal. What do you think about that proposition, Vargo?”

Vargo, clearly, was not enthusiastic. He was as worried about the threat as anyone. In any case, he reaffirmed, Marlok was a dangerous place.

“If these big ships are looking for a new home it’s a pity they don’t go there,” said Rex.

“They probably will, in due course,” returned the Professor. “Having started, who knows where they’ll stop? It really is a fantastic situation. On Earth when they are attacked the people rush from country to country. In more advanced worlds it seems that people have to fly from one planet to another. Dear-dear, what a muddle it all is.”

After some further debate Vargo agreed to go to Marlok if Borron would take them and provided the Council would permit them to use the *Tavona*. It was unlikely that they would be allowed to land, he surmised, so they would only be away for a few days.

“From Marlok we might go straight on to Ando and get to the bottom of what may turn out to be only a scare,” suggested the Professor.

“Don’t you think we ought to go home?” said Rex tentatively.

“For what purpose?”

“To warn the people that there might be an invasion from space.”

“Even if they believed us, which is most unlikely, they could do nothing. But things haven’t come to that yet.”

Tiger stepped in again. “Has it occurred to you, Professor, that if these people mean trouble they might attack us in space?”

“The one we saw gave no signs of hostility.”

“Maybe the captain had not received instructions at that time.”

“Tut-tut! We are allowing our imaginations to run away with us,” declared the Professor, impatiently. “Let us give ourselves something else to think about by inspecting these Stone Age persons.”

Borron raised no objection to the proposed trip, nor were the Council unwilling for the *Tavona* to go, so preparations were made for departure forthwith. It surprised Rex, and disappointed him, that the Minoans could so easily become dispirited. Advancement in culture appeared to have weakened their will to resist. At all events, he could imagine a very different attitude on Earth to the danger, should it arise.

There were more tears from Morino, who implored him not to go; but nothing would have induced him to be left out, and when the *Tavona* took off he was in his usual place.

Thinking of collision he did not like the idea of there being other ships in the vicinity, but Vargo assured him that in so much space there was less risk

of collision with one of the big ships than with a stray meteor.

Once more, as Mino appeared to fall away into the indigo vault that was space, he was conscious of that empty feeling in the stomach caused not so much by velocity as a vague dread of entering the unknown. He never would overcome that, he thought. Even when space travel became an acknowledged fact on Earth, as was bound to happen eventually, it would be a long time before people could embark on such voyages without similar sensations. When that day came, no doubt, someone would think of a device to occupy the travellers during the long hours between ports of call.

He slept, on and off, much of the way to Marlok.

He roused himself, however, when Tiger told him the objective was in sight, and settled down for his first view of a world as Earth might have appeared twenty thousand years ago. At least, that was the limit of his imagination as Marlok grew larger and larger until it filled his observation window.

He knew that Borron had no intention of landing unless he could find an area which he could be sure was not occupied by the primitive inhabitants; but he was a little surprised when, following a terse conversation between the crew in their own language, the ship was brought to a stop so quickly that he thought he was going through the floor. He looked at Vargo expectantly, for this was not Borron's normal spacemanship, and he could only conclude there had been a reason for it. There was. Vargo informed them that one of the big ships was below them, stationary, apparently keeping Marlok under observation.

"Dear-dear. The confounded things seem to be everywhere," said the Professor irritably.

The *Tavona* had been stopped, or nearly stopped, for it was still losing height slowly, at an altitude which Rex judged to be about two thousand feet. With no cloud interference visibility was exceptionally good, and the physical features of the planet stood out clearly; but even so it took Rex a few seconds to pick up the big ship. Actually, he spotted its shadow first, and that gave him a line on it. From his own altitude it appeared to be standing on the ground, but the shadow told him it was not.

As for the surface of the planet itself, it offered nothing remarkable. The general coloration was dull browns and greens. For the most part the terrain seemed to be flat, open plain, split by ravines as if at some time it had been subjected to intense heat; but there were rocky outcrops, of no great height judging from the shadows. Patches of sand and scrub, with an occasional flat-topped tree, reminded him of Central North Africa. There was a drab,

greyish area that puzzled him. He could see no water in any form, seas, lakes or rivers, which suggested that the place must be dry. Nor could he see any sign of life other than vegetation. He looked in vain for anything that might have been a human habitation. Nothing moved. In short, Marlok looked as lifeless as a photograph.

“Well, here we are,” said the Professor. “I see nothing to get excited about. What do you suggest we do, Vargo?”

Vargo had a brief conversation with Borron. Then he said: “Borron thinks it would be dangerous to land.”

“Because of the other visitors?”

“For one thing. Also because of the men-creatures.”

“I can’t see any.”

“When they see us they hide in the forest.”

“What forest? I don’t see a forest.”

Vargo indicated the grey-green area that had puzzled Rex. “That is a forest of what I have heard you call moss.”

“Moss! How can there be a forest of moss, which is a dwarf plant?”

“Not here. The moss is the tallest thing that grows.”

“How tall?”

“Twenty times as tall as me.”

“I see,” said the Professor slowly. “That certainly is tall for moss.”

“The people here live in it,” said Vargo. “They make tunnels, in which they run in and out like animals, very fast.”

“If they came out we could take off.”

“Perhaps not fast enough. Borron once had a ship that was damaged by stones.”

“Then let us go low over the forest. Perhaps we shall see them.”

“You will see nothing except moss, for as I have told you, the creatures live in tunnels, deep down.”

“Then they must be afraid of something,” declared the Professor.

“Perhaps they are afraid of us. They may like the way they live and do not wish to be disturbed.”

“Well, as it’s their world they’re entitled to think as they like. Perhaps if we dropped them some presents they would come into the open.”

This suggestion was never followed up, for here Rex stepped into the conversation. “The big ship is going down; I think it’s going to land. Yes, I can see it drawing nearer to its shadow.”

“Capital!” cried the Professor. “We’ll watch what happens. If what Borron says is correct the aborigines should put in an appearance very soon.”

Silence fell as all eyes were turned on the scene below.

Rex knew the ship had landed when he saw sand swirling below it, evidently disturbed by the power units, whatever they might be. It began to settle when, presumably, the power was cut. The atmosphere in the *Tavona* was now one of expectation, but nothing happened.

The pilot of the big ship had chosen for his landing ground an island, as it were, bounded on one side by the moss forest, and on the other by a deep ravine. Actually, wherever it had landed it would not have been far from a ravine; but it could have avoided the forest, thought Rex, as he watched. It struck him that the spacemen were unaware of the peril which, according to Borron, lurked in the giant moss.

Apparently Vargo was thinking on the same lines, for he remarked: “They cannot know of the barbarians or they would not land so near the forest.”

“They’re probably well able to take care of themselves,” observed Tiger. “I can’t believe that ape men have anything to compete with men who can build a ship like the one below. Brain will beat brawn every time.”

How far he was wrong, at least on this occasion, was soon to be demonstrated.

The doors of the big spaceship must have been opened, for suddenly a squat figure appeared standing beside it. Nothing could be seen of the man himself—if man it was—for the form was completely enveloped in what looked like a suit of armour, or a diver’s equipment that had been sprayed with metallic paint.

“Ah!” breathed the Professor. “This is truly marvellous. May we go a little lower, Vargo, please? We must get a glimpse of this visitor, if it is possible.”

Vargo, as was to be expected, was as interested as anyone, and at his request the *Tavona* went down to about two hundred feet, keeping a little to one side of the big ship. By the time this move had been made two more figures, clad in exactly the same way, had appeared beside the first. With a stiff gait all moved slowly forward, turning as if to survey the landscape.

The Professor spoke. “These people, whoever they are, must find it necessary to wear spacesuits, although from what you have told us, Vargo, Marlok has an atmosphere much like our own.”

“They may be testing the atmosphere,” was all Vargo could say.

The question was never answered, for at this juncture things began to happen, and they happened so fast, and with such spectacular effect, that there was no time for conversation. Indeed, everyone in the *Tavona* behaved as though spell-bound, and not without reason.

From out of the moss forest poured a horde of what, from their shape and the fact that they walked erect, must be called men; but such men Rex had never seen before. Tall and broad, they wore no clothes that could be seen, the reason being, apparently, that as they were covered with thin, light-brown hair, they did not need any. The *Tavona* was still too far away for details to be observed so no scrutiny of their faces was possible. They came out with a rush and swept down as a mob on the spacemen, swinging clubs and hurling large pieces of rock.

It seemed certain from the outset that the spacemen must be caught, for their movements had been slow and clumsy. So were they now, as they backed towards their ship, although in view of what was to follow they may have seen no reason for urgency.

From them, from the level of their hips, leapt long flashes the colour of electric sparks, and in whatever direction these were pointed the ape men fell as if struck by lightning. They were, in fact, mown down. But the rest came on, and such were their numbers that it still looked as if the ship would be overwhelmed.

While the issue hung in the balance a new factor appeared, one which obviously was going to settle the matter. Rex held his breath as a second force of natives sprang from the ravine behind the ship. He had no idea they were there; nor, apparently, had the defenders. With nothing to stop them this fresh mob rushed at the ship hurling stones and clubs which, hitting their mark, must have made a terrible din inside, even if they did no serious damage. Aghast, Rex realized that this might have been their fate had not the big ship been there to give them pause before they landed. It seemed to him now that Borron had underestimated the danger rather than the reverse.

CHAPTER V  
OLD VERSUS NEW

THE three spacemen who had left the ship were now close enough to it to be helped inside by their companions, and for a brief moment it looked as if that might be the end of the affair. But no. An ape-man, faster on his feet than the rest, tried to follow them in and before he could be dislodged, those who were attacking from the rear were climbing all over the ship, hammering at it with their clubs in the wildest frenzy of fury imaginable. One or two, sliding down from the top, reached the entrance doors before they could be closed and poured inside. What now took place inside the ship could not of course be seen, but it needed little imagination to picture the frightful confusion.

But the crowning horror was yet to come, and such a scene as the one now presented surpassed anything that could have been anticipated.

The big ship, with the ape men clinging to it like leeches, began to rise, slowly at first but with fast gathering momentum; and as it went up the natives one by one began to slip off, or as their strength gave out, fall off. Some hung on for a little while but in the end they all had to go, to plummet like stones to the ground below.

At this juncture it looked to Rex as if the invaders would succeed in making their escape, which, obviously, was what they were trying to do. But that the struggle was not yet over was revealed when the big ship, instead of increasing its velocity began to slow down, at the same time swaying and spinning in the most sickening manner.

“The ship is out of control,” stated Vargo, looking up at it, for it was now well above the *Tavona*.

“It must be the creatures that got inside, still fighting,” said Rex in a strangled voice. “How dreadful!”

“Why did the ship stop, anyway,” cried Toby.

“They had to stop it because they couldn’t close the doors,” answered the Professor. “As you can see, the doors are still open. With the doors open it would be fatal for the ship to leave the atmosphere.”

That the fight was still going on inside was proved when a spaceman was flung out, to hurtle down and narrowly miss the *Tavona* in passing. Rex, dry-lipped, unable to tear his eyes away, watched with morbid fascination

the figure of the doomed spaceman turning over and over until it crashed into the moss forest where it disappeared from sight.

That the crew of the ship had not been able to regain control became evident when, after wallowing about for some seconds, it began to fall. Faster and faster it fell until, like a giant bird struck dead in flight, it crashed into the forest to be seen no more.

“This is really shocking!” exclaimed the Professor, running his fingers through his hair in his agitation. “That awful spectacle will haunt me for the rest of my days.”

Borron, who did not seem particularly upset, took the *Tavona* low over the spot where the big ship had crashed, and for the first time the height of the moss could be appreciated. At the bottom of a deep round hole was the ill-fated ship, having by its weight cut a passage through the foliage to the ground. Over it ape men were crawling like flies on a piece of carrion. Some, seeing the *Tavona* over them, danced with bestial rage, waving their arms and brandishing their crude weapons.

“That’s one of the big ships gone west,” said Rex, in a voice which he hardly recognized as his own.

“There’s nothing we can do about it,” said the Professor. “To land near the forest would be suicidal. You were right, Vargo, about this being a dangerous place. These Marlokians are nasty people. They attacked without the slightest provocation.”

“As I warned you they would,” returned Vargo, simply.

“It strikes me we’d better do our exploring a little more carefully in future,” said Tiger, seriously. “I’ve seen as much as I want to of Marlok.”

“A machine gun, much less a rifle, would be no use against that crowd,” asserted Toby. “I wonder what those blue flashes were.”

“Certainly a weapon far in advance of anything we have on Earth,” answered Tiger. “From the colour I’d say an electric discharge of some sort. There is this about it. We now have an idea of what’s inside these ships.”

“A very poor idea, I’m afraid,” returned the Professor. “I would have liked very much to see exactly what sort of man was inside those spacesuits. So also would I have liked a close view of one of the uncouth gentlemen who dwell on Marlok. Obviously they are not fellows to meddle with. For sheer ferocity they would be hard to beat. After what we have seen of Man at this stage of his development it is no matter for wonder that on Earth he was able to survive the age of the great prehistoric reptiles, and later, deal successfully with such beasts as the mammoth and the sabre-toothed tiger.”

“These people have a long way to go before they catch up with us,” remarked Toby. “How far, in time, would you think we are in advance of them, Professor?”

“It’s hard to say. For a guess, at least forty thousand years. But as long as they’re happy what does it matter?”

“They didn’t look a very happy lot to me,” put in Tiger.

“You are in no position to judge, my dear Group-Captain,” averred the Professor. “It is natural, but nevertheless quite wrong, to compare other civilizations with ours—from the point of view of happiness, anyway. What may seem horrible to you might be heaven elsewhere. The females of the species below would hardly conform to your idea of beauty, but to the males they may be as glamorous as anything produced by a Hollywood film studio.”

“I think I can see one of them now,” said Rex, who still found it difficult to take his eyes from a scene which, with bodies lying about, looked unpleasantly like a battlefield, as indeed it was. His remark was occasioned by the appearance from the forest of a figure, smaller than the others, which ran from body to body as if seeking a friend or relative among the casualties. Apparently the creature found what it sought, for it stopped, and dropping on its knees, put out its hands as if to caress the fallen warrior. As the hands touched the body there was a bright blue spark, and the kneeling figure collapsed across the one it had touched.

“Did you see that?” cried Rex.

But the others, who were still discussing what they had seen, paid no attention. The Professor was saying: “I can’t help feeling that this is a wonderful opportunity for a close study of true Stone Age Man, one that may never occur again.” He pointed to a crumpled figure that lay at some distance from the rest, one that must have been flung off the ship when it was out of control at a high altitude. “I see no reason why we shouldn’t land over there for a moment, long enough for me to take a photograph which I could study at leisure. Knowing exactly where the danger lies it need not arise, for the body is far enough away from the forest.”

This, on the face of it, was true; but it was clear from the expressions of the others that they did not share the Professor’s confidence. However, when he pressed his point, observing that as the body was on open ground there could be no question of a surprise attack, Vargo, not without reluctance, agreed. So Borron moved the *Tavona* to a position immediately above the body the Professor had indicated and allowed it cautiously to descend. With everyone keeping a sharp look-out the atmosphere was tested, and when it

was ascertained that it was bearable, if not entirely comfortable, being chilly and having a peculiar aroma, the ship touched down and the exit door was opened.

The Professor, with his camera in hand, stepped down. “Behold a type that may have been our ancestor,” he said dramatically.

Rex was content to watch from the door, and it was with sensations that he had never before experienced that he gazed at such a creature as might have existed on Earth in the remote past.

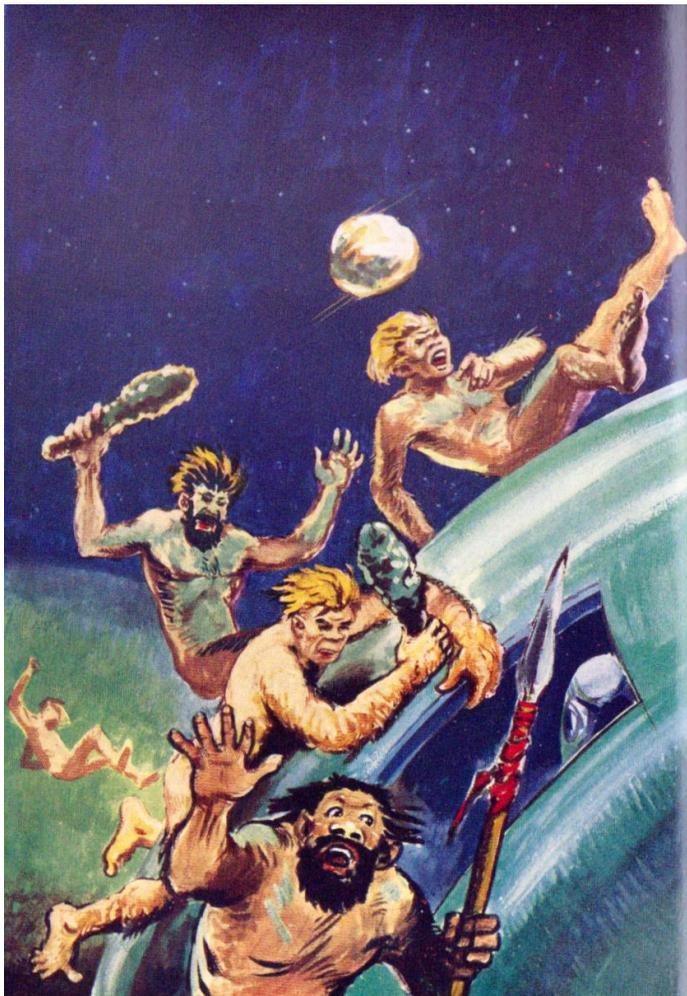
Under a mane of hair the forehead was low and receded sharply from protruding eyebrows. The mouth was large with the lower jaw prominent. The coarse hair that covered the body, thickest on the chest and legs, was sparse enough for the skin to be seen through it. The only garment was a piece of rough hide tied round the middle, and this, with the creature’s weapon, a beautifully worked flint spear-head lashed on a thick stick, proved beyond question that here was a man and not an animal. As the Professor remarked, animals do not clothe themselves, nor do they make weapons, not even crude ones.

Strangely moved by some deep emotion Rex was about to turn away when he saw the Professor, having taken some photographs put out a hand as if to touch the corpse. In a flash he remembered what he had seen, and almost screamed the words: “Don’t touch it!”

The Professor looked round, eyebrows raised. “Why not?”

“It might give off an electrical discharge,” answered Rex, in a voice stiff with anxiety. He described what he had seen.

“Thank you for warning me,” said the Professor seriously. “This poor fellow was not one of those who were killed by the flashes, but having been in contact with the ship he may have picked up radio-activity.”



See [here](#)

Such a scene surpassed anything that could have been anticipated.

The possibility was not pursued, for at this moment some of the ape men appeared on the edge of the forest, and with wild yells leapt towards the ship.

The Professor lost no time in getting on board. The doors were closed, and the *Tavona* rose slowly to an altitude of about a hundred feet, where it seemed safe from molestation. How far this was from being correct was brought to their notice when stones, hurled from below, began to hit the ship.

“They have certainly brought stone throwing, if nothing else, to a fine art,” remarked the Professor, as Borron took the ship up to a safe altitude.

“It seems a pity we can’t do something for these wretched people,” said Rex sympathetically. “Couldn’t we drop them some presents, to let them see we mean no harm?”

“There are enough backward people on Earth, without trailing round the universe looking for more,” growled Tiger.

“How do we know they’re wretched?” queried the Professor. “They may be as happy in their primitive conditions as are people on Earth. Indeed, they may be happier. They seem to be able to take care of themselves, anyhow. No, Rex. It would I think be better to let nature take its course. One day these people may discover the power of steam, or gunpowder, and then their troubles will really begin.”

“What do you wish to do?” asked Vargo.

“In the hope of finding conditions less disturbing than those we have witnessed here I suggest we move along to Ando, and see what that apparently charming little planet has to offer,” answered the Professor. “What do you think, Vargo?”

Vargo agreed.

So, leaving the uncouth people of Marlok to their own barbaric devices the *Tavona* proceeded on its way.

CHAPTER VI  
TROUBLE ON ANDO

IF REX had looked down on the Stone Age world of Marlok with a sense of morbid curiosity, it was with even greater interest that, some time later, he watched the approach of a glowing globe which Borron said was Ando, easily recognizable by its two suns, one on each side, the glare of which prevented the other planetoids of the cluster from being seen.

There would, Borron assured them, be no trouble here, unless of course the appearance of the strange big ships had developed into something more serious. In the event this had not happened at the time of their arrival. A sharp watch was kept as the *Tavona* neared its objective, but no big ships were seen. Apparently the one that had been keeping the planet under surveillance had departed.

From an altitude Rex could see that what Vargo had told them was true, the entire landscape appearing as one vast geometrical pattern of green or brown, with the boundaries of land and water so straight and uniform that they could not be anything but artificial. The towns, which occurred at wide intervals, were small, square, and confined strictly within their limits. That is to say, they did not straggle into the country; not that there was any country in the generally accepted sense of the word, every scrap of land being under cultivation, without hedges, woods or rivers. The surface appeared flat, never more than slightly undulating. Clearly, as had been claimed, everything was under control, with the result that from above the panorama presented was one of extraordinary neatness. Too neat, thought Rex, comparing the monotonous regularity with the ever-changing landscapes of his home planet.

The *Tavona* was received with every sign of friendliness by the little crowd that had assembled to watch it land, much in the same way as on Earth an ocean liner is welcomed at a port where such vessels rarely call. There to meet them, with some members of the Council, were the men they had found marooned on a distant planetoid, and with whom subsequently they were to share several hair-raising adventures.<sup>[4]</sup>

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<sup>[4]</sup> See *Now to the Stars*.

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Without going into details it can be said that the general conditions were precisely as they had been described. The people were tall, fair and good-looking, dressed alike in garments as simple as could be devised; the men in a belted shirt-jacket worn over shorts, and the women in a similar jacket, higher in the neck, worn over a plain skirt. These clothes were in several colours, the most popular being different shades of red and blue. Footwear appeared to be of the same material, open in the manner of a sandal but sometimes laced with fancy ribbons as high as the knee. No head covering was worn. Not a vehicle of any sort was in sight, and Rex was aware at once of an almost unnatural absence of noise, the one sound being, as Vargo had promised, the soft patter of feet as people moved about. A delightful note of colour was provided by flowers, which grew in profusion wherever a plant could put down roots.

A house was put at the disposal of the visitors, and after they had settled in, for it was the Professor's intention to stay for some days, Rex was soon mixing with boys of his own age, to whom he was of course an object of interest, although by no means their first visitor from another planet. He found the atmosphere a little overpowering at first, but he soon became acclimatized. The invigorating quality of which Vargo had spoken was evident.

There were language difficulties, but with Vargo or Borron around to act as interpreters, and with sign language when they were not, these were quickly overcome, both sides accepting the native word for any object not common to them both. Rex discovered that while his new friends were mostly taller, and sometimes more powerfully built, he was the stronger when it came to wrestling; but they could out-run him, and when it came to juggling, one of their favourite pastimes at which they were all adept, he could only watch with amazement the feats they were able to perform.

The big topic of conversation on the planet was still the visit and the peculiar behaviour of the big, unknown ships. Where they had come from was still a matter of surmise, although it was thought to be a far distant world. The common opinion was that the strangers had lost their home. Whether this was due to faulty navigation, or to a disaster which had left them out in space, was also a matter for speculation. Most people inclined to the latter view, for the expert astronomers had observed that a well-known star was no longer in its usual position—had disappeared, in fact. If these strangers had lost their home planet, it was argued, it could be supposed they were now looking for a new one on which to settle—a problem which, as they knew, had once faced certain Martian spaceships following the

fragmentation of Kraka. This, the Professor opined, was why they had attempted a landing on Marlok, with the tragic result that had been observed.

“What I don’t understand,” said Tiger, as they discussed the problem, “is why they hesitated about landing here. Apparently they had a really good look at the place from up topsides.”

“They may have decided that the place was already fully occupied,” suggested Rex.

“I doubt if that’s the answer,” returned Tiger. “Surely people looking for a new home would prefer to take over one where everything is laid on rather than some of the dismal places we have seen, where years of work would be necessary to make it habitable.”

“They may have found the atmosphere unsuitable,” said the Professor. “That, of necessity, would be the first consideration. An atmosphere in which they could only live in spacesuits would be no use to them. Since they have weapons, as we know, and the people here have none, the Andoans have good reason to hope that is the right answer, or they may have found themselves engaged in a very one-sided war.”

“It wouldn’t be war, it’d be a massacre,” asserted Tiger. “In a land where weapons are unknown a man with a pistol could give the orders.”

“The Council tell me they were prepared to receive them and make them welcome provided they behaved themselves, but quite obviously they were not prepared to be dispossessed of their land,” stated the Professor.

“Had the visitors been that way inclined the Andoans would have no say in the matter,” declared Tiger.

“They may find the right atmosphere on Mars, in which case the people there are wasting their time,” Rex pointed out.

“It would be worse still for us if they found an even more suitable atmosphere on Earth,” put in Toby, drily.

“We may be doing them an injustice by assuming they are prepared to take anything they fancy by force of arms,” protested the Professor. “They may be as peace-loving as the Andoans themselves.”

“From what I saw on Marlok they didn’t give me that impression,” asserted Tiger.

“But there they were attacked. They didn’t start the trouble.”

“They weren’t given time,” argued Tiger. “The locals took the initiative. We don’t know what would have happened if they hadn’t. But I have a pretty good idea of what would have happened here had they landed and got

cracking with their flash-guns, or whatever the things were. In my opinion, the Andoans, by disarming, are living in a fools paradise.”

“Obviously, it would have been just too bad for them had these strangers landed,” declared Toby.

“You talk as if these big ships were never coming back,” said Rex. “They may have gone off for reinforcements. What happens if they do come back—and land?”

“The choice of the Andoans would be a simple one,” declared Tiger. “They would either have to kill the invaders or leave. There’s no alternative. Failing in either they would be wiped out. I’d like to know the extreme range of those flash-guns.”

“The conversation has taken a turn that appals me,” said the Professor, stiffly. “You know I hate talk of war.”

“Hating it won’t stop it if it comes,” returned Tiger, grimly.

The situation took a definite turn for the worse some hours later when the Andoan ship came in with a load of refugees and the startling news that three of the big ships had landed on, and taken possession of, Lornica, one of the outer planetoids of the Andoan system. Lornica, it transpired, was a small place with a handful of people devoted entirely to agriculture. Many of the inhabitants had been killed. The few survivors had fled to the hills and were hiding in caves.

To a terrified audience the captain of the ship related what the people he had brought out had told him. They described the invaders as short men with broad faces, yellow-brown in colour with black hair and beards. About a hundred had landed, and at once struck down with a blue flame all who had approached them. To touch the bodies of the fallen was death. This danger did not last long because almost at once the bodies began to disintegrate.

“Well, Professor, this looks like it,” said Tiger moodily, when Vargo, pale of face, brought this alarming information.

“The people here demand to be taken away,” went on Vargo. “Even the Council say it would be impossible to live here now, with this peril so close.”

“But you can’t move the entire population!” exclaimed the Professor.

“Some could be saved.”

“Where would they go?”

“They say anywhere is better than certain death here. Some could go to Mino. There is plenty of room on Mars.”

“If these invaders are war-minded it would only be a question of time before they arrived there, too.” The Professor ran his fingers through his hair. “I must say this is a pretty kettle of fish,” he concluded, despairingly.

“It seems to me,” said Toby, “that it’s time we were getting home.”

Tiger frowned. “It goes against the grain to bolt, leaving these decent folk to their fate. That’s a bit too much like rats leaving a sinking ship for my liking.”

“But what good could you do by staying here?” asked Toby.

“I don’t know,” admitted Tiger. “These strangers have a secret weapon—secret to us, that is; we may have one just as effective.”

“What do you mean?”

“My rifle.”

“You’d take on an army with one rifle!”

“Not an army. I’d take on a hundred if I found my rifle had a longer range than their flash-guns. The only way I shall find that out is by staying here. You can all go if you like but I shall stay. One of the Andoan ships could take me home later if all went well.”

“This has come to a nice pass, I must say,” muttered the Professor. “I imagined a variety of dangers, but I certainly didn’t expect to be chased from one world to another by invaders from outer space. What you are proposing, Group-Captain, sounds to me very much like murder.”

“Not murder. War, if you like,” replied Tiger, tartly. “Every man has a right to defend himself, and his home. We’re not the assailants. These strangers have fired the first shots.” He turned to Vargo. “You go and tell the Council they can do as they please, but I shall stay here. The great thing is not to start a panic.”

“There are only four Andoan ships at home at the moment so not many people could escape, anyway,” said Vargo.

Tiger turned to Rex with a smile. “To let the Andoans see that we Earthmen don’t get in a flap at the first sniff of danger I suggest this might be a good moment to introduce the game of football.”

“That’s an idea,” agreed Rex. “I’d forgotten all about my ball.”

Vargo went off. Rex followed him, but went to the *Tavona* and produced the ball from his kit. Having inflated it, with it under his arm he joined a group of boys who, sensing the seriousness of their elders, had forgathered to await the next news. They looked at him expectantly as he walked up to them. Knowing they had never seen a ball bounce, for they had no rubber, he dropped the one he carried. The effect was not what he had expected, and

he shouted with laughter as the boys scattered like chips from a woodman's axe. Still laughing he called them back. Even when they returned it looked like being some time before he could get a game going, for so fascinated were the boys with the peculiar properties of this new toy that they were quite content to stand and bounce it. Eventually, with the help of Borron he explained the purpose of the ball.

This done he led the party to a field of short turf just outside the town and with their help erected two goal posts, not of wood, which was in short supply, but metal rods which the boys found somewhere when it was realized what was needed. For the moment, Rex decided, there could be no question of marking out the ground. That could come later. The goals were enough to go on with. He then divided the party into two sides, for identification purposes one side with, and the other without, shirts, and having indicated the object of the game threw down the ball.

This first football match on Ando would perhaps be easier to imagine than describe. No rules were observed. Nor was there an opportunity for introducing them, for once the game had started there was no stopping it. In fact, Rex soon dropped out of it, while he had some clothes left on his back. Pushing, shoving, charging, punching and tripping, a rugby scrummage was nothing to it. In vain Rex tried to stop play to say that hands must not be used except by the goalkeeper. It would have been easier to stop an avalanche. In a word, the game became a free for all, with the players limping or hopping on one leg clasping the toes of the other foot as a result of kicking too hard in soft shoes. At one stage Rex became really alarmed, fearing there would be serious casualties for which he would be held responsible. When finally the game petered out as the players fell from sheer exhaustion he took them to task.

However, by the end of two days, during which the ball was not allowed to rest for a moment, the game began to look more like football. The ground was marked out, the rules explained, the players given their positions, red shirts playing blue shirts. Rex, with a whistle he had found in his kit, was umpire. Everyone wanted to play, but as there was only one ball there were always plenty of spectators. The difficulty was to keep them off the field. As one game finished another started. The bouncing ball seemed to have an irresistible fascination, and adults arrived in increasing numbers to watch.

As Tiger remarked, as on one occasion he stood watching, one would think the Andoans had been waiting all their lives for a football to arrive.

The game was certainly a success, and Rex was thinking of sorting the many enthusiasts into divisions for a final championship when the end came like the fall of an axe. Never more abruptly did fun turn to fear.

A game was actually in progress when out of the blue sky above the field appeared three of the big ships. They did not land at once, but stopped and remained stationary at a height of about two hundred feet. The result was a stampede for the town in which, having rescued the precious ball, Rex joined. Finding the others, there was no need for him to tell them what had happened, for standing in the square they had seen for themselves. Apart from them, and two or three members of the Council, not a soul was in sight, although as Toby remarked, what the people hoped to gain by hiding in their houses was not easy to discover.

“You see what I mean by the folly of leaving yourself helpless,” said Tiger, bitterly. “If War is intended these silly people haven’t a hope, and they know it.” He set off towards the *Tavona*.

“What are you going to do?” inquired the Professor.

“I’m going to fetch my rifle,” answered Tiger, evenly.

“Then what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. It depends on what *they* do.” Tiger jerked a thumb towards the big ships and walked on.

The Professor threw up his hands in a gesture of helpless resignation.

## CHAPTER VII

### TIGER GETS TOUGH

THE others stood silent, waiting for Tiger to return. He was soon back, a pocket heavy with cartridges, filling the magazine of his rifle as he came. He did not stop when he reached them but continued on towards the football field.

“Where are you going?” asked Rex, in a voice brittle with anxiety.

“I’m going to the end of the houses where I can keep an eye on what these fellows get up to if they land,” replied Tiger. “You’d better stay where you are,” he advised.

“Not likely,” returned Rex firmly. “Where you go I go.”

“I think we’d better all keep together,” said the Professor, earnestly.

Tiger raised no objection, and he soon had quite a following, which included Vargo and Borron, as well as three members of the Council who, as Toby said softly to Rex, were in a state of jitters. For this, in the circumstances, they were hardly to be blamed.

By the time the party, with Tiger leading, had reached the ornamental gateway that gave access to the open country, the strangers had landed on the football field, although so far none of the occupants had emerged. The ships were close together, about a hundred yards away.

“We’re near enough,” decided Tiger, automatically taking charge of the party. “Don’t show yourselves in the open,” he went on, taking cover behind a wall so that only the upper half of his head was exposed.

The others took up similar positions. Rex, watching the portholes of the ships, thought he could see movement inside. He said so.

“If they come out without spacesuits we shall know that the atmosphere is suitable for them,” said Tiger. “If they wear suits we may suppose it is not, in which case they would have no purpose in staying here, as far as I can see.”

Some minutes passed in silence. An expectant hush seemed to have settled on the planet. Nothing moved. Nothing happened. The foreign ships might have been giant mushrooms that had suddenly sprung up. They looked just as harmless.

“I wonder what they’re going to do,” said Toby, softly.

“They’ll come out when they’re ready, otherwise they wouldn’t have landed,” said Tiger, confidently. “Give them time. We’re in no hurry.”

The next stage of the drama was unexpected. Two Andoans had appeared from a fold in the ground on the far side of the field, apparently members of a cultivation squad on their way home. On seeing the ships, which they did at once, they stopped, and from their mannerisms discussed the visitors. Then, while one of them stood still, his companion, evidently of a more inquisitive nature, began walking towards the ships.

“He’s taking a chance,” muttered Tiger.

“Hadn’t you better try to stop him?” suggested the Professor, looking worried.

“I doubt if I can,” replied Tiger. “He’s out of earshot, and after seeing what happened on Marlok I don’t feel like showing myself in the open.” He shouted a warning, but if his voice did reach the Andoan the man took no notice. He continued to stride on towards the ships.

“If those flash-guns of theirs have any sort of range they could have stopped him by now, had they wanted to,” said Toby, when the man had reached a distance of not more than fifty yards from the nearest ship.

The sound of his voice had hardly died away when it happened. There was a flash of blue light, faster than lightning. It started at the ship and ended at the man. The Andoan gave a convulsive start and fell flat. He did not move again.

“He’s had it,” said Toby, in a hushed voice.

“Oh why did they have to do that?” cried the Professor. “It was quite unnecessary. The man was doing no harm.”

Nobody answered.

What possessed the man’s companion to act as he did was not easy to guess, unless he happened to be a close personal friend, and inspired by anger, acted on impulse. Anyway, instead of running from the spot as might have been expected he raced towards his fallen comrade. The result, to Rex, was a foregone conclusion. There was another flash and the second man fell near the first. As if this were not enough, one of the members of the Council who had been watching with the others, let out a cry of anger, and before anyone could stop him he was running towards the ships. Vargo would have gone after him had not Tiger held him back, telling him to keep his head.

“If you’re all going to behave like this I shall soon have the place to myself,” said Tiger angrily.

How far the warning was justified was revealed when there was another flash and the Councillor sprawled headlong.

“This is dreadful!” cried the Professor, his face as white as chalk.

“At least we know how we stand,” said Tiger, harshly. “These infernal guns of theirs never miss, it seems. Presently we may get a chance to see if my shooting is as good.”

“This is war!”

“You’re dead right it is,” came back Tiger, grimly. “Just remember that we didn’t start it.”

“You know how I hate war.”

“Then why stay? There’s nothing to keep you here. If you don’t like it go home, because it’s only just beginning. I’m staying. With one rifle the Andoans may not have much chance against these robots, but without a weapon of any sort they’re sunk.”

The Professor made a gesture of resignation. “You are quite right,” he said, in a curiously calm voice. “We must stay. It is our duty.”

Replied Tiger: “I don’t know about duty, but I have a feeling that if this menace isn’t tackled now worse will come—for us, never mind other people.”

Nothing more was said.

A minute or two passed, during which the strange thought occurred to Rex that the next few minutes might decide the fate not only of Ando but of the entire Solar System, including Earth, where, no doubt, blissfully unaware of what was going on, nations were still bickering over trifles.

“Ah-ha. Here they come,” said Tiger, as if he had been talking of a formation of hostile aircraft. “We should soon know the answers.”

The door of one of the big ships had slid open. From the dark interior thus exposed, in slow procession stepped four figures; but they were not the grotesque creatures they had seen on Marlok. Short and broad-shouldered, with curiously long arms, they were dressed in ordinary loose-fitting clothes of some dark material. They stopped, and stood looking about them.

“That’s the answer to the first question,” said Toby, quietly. “They’re not wearing spacesuits.”

“Which means they find the atmosphere suitable for their requirements,” murmured the Professor. “That is most unfortunate.”

The four strangers now advanced to the body of the nearest Andoan and there stopped to inspect it.

“However distasteful it may be to you, Professor, this is where we must ascertain the answer to the second question,” said Tiger, bringing the rifle to his shoulder.

“What are you going to do?”

“As these scoundrels, without the slightest compunction, have employed their weapon against three harmless Andoans, I intend to see what effect this weapon of mine has on them.”

“Do you think that’s necessary?”

“Definitely. We must let them see we can hit back before they get the impression that there’s no opposition here. If this shot has no effect,” went on Tiger dispassionately, “I’d advise you all to make for the *Tavona* and head for Mino, telling them when you get there what’s happening here, and warning them that they may be next on the list.”

Silence fell as Tiger took aim. The rifle spat, shattering the breathless hush with its report. The figure nearest the dead Andoan sank down across his victim.

“That’s another question answered: they’re not invulnerable,” said Tiger, with grim satisfaction, as he clicked another cartridge into the breach.

The remaining three strangers had turned their heads and were staring in the direction from which the shot had come.

Tiger raised the rifle again.

“Don’t shoot any more,” pleaded the Professor. “I find this most distressing.”

“It’s likely to be even more distressing if these devils think they can have things all their own way,” retorted Tiger, curtly. “What about the three Andoans they murdered without any reason? I’ve no mercy for people who have proved themselves merciless. If we’re to teach them a lesson we might as well do it properly.”

The invaders had by this time picked up their first casualty and were carrying him to the ship. Twice in quick succession Tiger’s rifle crashed and two more fell. The survivor bolted into the ship.

“They don’t think so much of that,” said Tiger.

He watched without shooting as a rescue party dashed out of the ships, and picking up the casualties carried them inside.

“That has certainly given them a taste of their own medicine,” conceded the Professor. “Let us hope it will induce them to take their departure.”

“There’s one other question for which I’d like to have the answer in case they decide to hang around,” said Tiger. “It might be useful to know what

their ships are made of. I mean, are they tough enough to stand up to the impact of a bullet? We might one day encounter one of them in conditions less favourable than this—in space, for instance, where, as we know, their performance is better than ours.”

“They’ve closed the door. I think they’re going,” said Rex.

“If they’ve spotted us they may come over low and turn their flash-guns on us,” warned Toby.

“Take cover if they do,” answered Tiger, crisply. “I’ll do my best to discourage them.” With that he opened fire and emptied his magazine at the nearest ship. As he reloaded quickly he remarked: “I fancy those shots penetrated. Had they ricocheted off we should have heard them.”

“I think they’ve had enough,” observed the Professor, as all three ships rose into the air, swiftly gathering velocity.

“They’re not coming this way, thank goodness,” said Rex.

“If you really did puncture that ship it won’t be able to maintain pressure when it gets beyond the atmosphere,” said the Professor, as they stood watching. “They may carry repair outfits, as I did, in case of a puncture by a meteorite. Alternatively they’ll have to make haste into their spacesuits.”

The answer to this was not revealed, for in a matter of seconds the three ships, travelling together, disappeared from sight.

“Thank heaven they’ve gone!” exclaimed the Professor, fervently.

“Don’t let’s fool ourselves that they’ve gone for good,” returned Tiger seriously. “They may come back. I have an uncomfortable feeling that they haven’t gone far.”

“What do you mean?”

“If, as we were told, they’ve captured Lornica, that’s probably where they’ll make for, to report to the main body.”

“That’s a sobering thought,” murmured Toby.

“We shall have to keep a permanent watch,” declared Tiger. “They mustn’t take us by surprise.”

“That isn’t going to help the wretched people on Lornica,” Rex pointed out. “They must be in a bad way. They’re Andoans really, so we ought to do something to help them.”

The Professor regarded Rex over his spectacles. “Are you suggesting that we carry the war into enemy country?”

“As a military man I’m bound to say it would be to our advantage to do so,” stated Tiger. “Apart from abandoning the people there, to leave the invaders to consolidate their position would be asking for trouble. We

haven't routed them yet. They've only retreated, fallen back on their original position which, I suspect, is Lornica, and that's too close to be comfortable."

By this time word must have gone round that the invaders had been driven off, for Andoans began to appear from their several hiding places and the Professor's party found themselves being hailed as deliverers.

Seeing a few of the townspeople walking towards the three victims of the attack Rex remembered something. "Hadn't you better warn them not to touch those bodies," he told the Professor. "If they disintegrate as was said it sounds as if they may be radio-active."

"Quite right, my boy," answered the Professor, quickly, and passed on the advice to some members of the Council who had joined them, whereupon the necessary precautions were taken.

"The question is, what do we do next?" said Tiger, when the excitement had subsided somewhat.

"Have you anything in mind?" queried the Professor.

"I was thinking about Lornica."

"But my dear Group-Captain, you can't fight a war with one rifle. What if anything should go wrong with it, or you ran out of ammunition?"

"There's no need for us to rely on one rifle, if it comes to that," asserted Tiger. "There are plenty more where this one came from."

"Are you suggesting that we fetch more rifles from Earth!" cried the Professor, incredulously.

"Why not?"

"Preposterous! That would mean staying here indefinitely in order to use them."

"Not at all. They could be handed to the Andoans who would then be able to defend themselves. While they were being fetched some picked men could be given instruction on the one we have here. It's either that or we must abandon them. As things are, that's what our departure for home would mean."

"I suppose you are right," sighed the Professor. "You usually are in these matters. But knowing my aversion to violence you can imagine how distasteful all this is to me."

"War, apparently, was distasteful to the Andoans, and you can now see where it has landed them. We all know you're a pacifist, Professor, and if everyone thought on the same lines all would be well with the universe. Unfortunately that's not the case. While there are war-mongers pacifists have no hope of survival. Paradoxical though it may seem, their only hope

lies in arming themselves. That's what's happening on Earth at this very moment."

"Very well," said the Professor, in a melancholy voice. "Where will you get these rifles? You can't just walk into a shop and buy firearms, you know. You need a police certificate."

"I have two more rifles at home. Toby knows where they are. He has one himself, I believe."

"There are two or three at Glensalich. They were there, in the gun room, when I bought the Castle. Judkins knows about them," advised the Professor.

"Fair enough," said Tiger. "I suggest Borrion takes Toby home, waits while he collects all the guns and rifles he can lay his hands on, and then brings him back here. If you agree let's get on with it, for there's no time to be wasted. If the rifles are never needed, so well and good. If they are, we shall be ready."

The Professor drew a deep breath. "Very well. I agree," he said, sadly. "And having got these weapons, do I understand that you intend to go to Lornica?"

"Yes, provided the attack on Ando is not renewed."

"What do you hope to achieve there?"

"We might evacuate some of the surviving people; failing that we could let them see they're not forgotten."

"If you find the big ships there are you going to launch an attack on them?"

"Not necessarily. My main purpose, in the first place, is reconnaissance, and, if possible, to make contact with the Lornicans."

"How will you find them if, as we have been informed, they are hiding in caves?"

Here Vargo stepped in to say that Lornica was a veritable honeycomb of caves. The word Lornica meant place of caves. The people might have retired deep underground, but some would be watching, and if they saw an Andoan ship they would recognize it and come out.

"That sounds all right," asserted Tiger. "That's all we want to know. Now let's get on with it." He looked at Vargo. "You've heard the debate. If you'll make the necessary arrangements we'll get cracking, as we say. Now I think we might have some dinner."

The party was on the point of breaking up to go their separate ways when without the slightest warning there came a shattering crash like the

end of everything. In fact, Rex thought it was the end of Ando. The air quivered and the ground shook as though with an earthquake. It was a terrible noise, the more fearful because it was prolonged. Following the initial crash came an ear-splitting roar which, after rising to a crescendo, died slowly, like a peal of distant thunder.

Pale and wide-eyed they all stared at each other.

“What on earth was that?” muttered Tiger.

“It wasn’t on Earth, it was here!” exclaimed the Professor.

“A new weapon,” offered Rex.

“No,” decided the Professor. “Had a weapon been launched it would have been aimed at the town.”

“It sounded to me like an atom bomb,” stated Toby.

“It could only have been an explosion of some sort,” said Tiger. “The long detonation reminded me vaguely of something I’ve heard before. I’ve got it! The V.2. rocket bomb. The first crash was the thing hitting the ground, travelling faster than sound. That awful roar was the sound following it down.” Tiger strode quickly into the middle of the square. His eyes scanned the horizon. He pointed. “There you are! That’s where it struck,” he went on, raising a finger to where a tremendous cloud of dust stood like a plume against the sky.

“If they’re going to bombard us with rocket bombs we’ve had it,” said Toby, calmly.

“I’m not so sure that it was a rocket bomb,” said Tiger, frowning. “Had there been an actual explosion we should have felt the blast, even though the thing struck a long way away—thirty miles, for a guess.”

“Instead of guessing I think we’d better go and see what it was,” suggested the Professor. “It has certainly terrified our friends here. They’ve run into their homes again, although what good they think that will do them I can’t imagine.”

“That’s the state you get in when you realize you’re absolutely helpless,” said Tiger, cynically. “Let’s go over and look at this thing.”

“You can’t walk. It’s too far,” Toby pointed out.

“There is no need to walk,” put in Vargo. “We can go in the *Tavona*, which might be safer.”

They all piled into the ship which, in a minute, was circling slowly at a low altitude round the now settling dust. All that could be seen was debris, some of it looking like pieces of metal, over a wide area. Some of it was white.

“I think I know what that was,” said the Professor, as he gazed down.

“So do I,” returned Tiger.

“What is your opinion?”

“A spaceship, out of control, dropped sheer. It wasn’t one of ours. We have no white ships. It was one of the big fellows.”

“You are right,” confirmed the Professor. “If that ship was in free fall from a great height it would be travelling at several miles a second when it struck. The result would be what we can see below. Observe the deep crater at the point of impact. The question is, why did it fall?” The Professor looked at Tiger.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Tiger. “This was the ship I fired at.”

“I can think of no other solution.”

“Even assuming that my shots punctured the ship how could this have happened? The ship took off all right.”

“One of several things could have happened,” averred the Professor, pensively. “The most simple explanation might be this. The crew of the ship, as we saw, were not wearing spacesuits. In their haste to depart they may not have realized that their ship had been holed. Even if they did realize it the result may have been the same. Once beyond the atmosphere the pressure from within, and perhaps the suction from without caused by the velocity of the craft, would have emptied the ship of its air content.”

“But that wouldn’t cause the ship to stop and fall back,” said Tiger.

“Agreed. Had the controls not been touched it could have maintained its velocity indefinitely, except in the unlikely event of a collision with a planetoid. I can only conclude, therefore, that when the peril was perceived a member of the crew cut the power in the hope of regaining the atmosphere of Ando. But it was too late. Before that happened, with no time to don spacesuits, everyone in the ship was either dead or unconscious. With no one to steady the fall, the ship could only obey the first law of the Universe—gravity. It would be drawn to the body having the greatest gravitational pull, which in this case was the body it had just left—Ando. The sound we heard, and the final result as we now see it, is what might be expected from an object, travelling at a speed many times greater than that of sound, coming into collision with a solid body. The sound followed the doomed ship.”

“Are you going to land and check up on this?” queried Tiger.

“Check up? What is there to check up on? No,” decided the professor. “For more reasons than one. Firstly, we might find ourselves contaminated by radio-activity. Secondly, there would be no purpose in landing, for the

ship, and everything and everybody in it, being reduced to fragments, could tell us nothing.” With a wan smile the Professor surveyed the others over his spectacles. “Besides,” he said softly, “it might not be wise to anticipate the fate that might one day be ours.”

“That’s not a nice thought,” protested Toby.

“Well, at least that’s one enemy ship less to deal with,” said Tiger practically.

The Professor shook his head. “What a belligerent man you are, Group-Captain. Let us go back to the town, Vargo, to put the minds of our hosts at rest.”

“One last question,” said Rex, as they turned away. “Why didn’t the ship, travelling at such velocity, become incandescent with heat and burn itself out, as does a meteor falling to Earth?”

“The atmosphere of Earth is about five hundred miles deep,” reminded the Professor. “The atmosphere here cannot be much more than fifty miles. That must be the answer. Doubtless the ship was hot when it struck, hot enough to kill anyone in it had anyone been alive, but it hadn’t time to reach melting point.”

They walked on in silence.

## CHAPTER VIII

# LORNICA

EVEN under the threat of invasion, during the period that followed the departure of the *Tavona* with Toby to fetch the firearms, Rex found Ando—as Tiger had predicted—rather a dull place; the more so by reason of its constant temperature and unending day, to which he could not become accustomed. In such conditions time had no real meaning. Bedtime and dinner time were merely figures of speech. He preferred Mino, or even the still somewhat drab Mars. It seemed to him that the Andoans lacked virility, which was perhaps why they were helpless in an emergency.

Tiger said this was because their lives had been too easy. Their super-civilization, he declared, had passed its peak, and they were now in decline. There was a lesson to be learned from that. The present shock, the fear of attack from space, might do them good, he opined. If they survived, the general atmosphere of laziness and boredom which was apparent everywhere would vanish, now that they had something to think about.

The Professor, who at first had considered returning to Earth with Toby, had finally elected to remain on Ando. Toby could do all that was necessary. Vargo stayed with them, too, to act as interpreter. Borron had gone with Toby for the same reason. There were obvious reasons why Toby should have with him someone who could speak his language, and by this time, from contact with them, Borron now spoke English reasonably well. At the time this was arranged it was thought that a spaceship would not be required until the *Tavona* returned from Earth with the weapons.

Tiger, with a reconnaissance in view, spent much of his time, with the help of Vargo, learning as much as possible of the physical conditions on Lornica from the few inhabitants of that planet who had been evacuated to Ando. When not thus engaged he was busy with the squad of men he had selected for instruction in the use of the rifle. The Professor was usually to be found debating with the members of the Council. What they talked about Rex did not know.

There had been only one event—if it could be called an event—of note since the *Tavona*'s departure, and while it did not immediately affect them it gave them food for thought.

For reasons already explained the bodies of the three Andoans who had been killed by the flash-gun had not been touched; but they had been kept

under observation, and within twenty-four hours it was confirmed that the report of the Lornicans, concerning disintegration following death by the flash weapon, was true. Disintegration may not be the right word. The bodies began to fade away, to disappear, leaving nothing behind. The Professor was convinced that this could only be the result of intense radioactivity. Questioned by Rex he tried to explain how this might come about, although in non-technical terms it was not easy.

“You must understand,” said the Professor, “that the cosmic energy of the universe is locked within the atoms of which all matter is composed. The human body is composed largely of water. Now if you break a drop of water into its component atoms of hydrogen and oxygen you do not get less water. You get nothing at all.”

“And you think that something is breaking up the atoms of which those bodies are composed?”

“What other explanation could there be? Even on Earth, as we are only too well aware, men have discovered how to break atoms.”

“I’ve never had a clue as to how that could be done,” said Rex, helplessly.

“There are two known methods,” went on the Professor. “Both release the devastating energy held within the atoms. One is by what is called fission, which means the splitting of the atoms of the heaviest chemical elements into unequal parts. The other is by fusion, which is the fusing of two light elements into a heavier one. The first atomic bomb exploded by American scientists was the effect of fission. The hydrogen bomb, of which there is now so much talk, is obtained by fusion. It is thought that fusion is what is going on in the sun, releasing tremendous energy by converting hydrogen into helium. In some way, which I don’t pretend to understand, these super-spaceships have harnessed this power to operate their ships. It also looks as if they have so far mastered this power that by liberating it suddenly they can not only destroy life itself but the very matter of which it is composed.”

“I’m afraid all this is beyond me,” admitted Rex.

“I suspect, my boy, that it’s also beyond some of those scientists on Earth who are now dabbling with this dangerous stuff.” The Professor smiled. “Never mind. Have a caramel, and absorb a few atoms of glucose into your system with refreshing effect.”

“What exactly is glucose?” inquired Rex, accepting a sweet from the Professor’s bag.

The Professor chuckled. “Tut-tut. Six molecules of water and six molecules of carbon dioxide are transformed by the action of the sun into one molecule of glucose, otherwise sugar, and six molecules of oxygen. Are you any wiser?”

“Not much.”

“What does it matter while caramels taste the same? I think I see some boys waiting for you to play football.”

“Don’t tell me what a football is made of,” requested Rex, grinning. “I’m satisfied with it as it is.”

Some football was played, but in a desultory fashion, the enthusiasm having gone out of the game as a result of the shadow that hung over the now unhappy planet.

Later on, Tiger came over to where the Professor and Rex were talking to some of the boys with the help of Vargo, and said: “The Council has decided to send a ship to Lornica to find out what’s happening there, and, if possible, to bring here any surviving refugees. I’m going with it, taking the rifle to give the crew some protection.”

“Group-Captain, you organized this raid yourself!” accused the Professor, sternly.

“No,” denied Tiger. “Believe it or not, the people here who have relations on Lornica have demanded transport to take them there. If necessary they will attack the invaders with spears from the museum. I feel that if they have the courage to do that the least I can do is support them with the rifle. It would, I admit, provide me with an excuse to do a little preliminary scouting.”

“What is the latest news from Lornica?”

“There has been no word for some time, so there is a chance that the invaders have gone. The pilot and crew of the Andoan ship who have volunteered to make the trip used to be on the regular run. They know their way about.”

Said Rex: “I shall come too, of course.”

Tiger looked dubious. “I’d rather you stayed here. Anything could happen on a trip like this.”

“Anything could happen here, if it comes to that,” argued Rex.

“All right,” consented Tiger. “You can come if you’ll promise to pay strict attention to orders. How about you, Professor?”

“I think I’d better stay here to explain to the Doctor, when he comes back, what has happened. You may be back first, of course. I will continue

my studies of the development of Andoan civilization. I may have an opportunity of visiting Lornica later on, should you advise me on your return that such a visit would be worth while.”

A few hours later the ship, with Tiger, Rex and Vargo on board, was on its way to Lornica with one of the inhabitants of that planet to act as a guide on their arrival. What would happen after that remained to be seen. It would depend upon the circumstances, and for that reason no definite plan had been made.

The approach, in due course, was made, at the suggestion of the guide, from the dark side, for Lornica, being within the influence of only one sun of any consequence, had a normal, although rather fast, sequence of day and night. The idea was, having descended into the atmosphere, the ship should proceed cautiously into the twilight area, keeping watch for any natives who might show themselves. This would give the ship a chance to escape pursuit in the darkness should the big ships still be there and the Andoan ship spotted. If possible they would pick up a local man who would, it was thought, be able to tell them exactly how matters stood.

In the event, things did not work out quite like this although they started well enough. The ship made its landfall, and taking up an altitude of about a hundred feet moved slowly across the surface of a planetoid which, in the gloom, looked to Rex like a rocky section of Earth with cultivation between ranges of low hills. It was one of the roughest planetoids he had ever seen, and might have been a piece of Switzerland on a small scale. Should the rock turn out to be limestone he could well believe in the report of there being plenty of caves.

The guide took them to a region where, on account of a profusion of caves, he thought some people might be hiding; and this proved to be the case. As nothing was seen of enemy ships a landing was made on a flat area of harsh turf near the foot of some rugged hills, and there it was quickly surrounded by a score or so of people who, recognizing the guide, were soon pouring out their troubles.

Four of the big ships, it was learned, were now there, on the outskirts of the one small town the place possessed. The occupiers of the houses had, of course, fled—at any rate, those who were able to do so, for many had been killed. The invaders had taken possession of the town and were now moving about freely without spacesuits. They gave the impression of being there to stay. Nothing could be done about this for they were invulnerable, not only on account of the flash-gun but for reason of an even more deadly device. All that was known of this was, it could produce great heat over a wide area.

One ship only, the last to arrive, somewhat larger than the others, carried this weapon. The ships often made sorties, both near and far.

“What are you going to do?” Rex asked his father. “Now we know they’re still here how about picking up a load of refugees and getting back to Ando.”

“There’s no desperate hurry.”

“There will be if one of these ships comes along and spots us.”

“They wouldn’t spot the ship if it was camouflaged. I’d like to have a look at the enemy’s position from ground level.”

“For what reason? Are you thinking of trying to dislodge them?”

“No. The reverse. We know it’s possible to damage these ships with the rifle. If we could knock some holes into the rest it would keep them grounded, if only for a time. That would at least prevent another attack on Ando until Toby gets back with the guns. I suggest we camouflage the ship while we think things over. We can take cover in the caves if necessary.”

“If you wish to hide the ship you must make haste, for here it gets light very quickly,” put in Vargo.

They set to work forthwith, and with plenty of helpers soon had the ship well covered with grass, moss, and other vegetable matter, held in place by pieces of rock. By the time they had finished it was broad daylight, the sky having turned from black to deep blue in a few seconds of time. The job done they all retired to the mouth of the nearest cave, there to continue the questioning of the natives for any useful information not yet revealed.

Tiger had asked Vargo to inquire how the refugees were managing for food—for there were several of them, men and women, young and old—when from the hill above them came a shrill whistle from a man who must have been on the watch, although Rex had no idea he was there. In an instant everyone was out of sight, diving into the nearest available caves with the alacrity of rabbits in a warren when a dog appears on the scene. Guessing the reason for this the Ando party followed, and from the entrance of their cave saw one of the big ships sail into view.

It seemed that watchers in it must have seen the sentry, who, having farther to go, was the last man to reach the caves, for suddenly it swerved towards him, at the same time gaining some altitude; and as it did this a blinding white glare appeared beside it. From this a shaft of light struck down to the ground. Even in daylight the ray could be seen as clearly as a searchlight beam at night. If, as it appeared, it was aimed at the Lornican, it did not hit him. He, evidently aware of his danger, flung himself into the nearest cave, whereupon the bar of light, the base covering several square

yards of ground, began to probe the valley as if seeking another victim; and as it moved, the ground covered began to smoke.

Tiger pulled Rex farther back into the cave. “That must be the heat ray,” he surmised. “I don’t know, but I suspect that if that ray touches you you’ve had it.”

“In that case, if they take the thing to Ando, the Andoans will have had it, too,” muttered Rex, in a shaken voice.

“According to the people here the thing can’t hurt you while you are under deep cover,” said Vargo.

“What about our ship?” Rex spoke with sharp anxiety, for it looked as if the ray, still moving, would pass over it.

No one answered. It would obviously be fatal to leave the cave, so all they could do was watch breathlessly as the peril approached. Their lives, Rex suspected, now depended on whether or not the ship was seen; for if it was, and the ray concentrated on it, the metal might melt.

The beam of heat moved on. It reached the ship, paused, and then went on. Even in those few moments Rex could see the foliage, that had been used for camouflage, curl under the fierce heat, fortunately without taking fire, or otherwise being seriously affected. As the thing passed the mouth of the cave, some twenty yards away, the effect was as if a furnace door had been thrown open.

“What a horror!” breathed Rex. “What is it?”

“Merely a reflector for reflecting and concentrating the sun’s rays, I’d say,” answered Tiger. “It acts in the same way as a lens used as a burning glass. The idea isn’t original. Just before the end of the war Hitler was working on such a device, a sort of venetian blind of sodium plates that could be turned in any direction or directed at a target. The focal point, the real danger spot, would, I imagine, be in the centre of the beam. If it touched you, even in passing it would probably burn you severely. Held on you for a short time it would skin you, of course. Very nasty.”

“The people here haven’t a hope while things like that are on the prowl,” said Rex, bitterly. “They must go out for food and water. And if it comes to that, what a hope we’d have if they sent that ship to Ando!”



See [here](#)

Even in daylight the heat ray could be seen as clearly as a searchlight beam at night.

“I was thinking the same thing,” returned Tiger. “In fact, I was wondering why it hasn’t already been there. Maybe it has only just arrived here. If so it’s only a question of time before it turns up over Ando.”

“Could they use that weapon in the air, against another ship?”

Tiger shrugged. “It would probably depend on the position of the two ships in relation to the sun. Also, perhaps, on the distance from the sun. The closer it was the more deadly it would be.”

By this time the big ship had passed out of sight over the horizon.

“Don’t you think it would be a good idea to get home while the sky’s clear?” suggested Rex. “Or would it be better to wait until after dark before we move?”

Tiger did not answer at once. He stood staring at the scorched ground, deep in thought. “I don’t think it would be a good idea to go at all,” he said at last.

“But why in the name of madness stay here?” cried Rex, aghast.

“Listen,” replied Tiger, earnestly. “Neither here, nor on Ando or anywhere else, have we any defence against that horror—*while it’s in the air.*”

“What do you mean? What are you getting at?”

“What I mean is this,” stated Tiger. “If Ando, and perhaps the whole Solar System, is to survive, that weapon must be destroyed. And the only place where that can be done is on the ground. It would be futile to rush back to Ando and wait for it to arrive. What could we do there? It’s my guess that they’ve only one ship carrying this burning apparatus. Had the ships that came to Ando been equipped with it they’d have used it instead of running away when I opened fire on them. In short, as I see it, our only hope is to kill the thing here, on the ground. And the sooner the better.”

“That is the plain truth,” said Vargo, simply.

“I suggest that as soon as it gets dark you all go back to Ando, with as many Lornican women and children as you can carry.”

“And leave you here!” cried Rex. “Not likely. You’d bust that thing, or try to, even though you knew for certain you’d be killed doing it.”

Tiger frowned. “What of it? I wouldn’t be the first man to risk his life for the salvation of a community. People have been doing that for thousands of years. If they hadn’t there wouldn’t be any people by now.”

“If you stay I stay,” said Rex firmly.

Tiger turned to Vargo. “I want you to ask these people how far we are from the place where these ships are parked. They won’t be able to give you the answer in actual distance but they might be able to give you an idea of how long it would take me to get to them, walking. That’s what I really want to know.”

Vargo put the question. The nearest answer he could arrive at was that it would be possible to get to the town, which had been evacuated, outside which the ships had taken up their position, during the period of darkness, which on Lornica was about six hours of Earthly time. The way was hard, but a man would go with them to show the easiest route.

“That’s fine,” said Tiger. “Let’s call it settled. We leave at dusk. Are you staying here, Vargo, or would you rather go home?”

“I shall stay,” said Vargo, quietly.

They sat down to wait, taking the opportunity to have some refreshment.

While they were eating Rex remarked: “There have in the past been several futuristic books been written about wars between worlds, but none of them quite pictured this sort of situation.”

“Conditions, even on Earth, have altered considerably since most of those books were written,” Tiger pointed out. “The things that are now known to exist could hardly have been foreseen by the most imaginative writers.”

Rex did not pursue the subject. He wondered what the end of it all would be.

CHAPTER IX  
THE RAID

As the small red sun of Lornica dropped like a falling balloon behind the harsh horizon Tiger made a last careful reconnaissance of the sky for enemy ships. Seeing none, he announced his intention of making a sortie against the invaders, surely a project more strange than any ever undertaken by a man who had been born on Earth. Actually, as Rex perceived, it was only the fact that they were on a planet other than their own that gave the enterprise an atmosphere of fantasy. At home, a raid by land, sea or air, to destroy enemy equipment, would be a normal military procedure.

The object of the expedition, as Rex understood it, was simply this. The first task was to locate and ascertain the strength of the enemy forces—for that the invaders were enemies bent on conquest was no longer to be doubted. The second part of the operation was to put out of action, and, if possible, destroy completely, the heat weapon which, should it be employed against the people of Ando, would inevitably result in their annihilation.

It was an odd coincidence, reflected Rex as they made ready for departure, that the very fate which Tiger had predicted for the unarmed Andoans should loom up at this particular moment, while they were there. It now looked as if this might turn out to be a wonderful stroke of luck for the Andoans—either that or a tragedy for the visitors from Earth. It was bound to be one or the other.

The raiding party comprised four members only: Tiger, Rex, Vargo, and the volunteer Lornican guide, a tall, unsmiling man, who rarely spoke, although, to be sure, as matters stood he had ample reason for despondency. All their hopes rested on one weapon; the rifle which, there was reason to believe, was as effective on the ground, at long range, as anything the invaders could produce.

The march that now followed was so much like a counterpart on Earth that Rex found it hard to believe that he was not at home, engaged in a routine Air Cadet exercise. The “grass” underfoot, where it occurred, was coarse and harsh; but for the most part the way was rocky, through defiles that wound a tortuous course through successive ranges of low hills, with detritus, or brash, as broken stone is sometimes called, crunching under the soles of his shoes.

So tiring did he find this, in an atmosphere different from the one to which he was accustomed, that he was not a little thankful when the guide came to a halt, saying something quietly to Vargo, who informed the others that the journey was at an end. The township, beside which the strangers had landed, lay just ahead, where the ravine they were in ran out into open, cultivated ground. Another short advance would bring them within sight of the town. The enemy ships, assuming they hadn't been moved, would be in full view.

There was a short discussion about the possibility of sentries having been posted; but it was agreed that this seemed unlikely, for the invaders had no reason to be afraid of anything the Lornicans might do.

The party moved on, now with more caution. Rex found his heart thumping a little unsteadily, due partly to the thin atmosphere, but more, perhaps, from an awareness of unknown dangers. However, nothing happened, and a few minutes later the objective lay before them in the pale light of a million stars. Lornica had no moon comparable with the moon of Earth, but certain stars were larger and brighter, as a result of their proximity.

From the point at which they stood, the town, built with clearly defined limits as was the case on Ando, appeared as a ghostly mirage about a quarter of a mile distant. No light showed anywhere. On the near side, on flat, open ground, alarmingly close it seemed to Rex, were four of the enemy ships. One was larger than the others. This alone carried a heat reflector, as could be seen clearly in the starlight. It may have made the ship look larger than it really was. There was no movement, no sign of life, and the question that came automatically to Rex's mind was, where were the enemy crews? Were they in the ships or were they in the town?

Tiger must have been thinking on the same lines, for he said, softly: "I wonder where they are?"

"How are we going to find out?" queried Rex.

"I don't know," answered Tiger. "We can't do anything from here so we shall have to get nearer; but I admit I don't like the idea of crossing the open ground in front of us in case eyes are on the watch."

"There doesn't seem to be any alternative."

"I'm afraid you're right," answered Tiger, in a worried voice. "It looks as if we shall have to take a chance," he went on, "otherwise we might stand here all night without learning more than we know now. Apparently they still have four ships. With one lost on Marlok, and another on Ando, that may be the lot. The important one is the big feller with the burning device. If

we could smash that it would be a good job done. Failing putting it out of action altogether it would be something if we could damage it. I mean the reflector. They can hardly carry spare parts for a thing that size.”

“If the ships themselves were damaged they wouldn’t be able to get home, wherever that may be.”

“That’s bound to be the inherent weakness of all space craft. If you’re damaged you’re sunk.”

“Well, what are we going to do? Time’s getting on. Don’t let’s be caught out in daylight.”

“I’m going on,” decided Tiger.

“What about me?”

“You can come with me if you like. A spare pair of eyes would be an advantage. Vargo and the guide, as they can’t do anything with their bare hands, might as well stay here. If we don’t come back they could return to the caves, and later on let the Professor know what happened. Do you agree to that, Vargo?”

Vargo agreed.

“Then let’s get on with it,” said Tiger, loading the rifle and hitching it under his arm. “I shan’t use this unless I find it necessary,” he stated.

They walked forward, Rex with his nerves taut, eyes probing the dim light for any sign of movement. The queer thought struck him that it was to *this*, that a deer stalk in the Highlands of Scotland, with the same rifle, had brought them. It was not, he told himself, easy to believe.

Tiger headed for the nearest ship. “If anyone is watching we shall soon know about it,” he whispered.

Rex found little comfort in the remark. “If they are there, there’ll be one flash and we’ve had it,” he muttered, lugubriously.

“Keep wide of me, so that if there is a flash it won’t get us both,” advised Tiger, evenly.

They proceeded slowly, keeping a few paces apart.

When, without an alarm being given, they had covered about half the distance to the nearest ship, Rex began to hope that the crews were living in the abandoned town, although it was hard to shake off a feeling that eyes were out there in the gloom, watching them. Still walking forward, slowly he became aware of a sound, a sound so slight that in the ordinary way no notice would have been taken of it. Vaguely it reminded him of something, although for the moment he could not recall what it was. Then he remembered. It was voices in unison—like passing a school where scholars

were repeating something in a monotonous undertone. But these were not children's voices. They were too deep, too low, for that.

Exactly where the sound was coming from could not easily be determined, although as there were no Lornicans in the vicinity the voices could only be those of the invaders. It was an eerie sound, unreal yet with a remorseless quality, so that again the feeling came over Rex that this was not really happening; that it was all a dream, one of those bizarre nightmares that come at night when the brain seems to wander away from the body and all natural things. Were the strangers engaged in a ceremony of some sort?

Tiger, rifle now at the ready, continued to advance. Rex kept level with him, eyes staring, trying to make out where the voices were coming from, and wondering why his father, who must have heard them, did not stop. The ships looked more and more like giant mushrooms sprouting out of the plain.

Just before they reached the objective, the big ship carrying the reflector, the drone of voices ended abruptly and there fell upon the scene a silence even more disconcerting. Half stifled by the beating of his heart, every nerve tense, Rex stopped and stared while Tiger went right on to the device from which they thought they had most to fear. Attached to the outside of the ship it consisted of a number of shining rays, apparently metal of some sort, set close together and radiating from a central hub in the manner of a formal representation of the sun. He saw Tiger reach out and touch one of the rays; saw it bend under the pressure he applied to it.

Going up to him he whispered: "What is it?"

"I'd say an arrangement for collecting solar rays and reflecting them in concentrated form," breathed Tiger. "I imagine it can be controlled, turned in any direction, from the inside."

"Can you do anything about it?"

"I don't know. It's metal, so I doubt if shooting holes through it would do much harm. I was hoping it was glass, or something that could be shattered. The only thing I can think of is to shoot holes in the ship and so keep it grounded."

"Why not ground them all?"

"That would maroon them here. We don't want that. We want them to clear off altogether."

"Well, do something and let's get out of this," requested Rex desperately. "I'm getting the jitters."

He started, clutching Tiger's arm, as a small group of squat figures loomed suddenly in the darkness about thirty yards away, having emerged,

apparently, from the ship nearest the town. A voice spoke in a deep rumbling tone.

Instinctively both Rex and his father took a pace to the left, which put the ship between them and the newcomers. “Let’s go,” urged Rex. “If they see us we’ve had it.”

“Not necessarily,” returned Tiger. “The flash-guns may be in the ships, with the rest of their equipment. Stand still. They’re more likely to see us if we move.”

This was obviously sound advice and Rex obeyed, for so far, it was clear, their presence was not suspected. It was in Tiger’s power, he thought, to put the enemy to flight. But although the invaders had opened hostilities he did not think he would do that. It would be too much like murder. Or would it? The truth was, he couldn’t quite regard these visitors from outer space as human beings. They were either robots or animals—he wasn’t sure which.

He waited. Tiger did nothing. Seconds passed.

At the end the decision was forced on them. Footsteps and voices approached. Tiger, his rifle raised for instant action, began to back away, and, it need hardly be said, Rex went with him, watching for the enemy to appear. Instead, sounds the other side of the metal shell told him that the enemy had entered the ship, the door being on the far side. A voice, hard and guttural, was raised above the rest, as if giving orders.

“I believe they’re going to take off,” muttered Rex.

“Keep clear of the exhausts in case they do; they may be radio-active,” returned Tiger.

“They may be going to Ando!”

Tiger did not answer.

They ran a little way and then turned again, as from the ship came a deep drone, as if a power unit had been started.

For a moment longer Tiger hesitated, and then, it seemed, reached a decision. “If it gets off we’ve lost it,” he muttered. “We may never get another chance like this. Run. I’ll follow.”

Without questioning the order Rex turned and ran for his life. He did not even stop when he heard Tiger’s rifle go into action, rapid fire. Above the reports came a great noise of shouting in deep-throated voices.

Not until he was near the rocks where Vargo and the guide were waiting did Rex snatch a glance over his shoulder, to see Tiger coming at a run. The big ship was still on the ground. Figures, indistinct in the dim light, were

milling round it. A blue flash stabbed the darkness, another and another; but none came in their direction, and it was evident that either the weapon had a short range or the shooting was indiscriminate rather than at any particular target.

Panting, Rex joined Vargo and the guide, whom he found crouching behind a boulder, and there, a few seconds later, Tiger joined them.

“I think I’ve crippled the ship,” he announced. “The power units have cut, although whether they, or my bullets did it, I don’t know. I also aimed at the hub of the reflector and fancy I damaged it.”

“I will tell you something,” said Vargo.

“What is it?”

“These people do not see well. Their eyes are not good, certainly in this light.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because if their eyes were as good as ours they must have seen you running; for from here, which is farther away, I could see you.”

“That’s something to bear in mind,” averred Tiger, his eyes still on the big ship, to which the crew had apparently returned for none was in sight.

Rex watched it, too. Twice it appeared to lift a little as if trying to get off, only to wobble and fall back. Finally it settled on the ground and remained still. “You must have damaged it,” he said, with deep satisfaction.

This was short-lived, however, and he watched with mounting anxiety as from all the ships came their crews, to muster for what, from a babble of voices, was obviously something in the nature of a conference. This did not last long. The party broke up, and with heads bent low, moving at a run, the crews began to quarter the ground like a pack of hounds seeking a lost trail. Suddenly it struck him what they were doing. “I believe they’re trying to locate us by scent,” he surmised, wildly.

This was more or less confirmed when one of the ‘hounds’ let out a cry and bounded in their direction, to be followed quickly by the rest.

“I think you’re right,” rapped out Tiger. “Let’s get out of this.”

They set off at a run, the guide leading the way. He may not have followed the conversation but it was plain that he had grasped the necessity for beating an urgent retreat.

It was nearly two miles to the next range of hills. As they reached the pass that cut through them Rex looked back, and was horrified to see a compact group of figures obviously hot on their trail. The spectacle was all the more alarming in that the pursuers were silent now.

The flight continued over rock-strewn ground that made the going hard and dangerous, for it would have been easy to twist an ankle. The final range was reached with them all stumbling and panting, near exhaustion point. Again they all looked back. Not only were the pursuers still on their track but Rex saw with sinking heart that the gap between them had been narrowed.

“We shan’t beat them by running,” he gasped.

“You’re right. We shan’t,” answered Tiger. “They’ll catch us, or have us within range of their flash-guns, before we can get to the caves. We must stop them. It’s our only chance. I’ll handle it. You’d better go on.” When he saw there was some reluctance to obey this order he shrugged and said: “All right. Stay if you like, but keep under cover.” Dropping on a knee behind a rock he brought the butt of the rifle to his shoulder, took aim and fired.

Rex did not see anyone fall, but at the report of the weapon the pursuit halted abruptly. The men did not, he noticed, take cover, from which he concluded that they did not understand the nature of the weapon being employed against them. Indeed, it would have been more remarkable had they done so.

Over him again, as he watched, came that feeling of unreality that arose from the fact that they were fighting creatures from another world about which they knew nothing, not even its position in the boundless space around them. He still could not bring himself to regard them as normal human beings like himself. What purpose had they in these hostilities? Surely there was plenty of room in the universe for everyone. Why had they invented weapons? Why had they used them without first ascertaining the nature of the people on the planets which apparently they intended to occupy?

These ruminations ended when the shadowy figures in the valley dispersed, and Vargo, suggesting that they might advance with more caution, thought it would be a good thing to make a run for the caves; for should the enemy appear suddenly, close at hand, with his death-dealing flash weapon, they would be in a hopeless position, as day would break at any moment.

Tiger agreed, so they set off at the best speed possible, and came within sight of the entrances to the caves just as the sun swept up to turn the sky from grey to blue. It only needed one of the enemy ships, which now appeared, to send them pell-mell into the nearest cave, where, breathless, they could only sink down to recover their composure.

Rex broke the silence. “If they saw us they’ll know where we are,” he observed, moodily.

“They knew that already,” Vargo pointed out. “They knew the people left here were hiding in these caves.”

Rex looked at his father. “What are we going to do if they post a ship outside? If they spot our ship we’ve had it.”

“At the moment there’s nothing we can do,” returned Tiger.

“You must kill them one by one,” stated Vargo, dispassionately.

“That’s a grim proposal,” said Rex.

“If we cannot kill them they will kill us.”

“Presently Borrón and the Doctor will be along in the *Tavona* with more rifles,” observed Rex hopefully.

“They may be killed before they can land, not understanding the position here.”

Said Tiger: “It’s a pity we can’t talk to these people and arrange some sort of truce.”

“They are killers,” declared Vargo. “They have shown us that. You cannot arrange a truce with creatures of that nature.”

Silence fell again.

Outside the caves broad daylight had flooded the harsh landscape. Inside, the atmosphere was one of doubt and indecision.

CHAPTER X  
WHAT NEXT?

THE day wore on. Rex, his father, and sometimes Vargo, sat just inside the cave, from where they could watch the scene outside, in case there should be an attack. Actually, they could not see much, for their view was restricted by a long, low, rocky escarpment that occurred immediately opposite at a distance of about seventy to eighty yards. Without moving their positions they had another dull meal from the provisions they had brought with them. They discussed taking off and returning to Ando but decided against it on the grounds that it was too risky, at all events in daylight, while the enemy ships, with their better performance, were in the offing. They assumed their hide-out was being watched, probably from the rocks opposite, although they saw no one.

Two fears weighed heavily upon them. The first was that the *Tavona* would arrive, with Toby and the Professor, bringing the extra rifles. There was no way of stopping them. They would land in what was now virtually a death trap. The second fear was that their own ship might be spotted. To make things more difficult, should the *Tavona* arrive they had no means of letting it know where they were; for, in the circumstances, to uncover their own ship was not to be contemplated, for it would then stand revealed to their foes as well as to their friends.

Some time during the afternoon the Lornican guide, who had been absent for some time, came back and said something to Vargo. "He has something to show us," translated Vargo, looking at Tiger.

"All right; let's look at it," answered Tiger. "Anything is better than doing nothing."

They followed the guide, who produced a small lamp, into the recesses of the cave where the Lornican refugees had gathered. From there the guide took a narrow side turning, a natural fissure in the limestone, which ran steeply upwards for some distance before daylight showed ahead. This turned out to be a split in the rock face some distance above the cave entrances at ground level. This opening, of course, offered a much wider view, and Rex found himself looking down on the escarpment opposite instead of up at it, as had been the case from their original position.

The guide pointed.

Following the direction indicated Rex saw, for the first time, one of the enemy without space-travel clothing or equipment. Actually, he could only see the upper part of the man, who was lying between two rocks obviously keeping the caves under observation; but it was enough, and into his mind rushed all that he had read in the past, before his first space flight, about the unlikelihood of men on distant planets bearing any resemblance to the inhabitants of Earth.

Actually, there was a resemblance; a strong resemblance; but there were also differences. The face of the man before him was bigger, and broader, in proportion to his body. His eyes seemed to be larger, too; much larger. His neck was short and thick, although partly concealed by a black beard. A mop of black woolly hair also covered the top of the head.

A movement caught Rex's eye and he saw a second man. He, too, was watching the caves, revealing that Tiger's decision to remain under cover had been a sound one.

Vargo touched Tiger, who still carried his rifle, on the arm. "Kill him," he said, in a calm, matter-of-fact voice.

Rex could hardly believe his ears. Was this the peace-loving Martian of their early acquaintanceship? "Your outlook on peace and war seems to have changed somewhat," he couldn't help remarking.

"Things have changed," replied Vargo, simply.

Said Tiger, a suspicion of a sneer creeping into his voice: "It's easy to preach peace when you have no enemies."

Vargo ignored the gibe. "Shoot," he requested.

Tiger hesitated. And while he hesitated there occurred an incident which must have settled the doubts in his mind.

A Lornican appeared below. He carried a basket, suggesting that his intention was to collect some fresh vegetables from a nearby patch. For a few seconds he moved warily, his eyes on the escarpment as if he suspected the danger that lay there; then, before he could be warned, he made a run for it. He did not get far. A blue flame flashed, and the man who had taken a chance crashed headlong in the dirt.

"You are right, Vargo," said Tiger, with deadly calm. "That was quite unnecessary." He raised the rifle and took aim. The weapon spat. The murderer—it was the man they had first seen—leapt high into the air, rolled over and over down the bank in a little avalanche of rocks to the bottom, where he lay, spreadeagled, within two score of paces of his victim.

For a moment nobody spoke. Tiger jerked a fresh cartridge into the breach of his rifle. "They can't blame us if they force us to adopt their own

policy, which seems to be shoot on sight,” he observed coldly. “It’s a pity we can’t see what’s going on behind that escarpment.”

“It may be possible,” said Vargo, and turning, spoke again to the Lornican who was standing behind them. There was a brief discussion, at the end of which Vargo said: “Come, he will take us.”

Another uphill journey followed, up a narrow causeway bristling with stalactites and stalagmites, to a higher opening, a mere crack in the rock face but sufficient to offer a bird’s eye picture not only of the escarpment but the terrain beyond. All was now in plain view, the most conspicuous objects being two spacecraft that had been brought up to a point just beyond the escarpment. The crews were standing by them.

“Good job we didn’t try to slip away,” remarked Rex grimly.

“This is better,” stated Tiger, a ring of satisfaction in his voice. “If they want war they can have it. They’re handy with their flash-guns; now let’s see how they like our medicine.” So saying he got into a comfortable position and went to work.

He had fired three shots, and three men had fallen—for the target was an easy one—before the enemy, as it seemed, realized what was happening. Then, obviously not knowing how and from where death was arriving, they fell into a panic, running about in circles like sheep attacked by a dog. Rex observed it was one thing to face up to rifle fire knowing what it was, but a different matter not knowing. The effect of the flash-guns, on men unaccustomed to them, would have been the same, of course.

At the finish the invaders did the obvious thing. They bolted into their ships, either for cover or with the intention of removing themselves from the spot. But in this respect they were like ostriches pushing their heads in the sand, for Tiger now turned his fire on the ships, knowing that his bullets would penetrate the metal. One took off and got away. The other started to rise, unsteadily, wobbling from side to side. Tiger kept up a rapid fire on it. From a height of fifty or sixty feet it fell back to the ground, which it struck with some force, on an uneven keel, raising a cloud of dust. It finished in that position. The crew, or some of the crew, abandoned it and ran for their lives.

“Good,” said Vargo, dispassionately.

For a few minutes they stood watching the scene.

“There should be one of those flash-guns lying about. How about finding it and seeing how it works?” suggested Rex. “There doesn’t seem to be anything to stop us going out.”

“There doesn’t seem to be anything to prevent us from pulling out and returning to Ando,” answered Tiger. “This may be our chance to go. The alternative is to stay here and see the job through. The enemy has had a severe mauling with both men and machines, and knowing now that we can hit back he may decide to leave us alone—perhaps go back to where he came from. It might be a good thing to send the ship back to Ando with some of these refugees while we wait here to see how things turn out.”

“The enemy may get reinforcements,” said Rex, dubiously.

“So might we, if it comes to that,” returned Tiger. “There’s no desperate hurry to do anything. Let’s go back to ground level for a start.”

They returned by the way they had come to their original positions just inside the cave. Rex stepped outside, and having looked around turned his eyes to the sky, darkening with the close of day, for possible enemy ships. A cry broke from his lips. “We were just in time,” he shouted. “Look what’s coming.”

“What is it,” demanded Tiger, joining him.

Rex pointed. Dropping like a stone, although on an oblique course, was the *Tavona*, apparently looking for them.

“A fire, quick,” cried Tiger.

Within a minute a wisp of smoke was rising like a column into the windless atmosphere.

Those in the *Tavona* must have seen it, for the ship changed course and came directly towards them.

Those on the ground watched the sky anxiously for enemy ships, but none appeared, and presently the *Tavona* landed at a spot indicated by Tiger by visual signals. The Professor stepped out, followed by Toby, Borron, and some Andoans. By that time Tiger had asked Vargo to send a man to the top of the escarpment to act as watcher, to prevent them from being caught by a surprise attack.

“Good evening, all,” greeted the Professor, casually.

“Is everything all right on Ando?” asked Tiger quickly.

“Yes. We’ve had no trouble since you left.”

“Have you brought the rifles?”

“Yes.”

“Then would you mind getting them out? We may need them.”

The Professor raised his eyebrows. “Dear-dear! Is there any hurry?”

“There could be,” stated Tiger. “I’d prefer not to take chances.”

The rifles, and cartridges for them, were handed out and distributed.

Said Toby, while this was being done: "What's all the flap about?"

Without wasting words Tiger gave a brief account of what had happened on Lornica. No one spoke until he had finished. Then said the Professor, in a melancholy voice, pushing his fingers through his hair: "Mercy on us. How dreadful. What an unhappy state of affairs."

"It could have been worse," Tiger pointed out, grimly.

"What's the drill now?" inquired Toby, practically.

Tiger shrugged. "That's up to the Professor. Obviously we can do one of two things. We can either go home or we can stay here."

"Stay here?" queried the Professor. "For what purpose?"

"To finish what we've started."

"You mean, to continue the war."

"Call it what you like," said Tiger, shortly. "Let me remind you that we didn't start it. We came to pay a friendly visit to Ando. We can go back to Earth, but if we do we leave them at the mercy of these barbarians."

"What would you prefer to do?"

"Let's be frank about it. The Andoans are really nothing to us; but it goes against the grain to leave them in the lurch. There are other people to consider, too, including our own; for make no mistake, if these flash-gunning invaders get a foothold here it's only a question of time before they push their conquests into the Solar System. Mino and Lentos will come next, then Mars, then Earth."

Said the Professor, in an expressionless voice: "What you are suggesting is that we hunt down these strangers and—er—liquidate them."

"That, I thought, was the intention in sending for the extra rifles."

"I thought they were intended primarily for defence."

"They are. But I happen to be a supporter of the theory that the best form of defence is attack. I believe our rifles have a longer range than the enemy's flash-guns, and if that is so it should give us a strong advantage. I shall do my best to hold on to that." Tiger went on: "Unless the enemy has been able to plug the holes I made in the ship carrying the heat weapon, according to my reckoning they have only two serviceable ships left."

"They will repair the damaged ship," declared the Professor. "No spaceship would leave its base without having made provision for the repair of holes made by meteors. Bullet holes would amount to the same thing."

"Well, at least I've kept it on the ground for a little while," claimed Tiger.

“I wouldn’t rely on it staying there.”

“In this crazy business I’m not relying on anything,” replied Tiger. “It’s my guess that when these pirates realize they’ve bitten off more than they can chew they’ll find a healthier spot or go back to where they came from. That’s all we want.”

“If we could make contact with them and point that out it might save further bloodshed,” opined the Professor, pensively.

“What’s the use of making contact with people if you can’t speak their language and they can’t speak yours. I’d prefer to keep my distance from those flash-guns. They speak a language that doesn’t give you time to answer.”

Toby chipped in: “Well, instead of an argument which isn’t getting us anywhere, how about making up our minds on a definite line of action? It’ll be dark presently. In the meantime, if one of those ships should happen to come over and catch us in the open——” he broke off, looking up, as there came a shout of warning from the escarpment.

Rex looked, too, and saw the sentry racing down the rocky slope at a speed that could only mean imminent danger. And the swishing whine which Rex had come to associate with saucers travelling through an atmosphere left no doubt as to what the danger was.

“It sounds as if they’re on their way,” said Tiger.

“There they are,” cried Rex, as two ships showed above the ridge of the escarpment, although as yet some distance from it.

Tiger hitched his rifle forward. “It’d call for some pretty deflection shooting, but I wonder if I could pull down one of those birds.”

“Are you mad?” cried the Professor. “They’re coming this way. Back to the cave, everyone.”

There was a rush for the entrance.

“They’ll see the *Tavona*,” shouted Rex, in a pause, for the ship was of course still standing in the open without camouflage of any sort.

“It’s a good thing I grounded that ship with the burning device or we could say goodbye to it,” muttered Tiger, as they stood just inside the cave, watching.

“They’ll have their flash-guns,” Rex pointed out.

“Maybe; but they may not be able to use them from inside a ship without opening the doors. Here they come. Flying low, too. I’ll have a crack at ’em.” Tiger raised his rifle.

“You are wrong about the ship with the burning weapon,” said Vargo quietly. “There it is, in the air, rising from where it stood.”

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least,” said the Professor. “They were certain to be able to repair punctures.”

“They may not be able to use the weapon,” said Tiger. “I put several bullets into the centre of the thing. Hello! What are they up to?”

The two ships had suddenly swerved, at the same time climbing at a velocity that could only mean they were under full power.

“Something seems to have scared ’em,” remarked Toby.

Nobody answered, the reason being that it was unnecessary. The cause of the big ships’ behaviour could be seen by all.

Across the darkening sky, with a shrill wail, swept a fleet of some twenty small, black, cigar-shaped objects that could only be space craft, although of a type the spell-bound watchers on the ground had never seen or had heard described, although, Rex recalled, there had been rumours of such ships having been seen by high-flying pilots of orthodox aircraft over Earth.

The fleet, in perfect formation, sped like rockets up the trail of the escaping ‘saucers’, at a velocity almost too great for the eyes to follow. In three seconds they were out of sight. A few more seconds and the two big ships reappeared, falling sheer, obviously out of control.

“Looks as if the little fellers caught ’em,” said Toby, in a queer flat voice.

Above the falling ships a cluster of tiny black specks marked the reappearance of the cigar-shaped fleet.

Tiger spoke. “I give up,” he said lugubriously. “This is getting beyond me. I take back all I’ve said. Let’s go home and give our imaginations a rest.”

The Professor pushed up his spectacles, which had slid to the tip of his nose. “It doesn’t need much imagination to see what has happened,” he said calmly. “We have become involved in what is clearly an interplanetary war. The purpose of the big ships in coming here was, I fancy, not so much conquest as escape. In the same way that in our own war the heavy bombers had to go into hiding to escape the attentions of hostile intruders, these big ships may have fled from their regular bases to get away from the small black destroyers which, nevertheless, have succeeded in finding them. I repeat, we have been caught up in an affair that has nothing to do with us. These black ships may be the real aggressors.”

“It looks as if they’re going to land here,” said Rex, as the fleet dropped towards the open plain.

“That reminds me,” said Tiger. “What happened to the ship with the burning apparatus?”

“It may have escaped,” answered Vargo. “When the two ships that were coming towards us rocketted in vertical flight it went the other way, keeping low. None of the black ships went after it. With their eyes on the other two they may not have seen it.”

“Pity,” murmured Tiger.

“It isn’t likely to come back here,” offered Toby.

“Then why are these black fellows landing?”

“Some of the crewmen of the big ships may have been left on the ground,” suggested the Professor.

“If that’s the case they look like being out of luck,” replied Tiger. “When the black boys have dealt with them they may push off and leave us alone,” he added, hopefully.

“These black ships may not prove hostile to us,” rejoined the Professor.

“They know we’re here, anyway,” came back Tiger, as one of the small ships hung for a moment over the *Tavona* before going on to join its companions. “Pity we hadn’t time to throw some camouflage over it. But there, the damage is done now.”

“If they don’t recognize the type they’ll wonder what it is, where it came from and what it’s doing here,” said Rex.

“On the other hand, they may be so used to seeing spaceships of one sort or another that they won’t give us a second thought,” contended Toby.

“It didn’t take ’em long to identify the big ships,” asserted Tiger.

“Surely that needn’t surprise us,” interposed the Professor. “In this part of the universe one would expect spaceship recognition to take the place of aircraft recognition on Earth.”

“I think we must be prepared for this,” said Vargo gravely. “People as far advanced in science as those flying the little black ships will have terrible weapons for dealing death and destruction. You observed the way they overtook and destroyed the two big ships. Even you people of Earth, thousands of years behind, have fearful weapons. If your scientists can produce an atom bomb imagine what men in the advanced Space Age can do.”

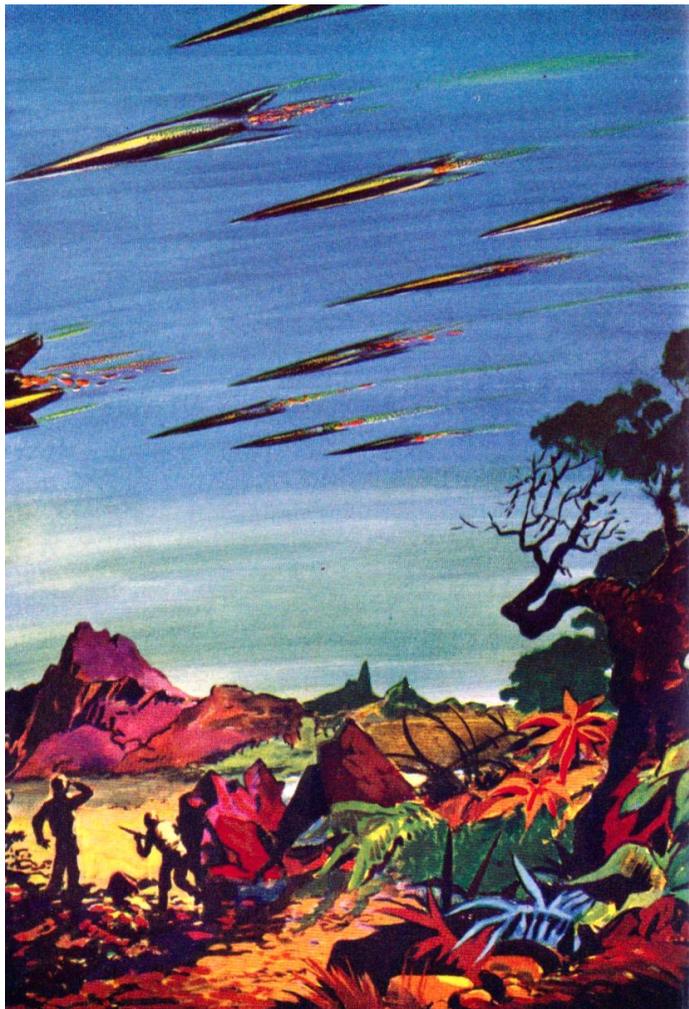
“I’d rather not,” answered the Professor, with a shudder.

Silence fell. But it did not last long.

“Well, what are we going to do?” demanded Toby, impatiently.

“You tell me,” requested Tiger, helplessly. He thought for a moment. “Actually, this new development doesn’t alter the position very much,” he went on. “We can either try to get home, or stay here in the hope that these little black devils will go home. For if we try to leave, and they spot us, and turn out to be as hostile as we might expect, we’ve had it.”

“If, in either case, the result is to be the same, as it would seem, I see no reason to do anything in a hurry,” said the Professor, evenly. “Let us bide our time. Would anyone care for a caramel?” he invited, producing his bag.



See [here](#)

The fleet sped like rockets at a velocity almost too great for the eyes to follow.

CHAPTER XI  
THE CREEPING DEATH

THEY retired to the cave, where, after a little while, they ate another uninteresting meal without enthusiasm.

“Let’s try to get this thing in line,” said Toby. “What are we trying to do? As I understand it the idea was for me to fetch the extra rifles with the object of giving the people here an air-lift to Ando, and, if possible, push off the planet these blokes in the big ships. Well, the big ships have been pushed off for us. Do we now take on these little ships or do we evacuate the surviving Lornicans to Ando?”

“That question would be easier to answer if we knew what this new lot intended to do,” returned Tiger. “If I thought that, having achieved their object in coming here, they’d return to where they came from, I’d say let’s do nothing. Wait for them to go, when the Lornicans could either stay here and get on with their farming or come back with us to Ando. It was the threat to Ando, while the big ships were here, that caused the flap. That no longer arises.”

“Which means,” put in Rex, “that what we do depends on what these little ships do.”

“Exactly,” replied Tiger. “And that’s something we shan’t know unless we stay here to watch them.”

“Watching them won’t prevent them from doing what they want to do,” the Professor pointed out.

“Admittedly,” conceded Tiger. “But if we go back to Ando, and then this new lot arrives there, the position will be the same as it was when the big ships came.”

“Then that will have to be the position, for the simple reason that we cannot prevent it,” declared the Professor. “If an interplanetary war is in progress, as it seems, our purpose should be to keep out of it. I have no intention of setting myself up as the saviour of the universe. I would rather go home.”

“That would suit me,” asserted Rex. “All we’re doing here is going round in circles.”

“Everything is going round in circles,” said the Professor, whimsically.

“How about this for a scheme,” resumed Tiger. “Let the *Tavona* go back to Ando with the Lornicans and report what has happened here, so that they won’t be taken by surprise if these little ships should turn up. That would complete the evacuation part of our programme. We don’t need two ships. If the new people come over and see the *Tavona* has gone they may think there’s nobody here. Unless they come close they won’t see our other ship under its camouflage.”

“What if they see the *Tavona* take off?” inquired the Professor.

“That’s a risk that will have to be taken. I wouldn’t suggest it in daylight, but in the dark, if it keeps low for a while, they may not see it. It will get a good start, anyway. Supposing the place to be deserted the chances are that this new lot will go on their way. They may find the atmosphere here unsuitable for a long stay.”

“I think that’s as good a plan as any,” averred the Professor, thoughtfully. “We will stay here and watch what happens. Should this flotilla of black ships depart we will at once return to Ando, for there would then be no purpose in our staying here.”

“Fair enough,” agreed Tiger. “Let’s get on with it.”

The plan did not take long to put into action. Through Vargo the Lornicans were advised of what was intended. From the alacrity with which they picked up their few belongings and embarked it was clear that they were only too happy to leave a little world which, at the best of times, was not very attractive. Borrón with a skeleton crew, for the ship was crowded, took their places. The doors were closed and the *Tavona* disappeared into the night sky.

“Now,” said the Professor, turning back to the cave, “I think it’s time we had some sleep. We’d better mount a guard in case we should have visitors. I’ll take first watch if you like. I’m not in the least tired.”

There were no visitors. There was no alarm. In fact, nothing at all happened during the short night.

The first streak of dawn found Tiger on his feet, making a cautious survey of the ground outside from the cave entrance. Seeing nothing he announced his intention of making a reconnaissance from the top of the escarpment which would command a wide view of the terrain beyond. This he did, to return shortly to report that some of the black ships were in the air, flying low and quartering the ground as if they were looking for something. They were, he thought, looking for any members of the crews of the big ships that had been left there. “They may come this way presently,” he

concluded, “so I think it would be a good thing if we kept under cover. It would be better if they didn’t see us.”

“Much better,” confirmed Rex, warmly.

The sun rose and warmed the thin, chilly atmosphere.

Having nothing better to do Rex said he would go up the fissure to the point of vantage which had been shown to them by the Lornican and keep watch from there. Vargo went with him. When they reached the place and looked out there was no movement anywhere, on the bare, inhospitable ground or in the air.

“That is good,” said Vargo.

“What do you think about all this?” asked Rex.

“I hope these strangers will go,” answered Vargo, earnestly. “Men who can make such ships will have weapons horrible beyond imagination. We would be helpless against them.”

“You don’t think the rifles would be any good?”

“Yes, perhaps, if you could see the men. But I don’t think you will see them. If they strike it will be from their ships. They might destroy this place utterly.”

Rex moved uncomfortably. “Yes, I believe even our scientists could destroy a little world like this, with hydrogen bombs.”

“I don’t think that will happen here,” said Vargo pensively. “The destruction of a world may involve others. It is hard to say where it would end. These people in the little black ships will know that.”

“That’s a comfort, anyway,” murmured Rex. He caught Vargo by the arm and pointed to what appeared to be a rapidly expanding ball of cotton wool in the far distance. “Is that a cloud over there, on the horizon? If it is it’s the first one I’ve seen here.”

Vargo studied the phenomenon long and thoughtfully. “It is not an ordinary cloud,” he said slowly. “In such an atmosphere as this a cloud of moisture of such density would not be possible.”

“What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it.”

Rex pointed again. “There’s another, over there.”

“Do you think we should tell the others?”

“Yes. Wait! Look!” It was Vargo’s turn to point.

Across an open area, perhaps half a mile away but plainly seen through the crystal-clear atmosphere, two men were running, making for the nearest

range of rocky hills.

“Those are men of the big ships,” said Rex.

“They must be, for the men of the little ships would have no need to run,” answered Vargo.

“Look at that ship! I believe it’s spotted them,” cried Rex, as one of the black cigars appeared above and behind the runners.

They watched. Rex saw nothing fall, but presently a white spot appeared on the ground in front of the running men. It grew larger with astonishing rapidity, spreading out as if it might have been a white liquid, without rising very high. The runners saw it, as they were bound to, and swerved away; but it made no difference; the vapour, obviously a gas of some sort, overtook them. As it curled round their legs they seemed for a moment to fight it. Then, still fighting, they fell, instantly to be overwhelmed. They were seen no more.

“In that cloud is death,” said Vargo.

Rex needed no explanation. What he had seen was all too plain. “If they drop one of those things in this valley it’s all over with us,” he said tersely. “Let’s go down. The others must know. From where they are at ground level they wouldn’t be able to see what we’ve seen.”

They tore down the fissure as fast as they could go, to be received at the bottom with inquiring expressions.

“What is it? What’s the trouble?” asked Tiger, looking startled.

Rex told him. “It looks to me as if they’re peppering everybody they can find with some sort of lethal gas,” he concluded. “The thing starts as a white spot and then spreads out like a pancake. It seems to cover a lot of ground.”

“If they’re going to poison the place they’ve obviously no intention of staying here themselves,” said the Professor.

“Neither can we stay here,” stated Tiger grimly. “Get the ship clear ready for a quick take-off while I have a look at this.”

“Don’t go far,” pleaded Rex. “The stuff spreads like water, faster than you can run. If they drop one here we may not even have time to get off. I think everyone ought to get in the ship, and so be ready if it happens.”

“I think so, too,” put in Vargo, when he saw some hesitation.

“Hurry!” cried Rex, realizing that the others, not having seen what he had seen, had not grasped the urgency of the situation.

The appearance of a small black ship, hurtling like a torpedo across the sky, produced the result that words had failed to do. There was a rush for the ship. The camouflage, or as much of it that mattered, was flung off. The

captain and crew went inside. The Professor, Toby and Rex, stood at the entrance watching Tiger, who was on his way to the escarpment regardless of Rex's pleading, in order, as he said, to see what was happening on the other side.

He did not reach it.

Again the little black ship flashed into view. It was gone in an instant. But watching it as it passed over Rex distinctly saw something pass between it and the ground. It looked exactly like a tracer bullet. He kept his eyes on the spot, a little higher up the valley, where he thought the thing had struck, and was not surprised to see a tiny white ball appear. At first it was no larger than a tennis ball, and looked so harmless that Toby smiled. "If that's the best they can do I see nothing to get in a flap about," he remarked, casually.

But Rex knew better. "Tiger! Tiger!" he screamed, seeing his father still walking on. "Come back."

Tiger stopped.

Rex pointed at the white object, now beginning to spread with ever increasing speed. "Run!" he shouted.

But apparently Tiger, like Toby, did not appreciate the menace. He watched the thing curiously for a few seconds and then, as if time was no object, began to stroll back towards the ship.

"Run," yelled Rex, his voice shrill with panic.

Tiger had covered about half the distance to the ship when he seemed to realize his peril; as well he might, for finding itself confined within the rocky walls of the valley, and its outward expansion checked, the white tide of death, like a sea of milk, surged forward as a torrent. Tiger broke into a run. It became a race.

The others jumped into the ship, and from inside, pale of face and with parted lips, awaited the result. Dust swirled below as the power jets came into action. The ship rose a foot or so after the captain had snatched a glance through the open doors.

Tiger beat the gas—or whatever it was—by a few yards. He took a flying leap into the ship. With the doors still open the ship soared. The white tide poured under it. At a height of fifty feet or so the captain brought the ship to a stop, apparently waiting for instructions.

For a minute nobody spoke. Tiger sat on a kitbag recovering his breath. The Professor stood at the open door staring down at the opaque flood.

Toby broke the silence. "How about moving to a healthier spot? If one of those black devils comes along and shoots us down we shall fall into that

stuff.”

“Yes, indeed,” answered the Professor. “I wonder what the stuff is, and how it is produced. It seems that in the field of chemistry we still have much to learn.”

“Let’s not start taking lessons now,” requested Tiger curtly. “I’ve just had one I shan’t forget in a hurry,” he added.

“I warned you,” said Rex.

“I know you did, but who could have imagined anything like that?”

Nothing more was said while the captain, keeping his ship low, moved it to an area so far unaffected by the peril. Rex, watching from a window, could see many places that were. The low white clouds were everywhere. He could see some of the black ships in the distance.

“Well, what are we going to do?” asked the Professor.

“One thing we can’t do is stay here,” answered Tiger, now on his feet at one of the windows. “That stuff is still spreading. It looks as if it’s going to cover the whole planet.”

“That may be the intention,” said Toby. “Give the place a proper mopping up.”

“It will certainly fill all the low lying areas,” stated the Professor. “The stuff must be nearly as heavy as water.”

Rex said nothing. A new horror had occurred to him. What if his own fair planet, Earth, should become victim to this form of attack? In the Spaceship Age, which was evidently coming fast, it could happen, he brooded morosely.

“Let’s get away from here before one of those little black demons finds us,” said Tiger abruptly.

“They’ll see us against the sky if we leave the ground,” opined Toby, doubtfully.

“They’ll spot us here if we stay long enough,” returned Tiger, crisply. “We shall have to chance it. With a good start we might give them the slip. Apart from anything else we must try to prevent the *Tavona* from coming back here to see how we’re getting on. That might easily happen. Borron won’t take kindly to the idea of just leaving us here.”

“You make a point, there,” agreed the Professor. “We no longer have any reason to stay on this miserable little world, which has, I suspect, been given its death blow, so let us away and hope for the best. What do you say, Vargo? You’re entitled to an opinion.”

“Let us go,” agreed Vargo, “for death only in one form or another awaits us here.”

“Then tell the captain. He can take what course he likes. We are in his hands, and I, for one, am content to leave it at that.”

The doors were closed, the usual preliminary measures taken and the ship sped away. For a little while it followed the contours of the doomed planet, but when all reported that the sky was clear it rocketed into space.

CHAPTER XII  
SHADOWS

As soon as the strain of the initial acceleration had passed, by which time the ship was well clear of the little planet's thin envelope of atmosphere, all faces were at the windows watching anxiously for any sign of pursuit by any type of ship. Nothing was seen, and after a time Tiger said, in a voice of relief: "Great work. I think we've done it. Had they seen us go, and come after us, they'd have overtaken us by now."

A little later, speaking to Vargo, the Professor inquired: "Are we making direct for Ando?"

Vargo put the question to the captain. "No," he informed them, when he had received a reply. "We are taking a course between some of the smaller planetoids of the constellation."

"Why?"

"For two reasons. These planetoids lie close together in the same orbit, and fast space ships, unfamiliar with them, would avoid them for fear of collision. Secondly, should we encounter enemy ships we might find temporary refuge. The captain thinks this course is advisable."

No one disputed it.

Well satisfied with the way things were going Rex sat back and watched the captain and his navigator. How they knew where they were, and how they found their way, was still a mystery to him; for although a few points of light in the indigo sky showed the position of certain stars, and planets with their satellites, these were constantly changing as a result of their own velocity. He was aware that every member of the crew could read the sky as a mariner reads a map; even the children of Ando could do that for it was one of the first things they were taught; but, reflected Rex, it was one thing to identify stars from a fixed position, and another matter to know them when travelling among them at astronomical speed.

The Professor spoke again. "These planetoids of which you just spoke, Vargo. Are they inhabited?"

"No," replied Vargo. "Apparently most of them are too small for any practical purpose, even though some have an atmosphere of sorts. On the very small ones the absence of gravity would make movement difficult even

if they held an atmosphere. The larger ones are uninhabitable for other reasons.”

“Such as?”

Vargo again put the question to the captain. “There are dangers of many sorts,” he answered. “It is better to keep away from such places.”

Rex could see that the Professor’s curiosity was aroused but the subject was not pursued.

Presently they passed close to one of these strange little worlds. At the Professor’s request the captain took the ship closer; but they did not land. The planetoid had a drab, grey-looking surface, and seemed unlikely to support any form of life.

After a while, still on the look-out for other ships, Rex saw another globe, and realized that the captain was, so to speak, hopping from one to another, making his way home through a vast archipelago where shelter could be found should a hiding place become necessary. He probably knew intimately these islands in space, from the colour or some other feature, whereas a stranger, not knowing them, would have to proceed with caution—as he had pointed out. After all, space was as desirable for a spaceship as plenty of sea-room to a mariner.

What a fantastic business it all was, soliloquized Rex, wondering how different things would have been on Earth had that planet been set in a close cluster of planetoids instead of having only a single moon.

Some time later another small planet appeared ahead, rather larger than those they had already passed.

“What a fascinating place this is,” said the Professor, enthusiastically. “Nothing would please me more than an unhurried investigation of these lost little worlds. What wonders they must hold for the explorer.”

“The captain says they are dangerous,” reminded Vargo.

“We have dangerous places on Earth, but that did not prevent men from surveying them,” said the Professor, tartly. “Do I see colours? Please ask the captain to go closer.”

“Your curiosity, Professor, exceeds your discretion,” said Tiger. “The captain says these places are dangerous, and he should know. Why not let it go at that.”

The Professor ignored the rebuke. “Vargo, will you please ask the captain what possible danger there can be on the world below us. It appears to be wonderfully fertile.”

“The colours are flowers,” said Vargo. “There are a great many.”

“But where is the danger?”

“The captain doesn’t know. He has never landed there, but two of our survey ships have, and in each case a man died quickly.”

“Surely that could have been coincidence. They might have died anywhere.”

“The captain does not wish to land,” said Vargo, firmly.

“Oh, very well,” replied the Professor, accepting the decision with obvious reluctance.

The ship would no doubt have held on its course had it not been for the shadow.

“Is that *our* shadow?” cried Rex, observing a large circular stain racing across the surface of the planetoid. Although he posed the question he knew that it was not, for the simple reason that from the position they were in, in relation to the source of light, it was impossible. He stared up but could see nothing.

“I saw the shadow,” said Toby. “There’s another ship about somewhere.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t ours?” asked the Professor, sharply.

“Quite sure,” answered Rex. “There’s ours, now. The one I saw was larger, which means that the ship that made it must be farther away.”

“Rex is right,” put in Vargo. “I see two shadows.” He spoke quickly to the captain.

“If we can see their shadow it seems likely they can see ours,” said Rex.

“We are going down,” replied Vargo. “If we remain still there will be less chance of our being seen.”

Nobody spoke while the ship, losing velocity, began to travel diagonally towards the planet, the details of which emerged as the gap was closed.

For the first time Rex found himself gazing at a world the predominant colour of which was blue. His first impression was of water, but the absence of any sort of reflection disproved this. Some areas of red and orange, also puzzled him. He had not forgotten what had been said about a world of flowers, but it did not seem possible that flowers could occur in such numbers and so tightly packed as to present solid blocks of colour. Poppies in an English cornfield could do something of the sort, he recalled, in a smaller way.

The captain brought the ship to a stop some twenty or thirty feet above the blue carpet, and from that position all eyes were soon employed seeking the unknown craft, or its shadow. They failed to locate it, this being due, Tiger thought, to their restricted field of view. They could not see directly

overhead, of course, on account of the ship itself. Rex was not surprised when the Professor renewed his appeal for a landing, saying that in any case they might as well be on the ground as twenty feet above it. This, on the face of it, was true, but it was clear from the expression on the captain's face that he was still opposed to the idea. However, he gave way, and allowed the ship to settle quietly on the—or perhaps it would be more correct to say into—the floral carpet, for it could now be seen that the plants that bore the blue clusterheads were about three feet high.

Actually, from this position, from the point of view of visibility they were no better off than they were before, the overhead angle still being cut off by the upper part of the ship. Some minutes passed. Nothing happened, but to Rex, if not to the others, the expectation of being attacked from above by an unseen enemy was anything but pleasant. Looking at the sea of flowers that spread away on all sides the queer thought struck him that all faces were turned their way, as if they, too, were being inspected. He brushed the idea aside. After all, there was nothing remarkable about the flowers. They were about the size of small lilies and grew in much the same way, on a stiff stalk. The leaves were rather larger and deeply serrated.

It was Toby who broke a rather long silence. "How long are we going to sit here?" he asked, with bored impatience.

"I was wondering the same thing," returned Tiger. "I can't see that we're doing anything useful, anyway. I suggest that someone goes outside and has a look round. If there's nothing in sight we might as well be on our way."

"I was about to make the same proposal," said the Professor. "There was, without doubt, another ship in the locality at the time we landed, but by this time it must surely have passed on. Had it intended to land, or do us a mischief, we should have known about it by now."

Tiger agreed. "What about the atmosphere, though?"

"If there is none it wouldn't be much trouble for someone to put on a spacesuit."

Rex smiled. It was plain to him that the Professor was really looking for an excuse to step outside the ship. However he did not say so.

Vargo resumed. "That is unnecessary," he said. "The captain would rather not stay here longer than is necessary. If there is no atmosphere, although it is almost certain there will be a slight one, a member of the crew will fill his lungs with oxygen, which will enable him to remain outside without breathing for the minute or two only that will be required to confirm there is not another ship above us."

The test for atmosphere was made. There was, as predicted, a slight one, too slight, however, for any practical purpose. When this had been ascertained a member of the crew inhaled deeply from a cylinder of oxygen for a minute or two. This done he entered the airlock chamber and a moment later stepped outside.

Watching from his window Rex saw the man, up to the waist in the sea of blue, explore the sky with his eyes. This did not take long, so having made a signal that all was well the scout turned back to the door of the ship. On the way he paused to look at his legs, although for what purpose could not be guessed. As he reached the door he seemed to stagger slightly.

The Professor must have noticed this, for he said sharply: "That man is not well. He may need help."

Vargo stepped quickly to the door, although in point of fact the man did manage to get in without assistance. But only just. For a second or two, with eyes that seemed glazed in a face as white as chalk, he stared at them. Then he crumpled on the floor like an empty sack. At the same moment the ship was flooded with a heavy sickly perfume.

"Quick, Doctor, what is it?" exclaimed the Professor.

"Look at his legs!" cried Rex. Remembering how the man had looked at them his eyes had naturally gone to the exposed knees. He saw they were smothered with a white rash as if he had walked through a bed of stinging nettles.

Never had he seen Toby move so fast as he did now. In a flash he had grabbed his black bag and opened it. In absolute silence the others watched him go to work. His stethoscope went to the sick man's heart. "Just ticking, but only just," he muttered, as if to himself. Out came the hypodermic needle. After that the only sounds were the slight ones made by the doctor as, on his knees, he worked on his patient.

"What are his chances, Doctor?" asked the Professor, anxiously, after some time had passed.

"Frankly, I don't know," replied Toby. "The man has been poisoned, by a virulent poison, too, but not knowing the nature of it I've had to guess."

"It was those infernal flowers that stung him."

"So I realize. Not even any known snake venom would work as fast as that. But what the stings lacked in size they made up for in numbers. Imagine what the stings of a nettle, magnified a hundred times, would do to a man."

"It was my fault," said the Professor miserably. "I should have accepted the captain's advice."

“I wouldn’t blame yourself,” answered Toby. “No one could have foreseen a thing like this.”

“We knew that other men who landed here had died.”

“From the same cause, obviously. At least we now know why they died.”



See [here](#)

Up to his waist in a sea of blue . . . he seemed to stagger.

“All ships can now be warned,” put in Vargo.

Toby reached for his stethoscope again as the stricken man began breathing stertorously. “That’s better,” he announced, with a sigh of relief. “His heart’s getting stronger. At first it was little more than a flutter. If there

are no after effects he should recover, but it may be some time before he's the man he was."

"So here is a world where flowers, of all things, have made themselves masters," remarked the Professor, looking out of the window.

"Any other form of life would have to have a hide like a rhinoceros to survive," opined Tiger. "With a beast the size of a rhino one would be prepared for trouble: these flowers are a lot more dangerous because they look so harmless. With a rifle one could deal with a rhino—but I don't know what you could do here."

"We shall not, if we are wise, attempt to do anything," put in Vargo. "The sooner we leave this evil place, I think, the better."

Everyone agreed, and with Toby still watching his patient the ship went on its way.

## CHAPTER XIII

### SOME ANDOANS ARE LUCKY

FOR a while Rex slept. The strain of what they were doing was in fact beginning to tell on him, and he was very tired, too tired, indeed, to concern himself overmuch with any new perils that might arise from this fantastic, yet at the same time, fascinating, project of space travel. Yet, when he thought about it, he could see little difference between it and the early discoverers on Earth. They, too, had had to face unknown and unsuspected dangers. But it was small consolation to remember that in the majority of cases the curiosity of those explorers had cost them their lives.

When he awoke it was to see a larger globe than any they had encountered, dead on their course. Vargo, after speaking to the captain, told them it was an important mark. After passing it they would head direct for Ando.

“It looks a big place,” observed the Professor. “It must have a circumference of at least a hundred miles. Is there anyone on it?”

After putting the question to the captain Vargo answered, “No.”

“Why not?”

“It is impossible for men to live there.”

“For what reason. Is there no atmosphere?”

“There is a good atmosphere, although thin.”

“Then what’s wrong with it?”

“Wait a minute, Professor,” put in Tiger. “Haven’t you done enough exploring for one trip?”

The Professor, smiling wanly, pushed up his spectacles. “I shall never have done enough exploring. All my life I have gazed up at the stars wondering what was on them. Now I am among them, with an opportunity of finding out, can you blame me if I succumb to the temptation to satisfy my curiosity? After all, it was for this purpose that I devoted all my energies to the invention of a device that would bring me here, the original *Spacemaster* that brought us together.”

“Some of us have had enough to go on with,” murmured Toby, looking at the sick man, still lying on the floor.

“I said nothing about landing,” protested the Professor. “I merely asked a simple question. Why is it that a world, which we are told has an atmosphere, and looks ideally suited for occupation, should be devoid of life?”

“I did not say it was devoid of life,” put in Vargo.

“Ah! Then there is life. What form does it take?”

“That planet at which you are now looking is one of those on which the dominant form of life is the insect.”

“What sort of insect?”

“There are several species.”

“But surely the Andoans, with their vast knowledge, could get rid of them?”

“Attempts have been made to exterminate them but without success.”

“How strange. I am astonished that the Andoans have not been able to deal with them, and so take possession of a world which, from here, looks superior to their own.”

“What of the clouds of locusts on Earth, of which I have heard you speak?” countered Vargo. “Have you been able to exterminate them?”

The Professor smiled. “You score a point there, Vargo.”

By this time the ship was passing low over the surface of the planet, presumably to allow the Professor at least to have a look at it, although there was no question of landing. Except for the absence of large areas of water the place looked not unlike some parts of Earth. There were several expanses of what was obviously desert country, but there were also forests, and adjacent to them what looked like rolling grassy plains. But there was no sign of anything moving.

“The place looks pretty dead to me,” remarked Tiger.

“I don’t think it looks a bad sort of place at all,” answered the Professor, studying the terrain below.

At that moment Rex distinctly saw a shadow flash across a distant forest. For a moment he said nothing, not wishing to be taken for an alarmist; but when it became clear that no one had noticed what he had seen he decided that he would have to speak. He did so almost apologetically. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t want to start another flap, but we *are* being followed.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Tiger.

“I just saw the shadow. It wasn’t ours. I could see ours at the same time. I can only think we’re being shadowed—literally.”

“Rex is right,” confirmed Vargo quietly. “I saw the other shadow, too.” He spoke to the captain in his own language.

The next moment Rex was jammed into his seat as the ship changed course.

“What are we doing?” asked the Professor, picking up his glasses, which had slid off his nose in the swerve.

“The captain is taking the ship low near the dark side of the planet, from where we may be able to see who is following us without being seen ourselves,” explained Vargo.

“Dear—dear—dear,” muttered the Professor. “This hiding from other ships is a hazard I had never considered. It is becoming tiresome.”

It seemed to Rex that the people in the other ship must have already seen them, but he said nothing. Like the Professor, the last thing he had expected was to be attacked in space. He found the prospect worse than tiresome, and anxiety began to dry his lips.

“At all costs we must avoid contact if it is possible,” said the Professor, as the ship, now very low and losing velocity, entered the fringe of twilight on the side of the planet opposite the source of light. “Are we going to land?”

“The captain thinks it is advisable,” replied Vargo. “We may then escape observation. A moving shadow is more likely to be seen than one that remains still.”

No one spoke until the ship came to rest on a strip of sandy soil that bordered a fairly wide expanse of jungle which seemed to be composed mostly of a species of giant bamboo. It was dead still, and although he looked hard Rex could see no sign of insects—or any other living thing, for that matter. This struck him as strange, possibly because as far as the landscape was concerned they might have been on Earth, and on Earth there is usually some living creature in sight, even if it is only a solitary bird. But here there was nothing.

All eyes surveyed the sky for the stranger, as far as this was possible from the windows. Nothing was seen. The colour of the sky, pale blue, told Rex that there was an atmosphere of some sort, and he confirmed with Vargo that while it was thin it had a density sufficient to support life. Presently a test was made to make quite sure, in case it became necessary to open the doors.

Rex could see no reason why the doors should not be opened anyway, and he said so. “If any insects appear we can always close them again,” he argued.

But the captain would not hear of it.

Vargo explained. "If only a few insects got inside we might not be able to get them out, in which case they would travel in the ship to Ando, and breed with disastrous results."

"What harm do these creatures do?" the Professor wanted to know.

"The bite of some gives a fatal disease."

"What are these insects like? Are they large or are they small? Do they crawl or do they fly?"

"There are several sorts. According to reports they fight each other."

"Then it looks as if they may have exterminated each other," said Rex, "for I can't see a single insect, large or small, on the wing or on foot."

But the captain was adamant, so everyone had to be content to watch from the windows.

It was Vargo who first spotted the ship that had betrayed its presence by its shadow. He pointed out its position to the others. Rex observed that it was of the "saucer" type, about the same size as their own. It was dropping quickly, apparently with the intention of landing near them, although the method of its descent was irregular.

"I'm afraid we must be prepared for trouble," said the Professor. "That ship has seen us, and is going to land near us."

"It is in trouble," stated Vargo, critically. "It may have seen us, but it is more concerned with itself than with us."

The stranger struck the ground heavily, sending up a cloud of dust.

As the dust began to settle Vargo frowned. He stared. He said something to the captain in his own language. The captain was staring, too.

"That ship looks very much like ours," remarked Tiger.

"We think it may be one of ours," Vargo astonished them by saying.

"You don't mean the *Tavona*," queried the Professor.

"No. But as you know we sometimes lose a ship. It applies particularly to those of the Remote Survey Fleet. You will remember how we found the Andoans marooned with a damaged ship. The one in front of us carries no marks by which it could be identified; but they may have been worn off by long journeys."

"They haven't opened the doors," said Rex.

"That might be either because they are unable to do so or because they know the bad reputation of this place. In the latter case they would only land in case of real emergency."

“Let us go over to them,” said the Professor. “They may be in need of help. I don’t see any insects. Let me out and I’ll go over.”

“No,” said Vargo firmly. “We will move the ship nearer to them, if the captain will agree to that.”

The captain raised no objection, so the ship took off, a few feet only, and moved slowly across the gap that separated the two craft. As they drew nearer it became possible to see the faded outlines of some blue stars painted on the side of the stranger—which, incidentally, appeared to have suffered no damage from its rough landing.

“It is one of ours,” announced Vargo, and in a buzz of excitement from the crew the two ships were soon alongside, the doors facing each other.

There was still no sign of insects so doors were opened. Vargo went out first. He climbed up and looked through a window of the stricken ship. He was down in a moment, demanding the key of their own compression chamber. The captain handed it to him, and in a matter of seconds the interior of the ship, which had been reported missing and had long been given up as lost, was exposed to the view of all.

Rex caught his breath and held it at the sight that met his gaze, even though he was half prepared for something of the sort. The crew lay about the floor where obviously they had fallen, dead or unconscious. With their faces blue-white they looked horribly dead.

“Some of them must have been alive five minutes ago or the ship couldn’t have made any sort of landing,” declared the Professor.

“They ran out of air,” said Vargo, speaking as one who could recognize the symptoms. “Quick. The oxygen. We may still save them.”

The limp bodies were carried out and the work of artificial respiration was begun by men who had obviously been trained to meet such an emergency. The others stood by, watching, taking an occasional glance around for signs of the alleged insect peril.

Under the influence of the oxygen that was being introduced into their lungs one by one the unconscious men began to show signs of life. Apart from the asphyxiation they looked ill, emaciated, but not to the extent that they could not be recognized by their Andoan rescuers, who had long ago given them up for dead. At last one of them sat up, and looked around with puzzled, lack-lustre eyes. They brightened, however, when he was addressed by name.

“He will soon be able to tell us what happened,” said Vargo.

And thus it was, although three of the lost crew failed to respond to treatment and were pronounced dead by Toby.

In view of where they were and the dangers that surrounded them the rescued Andoans gave only the briefest account of the misfortunes that had brought them to their present pass. It seemed that during their cruise to some distant stars they had found themselves involved in a gigantic interplanetary war of extermination. Hundreds of ships were taking part, flying sometimes in huge formations and using powers beyond imagination. Before the Andoans could get clear, on perceiving their danger, their ship was forced down and they were made prisoners. They were not badly treated, possibly because it was realized that they were strangers. In fact, rather were they treated as objects of curiosity. But they suffered a good deal of discomfort, for the heat of the planet on which they found themselves was almost overpowering. However, as their ship had not been damaged they had, during an enemy raid, seized an opportunity to escape. But they had become lost in strange skies. For a long time they had wandered about with their supplies of water, food and air, steadily diminishing, until at last, still without knowing where they were, they had seen a ship and followed it, hoping it would lead them to an atmosphere.

In the event, this is what actually happened, although by that time most of the crew were already unconscious, or nearly so, and the last man—as he told them—had collapsed as the craft touched down, and he had not sufficient strength to open the doors. Curiously, perhaps, although the desperate conditions in the ship may have been responsible, it was not realized until the last moment that the ship they had watched make a landing was one of their own—for which reason, not without cause, they regarded their rescue as something in the nature of a miracle.

It was agreed that it had been a wonderful stroke of luck.

While the dead adventurers were being buried in shallow graves—without any great ceremony it may be said, as if the survivors took this sort of thing as part and parcel of their occupation—the spokesman of the party, in answer to a question, said the people who had captured them had a big fleet of small, cylindrical-shaped spacecraft. The men themselves were small and lightly built, with black skins; but they were undoubtedly a people of great knowledge, intelligence and experience. They occupied not one but a whole system of planets, a great distance away.

“How does it happen that they occupy several planets?” the Professor wanted to know. “Are they a warlike people who have taken other worlds by conquest?”

The Andoan said he was not sure about this but he thought that was the case. At all events, they had recently attacked a people that had much larger ships.

“We’ve seen something of that,” said the Professor, sadly.

Tiger put a question. “Do these little black rascals ever fight on the ground as infantry, or only in their ships?”

“Why do you want to know that?” demanded the Professor, suspiciously.

“They may come our way one day. It’s good a thing to know as much as possible about a potential enemy.”

The Professor shook his head. “You are always thinking of war,” he sighed.

“Well, you must admit that all this is a bit alarming,” retorted Tiger. “We may ourselves be living in a fool’s paradise. If space war has already started, no matter where, it’s a matter of common sense that sooner or later it will spread to the Solar System.”

The Professor did not pursue the argument.

The Andoan spokesman said he thought the black men fought only in ships, one reason being that they took so little exercise that their legs were weak.

“It’s comforting to know they have *one* weakness,” stated Tiger.

CHAPTER XIV  
WHERE NOW?

IN the general interest in the story the lost Andoans had to tell it may have been that vigilance had been relaxed and the original danger said to be present on the planet temporarily forgotten. As there had been no sign of it this was perhaps understandable.

Now, while the disabled Andoans were recovering their strength for the journey home, Rex climbed on the step of their ship for a last look round, more from casual curiosity than any apprehension of danger. His attention was at once caught and held by what he took to be a broad dark shadow moving over the open ground some distance away. Supposing that such a shadow could only be caused by a cloud he looked up expecting to see one, even though moisture in such a dry atmosphere would have been remarkable. Unable to find anything remotely resembling a cloud he called Vargo's attention to the phenomenon.

It was soon forthcoming. Vargo took one look and moved fast. "It is an army of insects on the march," he said briskly. "Into the ship, everyone, for they may be coming this way."

"Why the hurry?" inquired Tiger, looking. "They're a long way away."

"They may be travelling faster than you may suppose. If what the captain has told me is correct they devour everything in their path."

"I can believe that, for the same sort of thing happens on Earth, the marauders being ants," said the Professor, as the sick men were helped on board the serviceable ship, the other, having no air supply, being useless. "Fortunately for us," added the Professor, "the pest is confined to tropical countries."

The appearance of the insect army may have done the travellers a good turn in hastening their embarkation, for hardly had this been completed, and the doors closed, than a second army appeared, this time on wings, and Rex began to appreciate more fully Vargo's warning about the dangers of the planetoid and the impossibility of it ever being occupied by human beings; for the insects occurred in such millions that it was obvious that nothing—men, animals, birds or reptiles—could dwell on the same world. For if Vargo was to be believed, and there was no reason to doubt his word, the insects

were carnivorous; which was a good thing for the vegetable life. Had it been otherwise the ground must have been stripped of everything that grew on it.

Rex stared aghast as the flyers, now darkening the sky, swept round as if obeying an order from a commander, and settled in a mass on the shadow on the ground. What was happening there could only be surmised, and Rex went cold at the thought of the ghastly battle being waged.

“There are people who believe that it was touch and go whether men or ants ruled our world,” said the Professor.

“I’m glad we won,” returned Tiger, drily.

There was a sharp patter on the outside of the ship as if it might have been made by hailstones.

“Some scouts have come to look at us,” said Vargo.

This was confirmed when one or two insects appeared on the outside of the windows. They were not as large as Rex had thought, being no more than half an inch long and in shape rather like ladybirds; but instead of being red in colour they were a hard metallic blue.

“These little beasts have teeth,” remarked the Professor. “Look at them! I believe they’re actually trying to eat their way into us.”

“I swear they can see us,” declared Tiger. “I don’t like the look of ’em. I can understand why the captain didn’t want to get any on board. There are more coming, too. Let’s get mobile.”

“Yes,” agreed the Professor. “I think it’s time we were on our way. We no longer have any purpose in staying here and I’m anxious to know if all is well on Ando.”

“All is not well here,” said Vargo, grimly.

“What do you mean?”

“We are moving.”

“What of it?”

“Our power has not yet been turned on.”

The Professor was incredulous. “Do you mean we’re moving without power?”

“Yes.”

“But how could that happen?”

“I don’t know.”

It took Rex a moment or two to grasp the real significance of this. “Do you mean that some power other than our own is causing the ship to rise?” he cried.

“Look out of the window,” said Vargo, an extraordinary expression on his face.

Rex looked. To his amazement he saw the empty ship, beside which their own had been standing, rising slowly from the ground with its doors still open. “But that’s impossible!” he burst out.

“It’s time you realized that nothing is impossible,” said the Professor, calmly. “Call it ridiculous, preposterous, if you like, but not impossible, for as you can see, it is happening.”

“But how could such a thing happen?”

“If you will look up you may get an idea,” put in Vargo.

Putting his face near the window, not without qualms, for insects were still crawling on it, he caught Vargo’s meaning. High overhead, spaced at regular intervals, was an armada of the small black ships. He wasted no time counting them but he reckoned there were no fewer than fifty. “Are *they* causing us to move?” he cried.

“I can think of nothing else it could be,” answered Vargo, without emotion. “The ship would not move for no reason at all. That *would* be impossible.”

“What you’re really saying is, the ships above us have us in their power.”

“There can be no other explanation.”

“But that’s fantastic,” declared Rex, in a near-panic.

Said the Professor. “I would say it is not so much a matter of fantasy as some form of that little-understood power, magnetism. Fully developed, what a wonderful power that must be. Here we are, in a ship, being towed without a tow-rope.”

“And we can do nothing about it?”

The Professor smiled bleakly. “Apparently not.”

“We must go wherever these black ships feel like taking us?”

“It looks very much like that, doesn’t it.”

Rex, pale of face, flopped into his seat as the two ships, side by side, sped skywards at an oblique angle at ever-increasing velocity.

“Would anyone care for a caramel?” inquired the Professor, evenly. “At moments like this they are both soothing and sustaining.”

Some of the others took advantage of this offer, but Rex did not. He had no appetite. He was, in fact, feeling slightly stunned by this awful thing that had happened to them; just as they were congratulating themselves that they were in the clear and on their way home, too. That was the ironical part of it.

For some time, how long he did not know, for time no longer seemed to have any importance, he sat staring out of his window: and as he stared his mood of having been frustrated changed, and he found himself strangely calm, although he was sure this was the end. He harboured no delusions about that. He did not see how it could be otherwise, with the ship out of control—or at any rate under the control of forces other than their own, which amounted to the same thing. It may have been this feeling of utter helplessness that induced an attitude of resignation to his fate. It was bound to happen sometime, he reflected philosophically. Considering the risks they had taken they had been lucky. The whole project had been one long risk. He had known from the outset that it would be. Having accepted those risks with his eyes open he felt he had no justifiable cause for complaint even if the luck had at last broken.

Contemplating the future in cold blood he came to the conclusion that it did not necessarily follow they would be put to death when they arrived at their destination, wherever that might be. After all, he mused, the Andoans who had been captured had not been killed. It was obviously within the power of their captors to destroy them at any moment, had that been the intention. No. The terrifying thought was that they were being taken to some far distant part of the universe from where, even if they were released, they would never find their way home. While realizing there was no real point in it he would have preferred, when his time came, to die on his own planet, or at least within sight of it—on Mars, for instance.

The truth was, in spite of his travels the pitiless immensity of space still chilled his heart when he contemplated it. His own world, when he had dwelt on it, had seemed so important, the beginning and end of everything. Now, he perceived, it was no more than a drop in the ocean of eternity.

From time to time the captain switched on their power units as a test or in an attempt to break away from the invisible bonds by which they were being held; but it was no use. It made not the slightest difference, as could be judged from the relative position of the empty ship, which remained unchanged. How silly it looked, hurtling through space with its doors wide open! It might have been a rowing boat under tow by a liner for all the hope it had of getting free.

The flight of black ships responsible for it all remained in formation, always the same distance above and slightly ahead of them. He watched them as a doomed bird might watch a snake, and it was a relief when at last somebody spoke.

“It would be interesting to know what power is being used for this operation,” said the Professor, in his ordinary voice. “The scientists on Earth

will discover it one day, no doubt, but so far, to the best of my knowledge, it has not yet even been suspected. It is clear that vast stores of energy occur in space awaiting our investigation.”

Rex turned to Vargo. “Have the Andoans any idea of where we are being taken?”

Having spoken to them Vargo answered: “It may be the planet from which they escaped, but where that is they do not know. The stars around them were unknown.”

Rex looked again at the black formation. The ships appeared to be stationary, yet he knew they must all be speeding through the void at astronomical velocity. He looked again at the empty ship beside them. With its open doors there was something absurd rather than tragic about it. He was still staring at it, without any particular interest—for there were only a few constellations in the black vault of heaven and he was unable to identify any of them—when a sudden increasing pressure forcing him into his seat told him that something was happening. We must be changing course, he thought. I wonder why? He stared at the black fleet. The ships were still in formation but they seemed to be a little farther away.

It was Vargo who, from his window, found the answer to the question that must have been in all their minds. “Look,” he said, a trace of excitement creeping into his usually expressionless voice. “Above the ships.”

Switching his eyes higher Rex saw a line of tiny sparks of fire that had not been there before. “Meteors. Or small planets, coming into the light of a distant sun,” was his guess.

“No,” returned Vargo. “Meteors would hardly occur in such a regular line and larger bodies would be moving in a circular orbit. Moreover, they all appear to be of the same magnitude. They came into our view together so they must be travelling together.”

“Then what do you think they are?”

“There is only one thing they can be. Ships. Big ships. They become larger and brighter, so they are evidently coming towards us. Look now! They turn on a course that will intercept the black ships.”

“Then it looks as if they’re going to attack them,” interposed Tiger.

“Who can say?” returned Vargo. “They may be friends or enemies.”

“From the way the black ships are behaving I’d say they’re enemies,” said Tiger. “I have a notion we’re going to be the first people from Earth to witness a spaceship dogfight.”

“If that is so,” put in the Professor, bitterly, “any pleasure you may derive from such a dreadful spectacle is likely to be short-lived.”

Nothing more was said for the moment. All eyes were on what was taking place above.

Watching with breathless attention Rex saw the black fleet open out as if to receive an attack; for that Vargo had been correct about the approaching sparks was no longer in question. They were ships of the “saucer” class, big ships. There were twelve of them. And Rex saw, or thought he could see, attachments to the sides that might be heat reflectors. A sudden flash of light more or less confirmed this. More flashes followed.

“The battle begins,” said Vargo.

To Rex his voice sounded far away, in accord with his general sensation of unreality.

“There’s one of ’em out of it,” remarked Tiger, with professional nonchalance, as one of the black ships swung away from the rest in a tremendous curve, trailing smoke.

“There goes another,” said Toby.

“Of all the things I had imagined,” said the Professor, heavily, “this surpasses them. As if we weren’t in enough trouble already we must become involved in an interplanetary air battle. Alas! If worlds are to fight each other we need talk no more of peace among men.”

“If I know anything you won’t have long to worry about *that*,” said Tiger, grimly. “Look what’s going on.”

Rex had never stopped looking, or rather staring, at a spectacle which became more and more unreal, although why this should be—as he tried to tell himself—he didn’t know, for the same sort of thing had happened often enough in the atmosphere of Earth, with ships and weapons of a different kind.

The two fleets closed. Lightning flashed between them. Smoke trails appeared. Two black ships, apparently out of control, collided. They did not fall, but seemed merely to swerve away in different directions. At the velocity at which they were moving there could not, he realized, be any question of falling in the literal sense of the word. The casualties would, no doubt, fall somewhere eventually; but that might take a long time, the time depending on how soon they were caught up in the orbit of the nearest star or planet, or the one with the greatest gravitational attractions in relation to the area in which the battle was being fought.

Suddenly it struck him that the ships were smaller, all of them, as if they were going away. “I believe they’re leaving us!” he called excitedly. “They

must have cast us off.”

“I think so,” said Vargo. “We may have been a drag on them and they needed all their power for other purposes.”

“Then we’re free,” shouted Rex, delightedly. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” inquired the Professor.

Rex blinked. “Well—er—anywhere.”

“And where will that get us?”

“B—but can’t we go where we were going when we were captured?” stammered Rex.

“There may be some difficulty about that.”

“Why?”

“Because, as we have long been out of sight of familiar constellations, I doubt if the captain knows where we are. And if he doesn’t know where we are how can he know which way to go.”

“Do you mean we’re *lost*?”

“I think that’s highly probable. We were under tow for a long time and must have travelled a great distance.”

“Well, we’re going somewhere,” asserted Rex desperately, observing that the battle had faded into the distance. He also noticed that the empty ship was still keeping them company, which told him that their relative velocities had been maintained. There was a near collision with it as the captain tested his power units and they came into action. After that it was soon left far behind. The last Rex saw of it, it appeared to be hanging in space, a lonely-looking, fast-vanishing speck in the great emptiness. He wondered vaguely on what strange world it would eventually crash.

The captain switched off the power units.

“Why has he done that?” Rex asked Vargo.

“We might be travelling farther from home instead of towards it,” Vargo told him.

Rex stared. It took him a moment to comprehend fully what this implied. He had realized that they were lost, but it hadn’t dawned on him that they were so far lost that those in charge of the ship didn’t know which way to go; that one direction was the same as any other.

A cold hand seemed to settle on his heart as he sank into his seat and strove to grasp what to be lost in space really meant.

CHAPTER XV  
TOUCH AND GO

AS REX pondered the situation, and came slowly to grasp exactly its full implications he perceived that they might as well drift as travel under power. In fact, as presently the Professor pointed out, it would be more advisable to drift, and so leave the ship at the mercy of the tremendous power that controlled the universe—gravity; for that would at least give them the satisfaction of knowing they were moving towards the nearest body of any size. The largest body would attract them, and the larger the body the greater would be the likelihood of finding an atmosphere on it.

How long they would take to reach such a haven was of course an unknown factor. If it was a great distance away they would never reach it—anyway, alive. They would live only as long as their breathing air lasted: and in this respect they were at the disadvantage of having, with the Andoans they had rescued, a double crew on board.

Nothing could be done about it so nothing more was said. It was an ever-present risk, and those who travelled through space had to accept it. This is not to say that the captain and the crewmen just sat down and abandoned themselves to their fate. They stood at the windows studying and discussing the stars, looking for one, or a constellation, they could identify. The trouble was, being so far away from any routes they had previously taken, the stars were in positions in which they had never before seen them. Again, there was the question of magnitude. A star normally brilliant might now be so far away that it appeared as a body of lesser magnitude. Conversely, a minor star might, being nearer than usual, appear as a body of the first magnitude. As Vargo pointed out, it was always realized that this could happen should a ship find itself beyond the known constellations. Ships of the Remote Survey Fleet took steps to make sure this did not happen by constantly taking sightings as they moved into the unknown. In the present case the ship had been taken into distant skies by forces beyond its control.

Disturbed in mind as Rex was, nature would not be denied, and after a while he fell asleep.

After another unknown lapse of time he awoke to find everything unchanged. Within the ship, as outside, all was silent, many of the crew being asleep. There was no sensation of movement, although he knew they were hurtling at colossal velocity through an absolute vacuum, such a

vacuum as it is impossible to produce by artificial means. In every direction the sky was almost black, for it is only blue when seen through an atmosphere. There was no dearth of stars, some, with no atmosphere to dim them, gleaming with a wonderful brilliance. How different they appeared from those seen through Earth's thick blanket of moisture-laden air, reflected Rex. Now it could be seen clearly that they *were* bodies in space, not mere pinpricks of light, all the same distance away, scattered over a sombre background.

After watching for a while he observed that the ship was in line with a group of planets, and, since they grew steadily brighter, was evidently moving towards them. By now he knew most of the major constellations, but this one he could not recognize, which only went to confirm how deep they were in space.

Seeing Vargo and the navigators looking in the same direction with obvious interest he inquired the reason. Vargo answered that some of the Andoans thought that on their more distant voyages they had seen the constellation before, although from a slightly different angle, for which reason they could not be sure of it. Certainly they had never landed there. But should their belief turn out to be correct it would give them an indication of the section of space the ship was in.

More time passed. The constellation towards which they were still heading became brighter, but the nearer view, to Rex's disappointment, did nothing to help recognition. The bodies had, of course, become more widely separated as the ship approached, and it could now be seen that they were in fact a great distance apart, although this was only to be expected. The captain, with the ship now under power, stood towards the largest, which presently was observed to be important enough to hold three small satellites, or moons, as they would be called on Earth. After a discussion between the crew Rex's heart sank when it was announced that no one had ever seen this planet before. The moons, and their positions, would have made it unmistakable.

“So we're as we were,” said Tiger, who had stood up to look.

“What do we do now?” inquired Toby, yawning.

Vargo spoke to the captain, and replied: “If there is an atmosphere the captain thinks it would be a good thing to land for a little while. The navigators would then have a wider view of the sky than is possible from inside the ship.”

“We had this trouble once before but we got over it,” said the Professor, cheerfully.<sup>[5]</sup>

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[5] See *Now to the Stars*.

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“On that occasion we weren’t so far from home,” Toby pointed out.

“We may not be so far from home, or at least from Ando, as we may suppose,” asserted the Professor. “I imagine it is largely a matter of getting the stars around us in the right perspective for us to be able to identify some of them.”

Rex was not deceived by this optimistic remark. He knew that what had happened to them was the situation from which they had most to fear. They were lost in space, with their air supply steadily diminishing. Should they fail to find their way home, or a planet with a reasonable atmosphere, they were doomed. An unknown planet with an atmosphere, water and a food supply of some sort, would save them for a time—perhaps enable them to live out their lives. But such a Robinson Crusoe existence made little appeal. Robinson, on his island, always knew there was a fair chance of being picked up. He maintained a constant watch for a passing ship. What hope had they of deliverance on one of a million planets and planetoids? None worth considering. Anyway, they had first to find such a body, one on which life was possible.

Thus mused Rex as the ship dropped towards a world the outlines of which now became more clearly defined with every passing minute. And the more he gazed at it the less he liked the look of it. It appeared barren; utterly and completely dead. He could see no sign of water; not that he expected to see any, for had there been water in any quantity there would probably have been clouds. And there were no clouds. He suspected there was no atmosphere, either. Should there be one it would be so thin as to be useless to them. He was beginning to be able to read the signs. One thing was quite certain. There could be no form of human life there, so even if the planet did hold an atmosphere of sorts they would have the place to themselves. The surface looked dull, dim, due presumably to its distance from the nearest sun. Which in turn suggested an intense degree of cold. There were some deep red areas that puzzled him although he paid no particular attention to them. From time to time, too, there occurred a sort of quiver, not so much on the ground itself as over it, for which he could not account.

The captain took the ship to within a thousand feet or so and then went into horizontal flight apparently in order to find a place to land, for it could now be seen that the planet was mostly a mass of rock. During the short

delay that followed Rex thought he must have been wrong about the temperature, for inside the ship it was rising.

“That certainly is a grim-looking affair,” remarked Tiger.

“Any port in a storm,” quipped Toby.

“Don’t land!” cried the Professor, suddenly. “Vargo! Tell the captain not to land! Get away—quickly.”

From the way the ship zoomed like a rocket the captain could have needed no warning. He must himself have realized the danger.

It was a sudden almost overpowering heat that told Rex what it was. Even after the ship was well clear the temperature continued to rise until it reached a point at which he felt sure they were all about to be roasted alive. When he touched the side of the ship he understood why. It was hot. Great was his relief when it began quickly to cool.

“We live and learn,” said the Professor, tritely. “The perils of this form of travel are never ending. The world we have just left must be very young indeed, for it has not yet had time to cool. Indeed, the rock is still in a semi-molten state, so had we landed we might well have stuck in it.”

“We should have been cooked by that time, anyway,” said Tiger. “It was touch and go as it was.”

“It was that dull red area that warned me what we were running into,” stated the Professor, wiping perspiration from his face with his handkerchief.

“I saw that,” declared Rex. “I thought it was some sort of moss, or lichen.”

“It was red-hot rock, presumably an area where the crust of the planet was thin.”

“No wonder the place looked dead,” muttered Rex.

“In just such a state was Earth several thousand million years ago,” reminded the Professor. “Most interesting. Strange to think that at some time in the distant future men like ourselves may be living there. We shall soon have seen worlds in every stage of development, from birth to death.”

“The one I like best is our own, and the sooner we’re back on it the better shall I be pleased,” observed Tiger.

“You may have to wait a little while for that. There seems to be some difficulty about it,” returned the Professor, calmly.

Nothing more was said. The ship sped on through silent space. The others dozed, but Rex, who had already had some sleep, continued to stare through his window, not at any particular object but busy with his thoughts. Strange thoughts they were, too. Not altogether pleasant ones, for from time

to time he remembered that every hour brought them to the moment when, with their air exhausted, they would fall asleep to wake up no more. After that, what? The ship, their weird coffin, would go on and on until, perhaps a thousand years hence, perhaps ten thousand, it would be drawn into the orbit of a distant star and remain there for evermore, unless, like a meteor, it crashed, an incandescent spark, into one of the countless worlds of the universe.

CHAPTER XVI  
REX WORKS IT OUT

TIME passed. How long, again Rex did not know. Time, as such, had ceased to have meaning. The ship raced on, although as far as any sensation of movement was concerned it might have been stationary, a cork floating on an ocean without shores. Nothing, decided Rex, could be more hopeless than wandering about in space looking for a particular star—or rather, planetoid. It would, he pondered whimsically, be impossible to be more lost. On Earth one looked up at the stars. Here he could look down at the stars, too. There were stars on all sides. Whichever way he looked he could see the sparks of light by which those within the influence of a sun revealed themselves.

One particular point of light attracted his attention. It was so exceptionally bright that he felt sure that they must, in their travels, have been within sight of it. Why hadn't he noticed it before? A mark so outstanding would surely be a beacon known to regular space travellers. He called Vargo's attention to it.

Vargo admitted he was puzzled. He agreed, they must always have been within vision of a star of such brilliancy. Why hadn't it been noticed before?

To Rex the answer seemed to be that they were in a section of the universe beyond the limits of Andoan exploration; but he did not say so. What he did say was: "It reminds me of something. It has the shining brilliancy of the planet Venus, within our Solar System. Even from Earth, Venus appears bright. As one approaches it is quite dazzling."

"It couldn't be Venus," said Vargo. "If it were we should see and recognize the other planets of the same system, not to mention the sun."

"I was wondering if the brilliancy could be due to the same cause."

"What is that?"

"Venus is completely enveloped in a thick blanket of white fog, almost pure carbon dioxide on the surface. It is sunlight reflected by the mist which gives it its exceptional shine."

"The same phenomenon could occur elsewhere, although I have never seen it."

"That's what I was thinking. Neither have I. Yet had that star always been there surely we should have seen it, for it must be visible from a great distance."

“You are suggesting that we are getting farther from home.”

“No. I’m suggesting that the star has recently arrived at where it is now, perhaps following an orbit that is bringing it nearer to us.”

“That could be the answer,” conceded Vargo.

“Just a minute,” said Rex slowly. “An idea has just struck me.”

“And what is this idea?” inquired the Professor, rising, having been roused by the conversation.

Rex pointed out the object that had caused it.

“It could be a star in its own right, otherwise a sun, or it could be a large planet catching the full rays of one,” decided the Professor. “What was the idea you were about to expound?”

“Thinking in terms of Venus I thought the brightness might be due to the same cause.”

“Quite possibly. There is no reason why Venus should be unique.”

“Then why haven’t we noticed it before?”

“What do you think?”

“Because it wasn’t there. It has only recently appeared. I mean, it might have been there all the time but has only recently acquired that brightness.”

“Why should it suddenly acquire such an exceptional brilliance?”

“By reason of something that has only just happened there.”

“What could have happened?”

“Somebody might have provided it with a white overcoat.”

The Professor looked up sharply. “What are you thinking of?”

“Lornica. When we last saw it a white fog, a lethal gas, was spreading over it.”

For a moment nobody spoke. Then the Professor, speaking with unusual solemnity, said: “It could be so. If you are right, my boy, then you have shown a spark of genius as bright as the star that produced it.”

“Thank you, sir,” acknowledged Rex, blushing slightly at such praise.

Vargo explained the theory to the captain and the ship was turned in the direction indicated.

“We shall soon know if you are right,” resumed the Professor. “If you are, we shall not be able to land, of course, but from a known position our navigator should be able to check on the planetoids which gave him his course to Lornica.”

It took them some time to reach the new objective. In fact, they did not actually reach it, this being found unnecessary, as the navigator, recognizing

other landmarks as the Professor had anticipated, was able to say with certainty that the fog-enveloped planetoid was definitely Lornica, although a drawn-out “tail” of the white gas, the result of the movement of the planetoid along its orbit, made the little world look larger than it really was.

“What a terrible weapon,” said Vargo, looking at the vapour as the ship swung away on a course for Ando. “All life on Lornica must have been destroyed.”

“No worse a weapon than some we have,” stated Tiger. “Any weapon must seem terrible to the Andoans, having none themselves,” he went on. “Provided these unknown ships can’t strike from a very long range they’d have a thin time if they tried to land on Earth. Built as they are, with metal walls so thin that a bullet will penetrate, they wouldn’t stand much knocking about. Never mind our new guided missiles, a smart battery of anti-aircraft guns would bowl them over like nine-pins.”

Said the Professor, sternly: “You are not, I hope, contemplating the importation of anti-aircraft guns to Ando?”

“The Andoans might do worse than have a few mounted at strategic points,” replied Tiger, lightly. “Where would they be now had it not been for me and my rifle?”

The Professor did not answer, and the conversation turned to another, more urgent subject, when Vargo announced that they had yet to reach Ando. It was by no means a foregone conclusion that they would, for the air supply was down to a dangerously low level.

Actually, Rex had already suspected this, for the atmosphere in the ship was becoming stuffy. It was now, apparently, to be a race against time. Far from the trip being the simple one he had anticipated they had gone from one trouble to another.

Worse was to come, for as, fighting for breath in an atmosphere now vitiated, they came to within sight of home and dropped like a stone towards it, Tiger, with a gasp of despair pointed to an object standing on the football field. There was no need to ask what it was, for it was plain for all to see. One of the big ships was there.

There could be no question of turning away. They had to land or die.

The captain gained a little time by bringing the ship to a halt at a height of about a thousand feet. This being well within the planet’s belt of atmosphere it was possible to open the doors, and Rex slumped with relief as the sweet fresh air poured in.

Tiger, from a position in the doorway, looked down. “This is a funny do,” he remarked. “One of our own ships—I believe it’s the *Tavona*—is

standing beside the big feller. And that, unless I'm mistaken, is the one I shot up on Lornica. We saw it leave, you remember. It must have come here. The reflector heating apparatus is all cockeye, where I must have bent it. There's quite a group of people there, too. What do you make of it, Professor? Vargo, ask the captain to let us down a bit."

The ship began slowly to lose height.

"There are certainly some Andoans in that group," declared the Professor. "I see members of the Council there. And I believe there are some of the big ship's crew. They're too burly, too heavily-built to be Andoans. As you say, Group-Captain, it's a funny do. I can only think that both sides have called a truce. If so, that would be wonderful. Nothing would please me more. As we can't stay here for ever, and as with our air cylinders empty we can't leave, let us go down and ascertain exactly what is going on."

The ship sank slowly towards the football field, the scene below becoming steadily more distinct. Even before they landed it was clear to Rex that there must have been a truce, for both Andoans and the broad-browed, black-bearded invaders, were standing together without any sign of hostility.

Once on the ground, where they received a great welcome for they had been given up as lost—this applying particularly to the Andoans who had escaped from captivity—explanations to account for the strange state of affairs were quickly forthcoming. At least, with a little imagination it became possible to form a fairly clear picture of what had happened.

The big ship was the one Tiger had damaged. The punctures made by his bullets had been sealed with equipment carried for repairing holes made by meteorites. Indeed, the foreigners, knowing nothing of rifles, thought the holes had been made by a shower of meteorites. But it had not been possible to mend the destructive heat weapon. On the appearance of the black attacking force the ship had fled, and had managed to escape, and for reasons that were presently to be explained landed on the first planet that held an atmosphere, which happened to be Ando. The crew, it seemed, were unaware that some of their ships had previously landed there, with sinister results. Language difficulties prevented detailed explanations, but with their high degree of intelligence both sides had managed already, with the help of sign language, to establish some sort of contact. The visitors, being in no state to open hostilities, soon discovered that the Andoans were harmless. It was clear they did not associate their misfortunes with Tiger—or rather, his rifle, the purpose of which was unknown to them.

It transpired that the chief reason for their landing was because they had two wounded men on board, and were too far from their base, they thought,

to reach it before the men died.

“This is where you may have an opportunity to distinguish yourself, Doctor,” said the Professor, looking at Toby, when they were informed of this. He turned a suspicious eye to Tiger. “From what you have told me you must have been responsible for these casualties.”

“I should think it’s more than likely,” admitted Tiger, frankly. “I did my best to put them out of action.”

“Then the Doctor must do his best to put matters right,” asserted the Professor.

“I would have thought these people, being so clever, would have known more about medicine than I do,” said Toby.

“They can hardly have had any experience in bullet extraction,” the Professor pointed out, with asperity.

“I’ll go and get my bag,” said Toby. “Where are these sick men?”

Vargo ascertained that they had been taken to a house in the town. Their wounds had been bandaged, nothing more. Bullets being outside their experience they could not understand what had caused the tiny holes. Nor was it realized that the objects that had made the wounds were still inside the injured men. In fact, they were puzzled, because, as they said, wounds caused by meteorites were terrible, and always burned the flesh.

Presently, under the wondering eyes of several spectators, Toby was at work in his professional capacity. Rex, who had taken a first aid course, was there to help him, and he could see from the expressions of those who were watching that the miracle of modern surgery was to them more wonderful than anything they themselves could demonstrate. Why this should be, considering that their civilizations were older than those of Earth, Rex did not know, unless it was because they had long ago conquered disease and therefore had no need for doctors. Anyway, Toby extracted the bullets from his patients, whose wounds, fortunately, were not serious, and having bandaged them, and given orders that they were to be kept quiet, rejoined Tiger and the Professor who were waiting outside on the square.

“Those fellows should be all right now,” he announced, referring of course to his patients. “Where do we go from here?”

“I think we should soon be getting back to Earth,” answered the Professor. “We have seen as much as there is to see here, so there is really no point in our staying any longer. We’ll call at Mino on the way, and look in on Mars to see how the work is progressing, and then home.”

“Just a minute,” said Rex. “What’s the flap about?”

People were running, most of them looking up.

Rex looked up, too, and saw six big ships dropping towards them.

“They’re the same type as the visitor already here,” observed the Professor. “Provided they don’t do anything in a hurry all should be well.”

“They’ll see one of their ships on the ground beside ours. That should tell them there’s no fighting going on,” remarked Tiger.

And so it turned out. When the big ships landed, their compatriots were there to meet them, and, it can be assumed, explained the situation. At all events, Andoans and visitors were soon intermingled, trying to explain a complex situation.

“This is truly the most marvellous thing that has ever happened,” declared the Professor. “It gives us hope for the future of the universe, and for our own world in particular when spacecraft on Earth become objects as familiar as aeroplanes. After what we have seen it is clear that that time is not as far off as some people imagine. The spectacle before our eyes, of three races of people from different worlds on friendly terms, surpasses anything for which I could have hoped. Once cordial relations such as this have been established I see no reason why they should not continue. I am tempted to stay here until I can speak the language of our new friends, to find out something about them, where they come from, and the like.”

“If you’re going to start that we shall never reach home,” asserted Tiger. “They would probably introduce us to other worlds, and so it could go on indefinitely. This sort of thing can be carried too far. I’m all for going home while we know where it is.”

“After all,” put in Toby, “there’s nothing to prevent us from coming back later on if we feel like it, and learning from the Andoans something about these black-whiskered warriors. Don’t forget they’re having a spot of bother with the little blokes who fly the little ships, so I don’t think this is the moment to hang about.”

“I think you are right, Doctor,” agreed the Professor. “We have done well. Let us not expect too much. As soon as we can conveniently leave we will be on our way. I will speak to Vargo about it immediately. No doubt he is as anxious to go home as we are.”

“Borron, too,” reminded Rex.

“Ah yes, Borron,” murmured the Professor, with a twinkle in his eye. “That pretty daughter of his will be glad to see the pair of you alive, and well, no doubt.”

## CONCLUSION

### THE WAY BACK

ARRANGEMENTS were soon made for the journey home, for Borron was anxious to let the High Council on Mino know that all was well with him and his crew, and Vargo, to whom space travel was no novelty, wanted to see how the work of restoration on Mars was progressing. Aside from personal considerations, they felt they should allay on Mino the fears that had been caused by reports and rumours that all was not well on Ando.

So, two days later—as near as Rex could judge on a nightless planet—when Toby could announce with confidence that the wounded men would recover, goodbyes were waved, to the sorrow of their Andoan friends, and there began a journey which, it may be said at once, was uneventful.

A brief stay was made on Mino, where the Council were thanked for the loan of the ship, and Rex had to endure some chaffing on account of Morino, who made no secret of her grief at the parting, and would, indeed, have accompanied the party to Earth had she been allowed to do so.

The ship went on to Mars, where Vargo intended dropping off. It was found that the work was going according to plan, and there was reason to hope that the day was not far distant when those people on Mino who wished to do so would be able to return to their original home. Borron was one of these, so, as Toby quipped, Rex would soon be living “next door” to his girl friend. Even the critical Rolto, who was still there, had to admit that the planet was wearing a different look from the place of death it had been when the *Spacemaster* had made its first landing there.

As Tiger remarked, it now looked “lived-on”, a condition, which when it was observed by astronomers on Earth, was likely to cause some excited speculation. As the Professor said, a trifle sadly, they could tell them what was happening. In fact, they could tell the greatest story of all time; but who would believe them?

Rolto was more than a little shaken, not to say subdued, by the report of the interplanetary war. Leaving him to think about it, the *Tavona*—for Borron was back in his own ship—set out on the last stage of its journey.

For Rex, if not the others, there were two thrilling moments, occasions which moved him strangely. The first was when Earth, with its old familiar moon, came into sight. The other was when he stepped out of the ship on to

a heather-covered hill in Scotland, and was able to say that most wonderful word in any language—Home.

Arrival had been timed for a night landing to reduce the chance of the ship being seen, but as it was nearly dawn Borron stayed only long enough to help them unload their equipment. Then he was off again. His last words were: “Let us know when you want to visit us again. We’ll be on the watch for lights.”

“Give my love to Morino,” called Rex.

Standing in a little group they watched the ship that had carried them so far, and so well, disappear into the star-studded heavens. Then, in silence, for the moment was a touching one for all of them, they walked slowly down the hill towards Glensalich Castle, the Professor’s Highland home from where their strange adventures had begun.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations by Leslie Stead. Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *To Outer Space—A Story of Interplanetary Exploration* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]