

Another Adventure of the Spacecraft TAVONA
in the Great Unknown by **Captain W.E. JOHNS**

**THE
MAN
WHO
VANISHED
INTO
SPACE**



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Title: The Man Who Vanished into Space

Date of first publication: 1963

Author: Capt. W.E. (William Earl) Johns (1893 - 1968)

Date first posted: 16th April, 2024

Date last updated: 16th April, 2024

Faded Page eBook #20240408

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**THE MAN
WHO VANISHED
INTO SPACE**

*Another adventure of the spacecraft
Tavona in the Great Unknown*

BY
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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

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ST. PAUL'S HOUSE, WARWICK SQUARE,
LONDON, E.C.4 BY C. TINLING AND CO.,
LIMITED, LIVERPOOL, LONDON AND
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FOREWORD

As we predicted in the first book of this series men from the planet Earth have now been launched into that vast region of emptiness which has been called Space; so space fiction is no longer far removed from space fact, if, indeed, it has not become part of the same thing. In other words, what has been called space fiction, which means fiction associated with other worlds, is not more fictitious than stories about imaginary people who happen to live on the surface of the planet known to us as Earth.

Such tales as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson* were fantasies written at a time when we knew less about this particular world than is known today. Admittedly, we know nothing about what is happening on other worlds, but it is now only a question of time before we do. What is not true is fiction, whether the tale is supposed to occur on Earth or anywhere else; but in our own day and age we have seen what was once described as fiction come to pass.

The Jules Verne stories, for example, which prophesied things no one at the time they were written could take seriously—air and submarine travel, for instance. Anyone who lives for a few more years will not only see people from Earth on the Moon, the starting point for space exploration, but will in all probability be able to watch them—on television.

To avoid repetition, which might irritate readers of the previous books in this series, here are the names of the Space explorers chiefly concerned.

Professor Lucius Brane. A somewhat eccentric (but by no means foolish) scientist inventor.

Group-Captain "Tiger" Clinton, formerly of the R.A.F. Experimental Establishment.

His son, *Rex Clinton.*

Squadron-Leader "Toby" Paul, of the R.A.F. Medical Service.

Vargo Lentos. A Martian liaison officer.

Gator. Commander of the spaceship *Tavona*.

Borron. A space navigator of great experience.

Morino. Rex's girl-friend on Mars.

Rolto. A mischievous Martian spaceship commander.

How the Earth members of the party found themselves involved in space exploration is narrated in the earlier books, which appeared in the following order:

1. Kings of Space
2. Return to Mars
3. Now to the Stars
4. To Outer Space
5. The Edge of Beyond
6. The Death Rays of Ardilla
7. To Worlds Unknown
8. The Quest for the Perfect Planet
9. Worlds of Wonder

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CHAPTER I
TRAGEDY AND A MYSTERY

THE spaceship *Tavona* sped along its course through that frozen, silent, lifeless void that occurs between the suns and planets of the Universe and which on Earth is known as Space.

Rex Clinton sat by his observation window gazing through the heavy glass with sombre contemplation. He was not looking at anything in particular, one reason being there was nothing to look at except the eternal stars, and he had seen those often enough before. Once in a while, with a slight sinking feeling in the stomach which he had never been able to entirely overcome, his eyes wandered to a yellow ball that might have been a moon but was in fact his fast-shrinking home planet, Earth.

From it they turned to the brilliant crescent of Venus, which was the ship's first objective, not for any other reason than because the Professor had expressed a wish to confirm certain impressions he had formed since the occasion of his only previous visit, which had been brief, cut short by a sudden devastating tempest.

The final objective was Mars, with no more serious object than to re-visit old friends and see how far the restoration of that stricken world had proceeded.

For the rest, the skyscape at which Rex gazed was one of wearisome monotony, nothing more than an all-enveloping background of deepest indigo sprinkled with innumerable points of light that were the constellations of the Galaxy, unchanging and eternal. By now he knew them all by sight, either by their Earthly names or those used by his Martian companions. They glittered not only above, but below and all around, for the ship itself was no more than a microscopic controlled satellite moving amongst them; although now that it had settled in its usual velocity, with motive power no longer necessary, there was no more sense of movement than if it hung suspended by an invisible cord from one of the stars immediately overhead.

He was sinking into the state when he had almost ceased to think, a condition common in space flight when there is nothing to catch the eye or hold attention, when he was roused by the appearance of a spark of light which he was sure had not been there a minute earlier. Whether the object was a large one a great distance away, or a small one close at hand, he did not know, and had no means of ascertaining. All he knew was, there was something there, and

the thought struck him that it might be one of the artificial satellites launched from Earth of which all trace had been lost, either through mechanical failure or possibly because it had gone beyond the range of radio telescopes set to track it.

If a rocket or its capsule had gone into orbit far from Earth, he pondered, it could become a danger to spaceships operating in that region. They themselves might have collided with it with disastrous result. Wherefore he called to Borron, who was sitting by Gator at the controls, and said there was something outside which he was unable to identify. It was not a comet for it had no tail. It might be a meteor reflecting the light of the distant Sun.

Borron joined him. "Where is it?"

"Take a line immediately below Libra."

Borron peered through the window. He wiped the glass to make sure there was not a particle of something adhering to it and looked again.

"Yes," he said. "There is something, and as it shines with a white light it cannot be far away. We will see what it is." He returned to Gator.

The jets, operated by Cosmic Rays, began to hum, and the changing patterns of the stars told Rex that the ship had begun to turn, necessarily in a very wide arc to prevent discomfort to the passengers, but closing slowly on the object. The jets died as the circles narrowed. Eventually it became evident that the object was a small one; so small, in fact, that it was still not possible to form an opinion as to what the thing might be. But that there was anything there at all was a mystery that roused everyone in the ship to active expectancy.

"My guess is, it is part of one of those lunatic rockets our people are still experimenting with," remarked the Professor.

Nobody answered.

The *Tavona* closed in and finally drew alongside, the ship and the object appearing to be stationary although both might have been moving along the same orbit. Rex neither knew nor cared which it was, for he was almost overcome by what he saw a few feet from his window. Judging from the brittle silence that had fallen everyone on board was affected in the same way.

Tiger was the first to speak. "This is impossible!" he expostulated.

"Tut-tut! my dear colleague," replied the Professor quietly. "Remarkable and astonishing I agree, but you cannot say a thing is impossible if it has actually occurred. As our eyes bear witness, this *has* occurred; but don't ask me how."

Rex said nothing. He was still staring at the object with mixed emotions of horror, awe and incredulity—and perhaps a little fear.

It was a body. A human body. The body of a young man. It was floating—if floating is the right word—at full length, legs together, hands folded across the chest. Of the rest, only the hands and knees were exposed, and these, like the face, were so white that they might have been carved from chalk. The reason why the knees could be seen was because—and this gave the whole thing a touch of fantasy—the corpse wore a kilt; a tartan kilt such as may be seen in the Highlands of Scotland. On the head was the type of cap which, with a peak front and back, is commonly called a “deer-stalker”.

Rex moistened his lips, which had gone dry, as he watched the body drifting nearer to the ship, drawn by the unseen force which brings together two fragments on a cup of tea. There was something weird, horribly unnatural, about the way the lifeless body floated with nothing to uphold it. That it did not fall seemed all wrong, although, in fact, as he was well aware, it was obeying the fundamental law of the Universe: Gravity: the power that held everything in place, and without which all would be confusion. While the several planets now pulling on the body from different directions remained evenly balanced it would remain where it was, in suspension. Weight meant nothing. A ball of lead would have behaved in the same way. Only in the event of a change in the position of the stars in their orbits would it move, and then it was as likely to travel upwards, or sideways, as downwards.

Death could come in many forms, thought Rex, and none could be anything but distressing; but here, in this dreadful loneliness, this infinity of empty space, it seemed to hold a poignancy that was like a cold hand on his heart. Should he himself step out of the ship unprotected, he reflected with a shiver, he would join the corpse already there, dead within a minute, his lungs deep-frozen and the blood in his veins solid ice. Empty space. On Earth men spoke of it glibly without realizing what a fearful thing it really was.

Tiger spoke, his voice pitched high with bewilderment. “In the name of all that’s fantastic, how could this have happened?”

The Professor answered, speaking slowly and thoughtfully. “That provides us with an interesting problem, one to which, quite obviously, there must be an answer. But I think I can tell you the poor fellow’s name.”

Vargo turned and stared into the face of the speaker. “Do you mean you recognize him?” he asked, in his clear precise voice.

“No. To the best of my knowledge I have never seen him before.”

“Then how could you know his name?”

“By the pattern of the cloth of which his kilt is made. It is the Macpherson Hunting Tartan. Only a member of the clan Macpherson would be likely to wear it, wherefore I assume that is the name of this unfortunate man. I have

lived in the Highlands of Scotland long enough to be able to recognize most of the better-known plaids.”

“Can you tell us anything else about him?” inquired Tiger.

“He was probably a gamekeeper or a ghillie. Those are waterproof hill brogues on his feet, made of horse hide, and the heavy woollen stockings are specially made to stand the wear and tear of tramping through rough heather. We may learn more about him from the contents of his pockets, if there is anything in them.”

Rex found his voice. “Surely the big question is, by what possible means could the body have got here?”

“As far as I can see at present there is only one possible answer to that,” returned the Professor. “This man is, or was, a Scot. Of that there is no doubt whatever, because it is inconceivable to me that his tartan, which is a complicated one of several curious colours, could have occurred by coincidence anywhere else. He must have been picked up by a spaceship and carried off. Somewhere about this spot he died and was put out. Observe how carefully the body was composed before being jettisoned. Vargo, you are a wise man. Can you think of any other theory?”

“No. If the man died in the ship he would probably be put out because there could be no object in transporting a dead man anywhere.”

“What a horrible thing to do,” protested Rex.

“Why horrible? The body is as well here as buried in the ground.”

“Some would say better,” put in the Professor. “In the ground a body decomposes. Here, in the intense cold, in a zone of neutral gravity, it would be perfectly preserved for all time.”

“Are we in a zone of neutral gravity?” Rex asked Borron.

“Practically. Complete neutrality exists in theory only. Always there is a dominant force, however slight, exerted from one direction, although it may be a long time before it is able to take an object into its orbit. The chances are that ultimately this body will be gathered by one of the planets or planetoids of the Solar System and in falling through the atmosphere become incinerated.”

“When everyone has finished guessing what are we going to do about this?” asked Toby, practically. “If we are going to leave the body here we might as well be on our way.”

“We can’t do that. It’s too horrible to contemplate,” argued Rex.

“Very well. Let us take the body somewhere and give it a Christian funeral.”

“Where?” asked the Professor, succinctly. “You’re not suggesting that we

take the body back to Scotland?”

“Why not?”

“That *would* start something.”

“We could bury the body secretly.”

“And put ourselves in the position of murderers disposing of a victim? We can’t do that. Alternatively, to hand the body over to the police would mean explaining how we came by it. We could hardly do that and expect to be believed. Besides, there are other people to consider.”

“What other people?”

“This man will have relatives, possibly a wife, on Earth. His disappearance may be an unsolved mystery. They should at least be informed that he is dead, so that they can abandon hope of his return.”

Rex stepped in again. “What I cannot understand is this. Why was the man snatched from Earth in the first place. There must have been a purpose in that. Who would do such a thing?” He looked at Vargo. “Have any of your ships been to Earth lately?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Would Rolto—”

“No. He may have peculiar ideas but he could have no possible purpose in seeing, much less seizing, a man of Earth. After all, he has seen you often enough.”

“If we accept that it can only mean that another ship from another planet has paid a visit to Earth.”

“That is the only explanation.”

“How many planets operate spaceships?”

“If we include the Galaxy, a great many. You know some of them, having travelled in them.”

The Professor resumed. “I think we should go very carefully into this, and if possible find out exactly where this man was and what he was doing when he was abducted,” he averred, seriously. “I say abducted because I can’t believe that the young man outside would of his own free will enter such a vehicle as a spaceship. He must be on the list of missing persons so it should not be difficult to get some information about him.”

Tiger looked sideways at the speaker. “You’re taking a serious view of this?”

“I am. I hope it isn’t going to be another case of what happened on Krona.

^[1] If some unknown ship is going to make a habit of raiding Earth for slaves, or people to populate certain of their planetoid territories, sooner or later there

will be trouble.”

“The consequences of that would probably be a more serious matter for Earth than for the raiders,” said Vargo.

“How so?”

“A planet so far advanced in technical science as to be able to produce long-distance spaceships would almost certainly have a means of destroying all life on your planet. But I need hardly tell you that. You will not have forgotten how the ambitious people of Ardilla tried to make themselves masters of Terromagna.”^[2]

^[1] See *Worlds of Wonder*.

^[2] See *The Death Rays of Ardilla*.

“That’s a sobering thought, I must say,” muttered Toby.

Vargo went on. “Your people of Earth are so taken up with their own petty wars that they still have not realized what interplanetary conflict would mean. There would in fact be no conflict, because Earth would be swept clear of all life by the mere press of a button possibly millions of miles away.”

“Let us not go into that now,” requested the Professor. “Let us deal with the present, in which matter I have a suggestion to make. It is simply this. Let us collect the body of this unhappy man, and after examining it for clues of identity take it to the nearest ground for burial.”

“That would be your Moon,” offered Borron. “We are no great distance from it.”

“Very well. Then let it be the Moon. There the doctor can endeavour to ascertain the cause of death. When that has been done, as we have no tools for digging, we will build a cairn of stones over the body. Afterwards, if Vargo is agreeable, we will return home and make inquiries about where the poor fellow lived, and so on. If he had relations no doubt we shall be able to think of a way of reporting his death without involving ourselves.”

Vargo said he had no objection to such an arrangement. He could not of course stay on the ground at Glensalich Castle, the Professor’s home, for any length of time for fear of being seen, so having put them down he would take off and return at a date to be arranged.

“Capital,” agreed the Professor.

“Then let us get on with the grim task,” suggested Tiger, lugubriously.

“I’m not squeamish, but there’s something about this whole affair that gives me the creeps.”

“You’d better leave this to me,” offered Toby. “I’m more accustomed to handling bodies than any of you.”

“You needn’t bring this one into the ship,” said Vargo. “It can travel quite well between the double doors.”

Toby nodded, and forthwith began to get into his space suit and the equipment that would be needed when he opened the outer door.

Presently the heavy inner door was opened and he stepped into the exit chamber. “I shall be a minute or two,” he advised. “I’ll flash the signal light when I’m ready to come back in.”

The door, self-sealing, was closed behind him.

Rex, watching from his window, saw the outer door open. Toby’s arm appeared, reaching for the body, now bumping as gently as a cork against the shell of the spacecraft. He drew it in. The door was closed, leaving him, with the body, in the airtight chamber.

It was some minutes before the signal light over the inner door flashed its signal to announce he was ready to re-enter the cabin. The door was opened and Toby came in, carrying the dead man’s cap. The door swung back into its soft plastic seating under the pressure of the atmosphere in the cabin and he began removing his space gear.

“Well?” questioned the Professor. “What did you learn?”

“You were right about the name,” informed Toby. “It’s written on the maker’s tab inside the cap. The initial is ‘I’, which probably stands for Ian. The cap was made by, or bought from, a tradesman of Inverness named Grant. All I could find in the pockets were these.” He produced a knife, four twelve-bore cartridges, a packet of cigarettes of a popular brand, matches and a length of cord.

“Did you find anything to suggest the cause of death?” asked Tiger.

“Nothing. Not that I would expect to without the proper equipment for an autopsy. It seems a perfectly healthy body. I could find no signs of violence or disease.”

“Was he the sort of man who might die of heart trouble or shock?”

“I would say no, although one can never be sure. As you’d expect, the body is as stiff as an icicle. One thought that did strike me as I went over him was this, although I must admit there was no evidence to support the idea. If, when he was in the ship, this man showed symptoms of any sort of illness, or indisposition, even if it was only a common cold, the officer in charge of the

ship might have been anxious to be rid of him for fear of the entire crew becoming affected.”

“That might well be the explanation,” said Vargo. “We know from experience that what might be no more than a minor ailment on one planet can be a killing disease on another, where there has been no opportunity to acquire a degree of immunity.”

“I take your point, which seems to me a reasonable one,” returned the Professor.

So conjecture over the mystery continued until Borron announced they were nearing the Moon, so would those who intended going out get ready to do so. Conversation ended as space suits were donned.

On arrival no time was wasted. A landing place to suit their purpose was found on a desolate plain littered with loose rocks. The body of the Scot who had died so far from home, no longer weightless, was carried out and a tall cairn built over it. Tiger recited the Lord’s Prayer and that was that.

As soon as this brief ceremony was finished everyone got back into the *Tavona* which, to Rex’s relief, was soon on its way to Earth. He had said little, but had found the experience a moving one. Aside from this, the first death he had seen in Space opened up new possibilities not pleasant to contemplate. Was this how he would end up? It was not that he feared death, and common sense told him that once dead it wouldn’t really matter where he was; but there seemed to be something peculiarly repellent in the idea of leaving his bones in the frozen sterility of the everlasting void between the stars.

CHAPTER II

A DIFFICULT SITUATION

IT was a week later when the Professor's car, with Tiger at the wheel, ran into Inverness, capital of the Highlands of Scotland. In the car with the driver were the Professor and Rex, Toby having decided to stay at home to write some letters. In any case, as he remarked, there was no useful purpose to be served in making a crowd.

The *Tavona's* return to Earth had been without incident, and having waited for darkness Gator put the ship down on its usual spot close to Glensalich Castle. Before leaving an arrangement had been made for it to return in two weeks, when all being well it would proceed with its original plan.

Two weeks, the Professor thought, and the others agreed, should be ample time for them to complete the inquiries they intended to make about the lost Scot. The more he considered this amazing affair, he declared, the more convinced he became that there was a sinister purpose behind the abduction, for which reason it was their duty to find out, if possible, just what that was. He said he could not believe that the Scot had willingly embarked in a strange, unknown craft, which he would probably regard as a "flying saucer". It could hardly be anything else. The obvious place to ask questions about the man's disappearance was Inverness; indeed, it was the only place where they might expect to learn something of the circumstances in which the Scot had vanished—literally into thin air, although no one was likely to guess that.

They were all aware that in starting these inquiries they were likely to put themselves in a false position, in that they would not be able to reveal what they knew. Not that they would be believed if they told the truth. They would, therefore, have to proceed warily, withholding the facts, yet, if possible, refraining from telling deliberate lies, although how this was to be done was not clear. It would depend on how things worked out. Anyway, this was a problem that would have to be faced unless they took the easy way out and did nothing at all. Naturally, this was considered and discussed at some length, but at the end was overruled by the Professor, who felt that if they did nothing the raid would be repeated and more people would disappear. Their chances of preventing that were not exactly bright, but it was up to them to do their best.

The Professor had, unwisely as things turned out, retained the dead man's cap, thinking it might be useful in providing a reason for their interest when they started asking questions. At the time this seemed reasonable, but no one

had thought seriously of how they were to account for having it in their possession. It was one of those things that became obvious later. They realized of course that the lost Scot would be missed, but it did not occur to any of them that the mysterious disappearance was still a general topic of conversation in the region of the man's home.

They had no difficulty in finding the establishment named on the tab in the cap. It was a shop of some size, part outfitters and part tailors, and they went in, the Professor actually carrying the dead man's deer-stalker cap in his hand, with a confidence that was soon to become embarrassment. For here coincidence, not a very remarkable one perhaps, took a hand. It merely expedited what otherwise would have taken some time, but this would have given them a chance to think.

There were two people in the shop when they walked in. One, hatless, and from the manner of his dress, was clearly the proprietor. The other was a tall, gaunt, fresh complexioned man, blue-eyed and fiery-haired, of about fifty years of age. Dressed in rough tweeds, he was apparently a customer.

Deep in conversation they both turned casually to glance at the newcomers as they entered. Words died on their lips, and thereafter there was nothing casual about their attitudes or expressions. Their eyes were on the cap the Professor carried in his hand. They stared at it as if it held some peculiar fascination.

The Professor was not given an opportunity to ask the opening question which he had ready. Taking a pace forward it was the big man who spoke, and his voice had an edge on it. Pointing at the cap he rapped out: "Where did you get that?"

"I—er—found it," stammered the Professor, taken aback by a reception for which he was unprepared.

"Where? Give it to me." The man held out a hand.

By this time the Professor had recovered his composure. "We will come to that presently, if you don't mind," he replied evenly. "I came into this shop to make some inquiries, not to be subjected to an interrogation by people I don't even know."

"I'm sorry, but that cap belongs to me."

Again the Professor looked a little surprised. "Indeed! I happen to know the name of the man to whom the cap belonged because it is written inside. If you are claiming the cap as your property perhaps you would be good enough to tell me *your* name."

"My name is Tulloch."

"This is Colonel Sir Murdo Tulloch, of Drumash," put in the shopkeeper,

by way of explanation.

“In that case the cap does not belong to him,” returned the Professor. “It belonged to a man named Macpherson.”

The Colonel flushed. “You needn’t tell me that. He was one of my gamekeepers, confound him, and I provide my outdoor servants with suits and caps of my own special house tweed.”

With a shock Rex realized suddenly that the tweed the Colonel was wearing was of the same pattern as the cap. However, he said nothing.

“Why do you say confound him?” asked the Professor, quietly.

“He let me down just before the shooting season opened.”

The shopkeeper protested. “Excuse me, sir, but I don’t think he would willingly do that. I knew Ian Macpherson well. I believe what most people here believe. He and Donald Graham went down in a bog.”

The Professor started. “Do you mean *two* men disappeared?”

“I do so. Didn’t you know?”

“I certainly did not.” The Professor looked at the Colonel. “Instead of talking at cross-purposes, Sir Murdo, may I ask you to be good enough to explain the manner of these disappearances? The matter may be more important than you imagine.”

“I can’t imagine anything more important than having my keepers walk out on me a few days before the opening of the grouse season,” growled the Colonel. “Who are you? I can’t remember seeing you before.”

“My name is Professor Lucius Brane and my home is Glensalich Castle, about forty miles from here.”

“Ah. English, eh.”

“My nationality has nothing whatever to do with the matter under discussion.”

“I see. And do you mean to say you know nothing about the disappearance of my two men when for months the whole country has talked of nothing else?”

“That, I must admit, is the case. I am very occupied and I am often away for long periods.”

“Well, as you have Macpherson’s cap you must know something about it. I will tell you what happened, after which you can tell me how you came by this cap.” The Colonel turned to the shopkeeper. “Can we sit down somewhere, Mr. Grant?”

“You may have the fitting room, sir.”

They went into the room. Chairs were brought.

“When did these men disappear?” began the Professor.

“More than a year ago. On the first of August last year, to be exact.”

“As long ago as that! How did it come about?”

“It happened this way. I asked Donald Graham, my head-keeper, to take a long walk over my moor and report on the general condition of the grouse. That, in case you don’t know, is a general practice before the shooting starts. No one wants to shoot birds until they’re in full feather and strong on the wing.”

“I understand.”

“Macpherson, the under-keeper, suggested he went with him, as in that way they would be able to cover more ground. Those would have been my orders, but I noticed Macpherson had a cold and looked as if he might be sickening for influenza. I said he would be better in bed, to be sure of being fit for the twelfth, the opening day of the shooting. However, he said he was all right, and as he was keen on his job, against my better judgement I agreed to let him go with Graham. There was a lot of ground to cover. Each man took his dog, one a labrador and the other a springer spaniel. I mention that because they come into the picture. They also took their guns in case they flushed any vermin, and their gamebags with their pieces.”

“Pieces?”

“Their food. Sandwiches for the day. As the moor embraces something like 50,000 acres it was likely to be a long one. My gardener saw them leave the gunroom and set off. From that moment to this no one has set eyes on them. Now you will understand my astonishment when you walked into the shop with Macpherson’s cap in your hand.”

“Yes, indeed. When did you discover the men had not returned?”

“The following morning. The dogs came home alone. My yardman found them skulking in the kennels. That told me something was wrong. Good dogs, happy dogs, don’t skulk. In the ordinary way they would never leave their masters. In fact I’d say that’s unheard of. The dogs looked scared. You can always tell when a spaniel is upset. Its tail droops, its ears droop—everything droops. When it was reported to me that the dogs had come home alone I gave orders for a search to be made for the men, because it was obvious something had happened.”

“Did it occur to you then that they might have been caught in a bog?” asked the Professor.

“No, it did not. This talk of bogs is absolute nonsense. There are bogs on my ground as there are on a great many moors in this part of the world, but both men had been with me for years and knew the ground like the backs of

their hands. It's a gamekeeper's job to know every inch of his moor. Had all been well with them those two boys could have found their way home in the dark or in a fog."

"What sort of day was it?"

"Fair, but rather cloudy."

"You call them boys, Sir Murdo. How old were they?"

"Graham was twenty-six and Macpherson twenty-one."

"And the search proved fruitless?"

"Practically. I was out all day with six men and it wasn't until sundown that we found any trace, and that only deepened the mystery. We came to a place where apparently they had sat down to eat their lunch. It was just the sort of place they would choose, a flat open area between hills which we call the Plain, about five miles out. The heather is old rank stuff with spagnum moss under it; not much use as feed for birds but a well-known place for a fox to lie up for a snooze in the sun. I'm sure that when those boys sat down their intention was to have their lunch and at the same time keep an eye open for a movement which might indicate the presence of a fox. They knew the signs, such as an old cock grouse sitting on a rock croaking a warning to all concerned or maybe a hare making its way to a safer spot."

"What did you find there?"

"Their gamebags, with their guns lying across them. The guns were loaded, of course, but neither had been fired. One of the gamebags had been opened as if to take out the sandwiches. The heather was flattened showing they had sat down. There was no sign of the men themselves."

"Were there any bogs near?"

"There are some soft places in the Plain but no bog."

"What was your first impression of what had happened?"

"I had no idea. I couldn't even form an opinion. The most extraordinary thing I ever heard of in my life. There was some talk of poachers being concerned, but that didn't make sense. Poachers would stay near the road and make for good ground, not tramp four or five miles out to the only place on the moor where there wouldn't be likely to be a head of game of any sort. The search went on for days, and when nothing came of it I was forced to the conclusion the boys had left me to find work somewhere else. Really, that didn't make sense either, because why should they leave their guns? Guns cost money nowadays. Besides, the boys had a month's wages waiting for them at the Lodge. Had they intended leaving me, hard though that is to believe, they wouldn't have gone without their money."

“A curious point that strikes me is this,” observed the Professor, pushing up his glasses from habit. “You say you think the boys chose that spot to sit because they would have a good view of the open ground in front of them. Very well. Let us assume they did see something that caused them to move, a fox perhaps, a predatory bird or some other kind of vermin. Why should they go to investigate without taking their guns?”

“Exactly. They wouldn’t have much chance of catching a fox with their hands,” said Sir Murdo with biting sarcasm.

“What about the dogs?”

“I don’t know. They might have gone with the boys when they moved off, as obviously they did, or they might have left them to mark their gear. It’s all quite beyond me. Whichever way you look at it the whole business defies reasonable explanation.”

“What did you do when you failed to find the men and realized that something had happened to them, or at any rate they were not coming back?”

“I informed the police.”

“What did they do?”

“They could only repeat what had already been done. They organized a search party and went over every inch of the ground. They had theories, of course. The first was that there had been an accident, although what sort I can’t imagine. There were no cliffs near over which the chaps might have fallen. The police even considered murder.”

“*Murder!*”

“Yes. They thought the men might have had a row over something. In the fight one had killed the other and then bolted.”

“Did you believe that possible?”

“It’s ridiculous. The men were on the best of terms. To my knowledge they never had a cross word.”

“Where did they live?”

“On my premises. Each had a bothy in the yard. They frequently had meals in my kitchen. They had breakfast there on the day they disappeared, and according to the maids they were in their usual good spirits, laughing and joking with them.”

“I gather neither of them was married?”

“No. They were both single men.”

“What about relatives?”

“I believe Graham had relations in the South, but I don’t know exactly where. He never told me. Macpherson was a foundling who came to me from

an orphanage. Their disappearance was a nine days wonder in the district and people still talk about it. Now you can understand why, when you walked in with Macpherson's cap in your hand, I was startled to the point of being a bit short with you."

The Professor smiled bleakly. "I can well appreciate that."

"Where did you find it?"

Here we go, thought Rex. This is where they would be faced with questions impossible to answer truthfully, although inevitably they would be expected to provide an explanation. It was with some anxiety that he waited for the Professor to reply.

He need not have worried. The Professor, knowing the question would arise, had prepared for it. "I picked up the cap this morning on the heather near my house," he answered blandly. Which, speaking literally, was true. He did not say he had deliberately thrown it down before picking it up. Rex wondered why he had done it. Now he understood the reason. So if it was not strictly the truth it was not a lie. Anyway, as it was not possible to tell the truth and expect to be believed the deception was perhaps excusable.

"And you say you live forty miles from here."

"Yes."

"In which direction?"

"Roughly north-west."

"Then your ground must be at least sixty miles from mine." The Colonel's blue eyes opened wide. "Can you offer any explanation as to how that cap could have travelled that distance without its owner?"

"We have no proof that it did travel without its owner. Not that I have had much time to think, bearing in mind that when I walked in here I had no knowledge of the extraordinary story you have just told me. I found the cap, and seeing the name of the maker inside I merely brought it in thinking he would know the name of the owner, to whom he could return it."

"Well, now you know the story can you think of any way the cap could have got from my ground to yours, over what is very rough country?"

The Professor thought for a moment. "For the moment I can think of only one way, although as a theory you will probably find it as unacceptable as the others that have been put forward."

"Tell me what it is."

"I wonder could those men have been picked up by an aircraft of some sort and the cap gone overboard?"

The Colonel stared as if he couldn't believe his ears. "Are you serious?"

“Of course I’m serious. This is no laughing matter.”

“But the idea is fantastic!”

“The whole thing is fantastic, if it comes to that. Surely the introduction of an aircraft is within the bounds of possibility? The men disappeared. That is beyond dispute. Very well. Can you think of any other way your men could leave the district without being seen by a living soul?”

“No. Not when you put it like that. The very fact that the country is thinly populated is more reason why everyone remembers everyone he sees. But whose aircraft, and why?”

“Those are questions I can’t answer; but all you have told me indicates that when those men left the Lodge to walk the moor they had every intention of returning the same evening. Why didn’t they?”

“That’s what a lot of people would like to know,” asserted the Colonel grimly.

“I still say they went down in a bog,” put in the shopkeeper. “It has happened before.”

“What about the dogs?” inquired the Professor. “Where the men went the dogs would go, in which case they too would have sunk in the bog.”

“The men may have ordered the dogs to guard their guns and gamebags,” observed the Colonel.

“That could be the explanation,” conceded the Professor. “Would there be enough room on the Plain for an aircraft to land?”

“Not an ordinary aircraft, but a helicopter would have no difficulty. I still say the notion of an aircraft of any sort landing is more preposterous than the bog theory. We rarely see an aircraft.” The Colonel smiled cynically. “A short while ago one of my ghillies reported that he had seen one of these ridiculous so-called flying saucers, which shows to what lengths imagination can run.”

“You didn’t believe this?”

“Of course not. I’m a practical man.”

The Professor got up. “Well, Sir Murdo, that’s as far as I am able to help you, so we’ll be getting along.”

“You’ll leave the cap with me?”

“Certainly, as it is your property. What will you do with it?”

“I shall show it to the police.”

“Do you think that’s necessary?”

“Definitely. These men are on their list of missing persons so any clue must be handed to them.”

“Of course—of course,” agreed the Professor, as he turned to the door.

The shopkeeper saw them out.

As soon as they were on the pavement the Professor made a beeline for the car. “Quick,” he said urgently. “Let’s get away before that excellent Scottish gentleman can think of more difficult questions to ask us.”

CHAPTER III
A CLOSE SHAVE

LITTLE was said on the run home. On arrival Toby was told what had transpired in Inverness, and as they sat down to a late lunch the Professor inquired, with one of his naïve smiles: "Well, how did I do?"

"I think you did very well," complimented Toby. "It must have been a sticky interview."

"I held my breath when Sir Murdo asked where we had found the cap," said Rex.

The Professor looked a little shamefaced. "I'm afraid I was rather naughty," he confessed. "Yet what else could I say? The question was certain to be asked. I had to give some sort of explanation so I prepared a loophole in order not to have to tell a barefaced lie."

"You were sailing pretty near the wind," returned Toby, smiling.

"Let us say I ducked the question or glossed over it. What I said was, I admit freely, a deception. What was the alternative? To tell the truth? It was one of those odd situations where a lie would be believed whereas the truth most certainly would not. Had I told the literal truth it would have sounded something like this. 'As a matter of fact, Sir Murdo, with these gentlemen I was in a spaceship with some Martian friends, on our way to Venus, when we came upon the body of this poor fellow Macpherson, perfectly preserved, floating about in an unknown orbit of the Solar System. We felt we could hardly leave it there, yet had we brought it back into the Earth's atmosphere it would have decomposed rapidly; so acting for the best we buried it on the Moon.'"

The Professor brushed his hair back and looked at the others whimsically over his glasses. "What sort of reception would that statement have had, do you suppose? No one would, or could, believe such a tale. We would have been regarded either as liars or lunatics. My conscience is salved by the knowledge that we acted for the best for all concerned, and the story I told has done no harm to anyone." The Professor, having delivered his verdict, resumed his meal.

"It seems to me that you did not learn very much that you did not already know," observed Toby.

Tiger answered. "We picked up at least two important facts, although for the rest the details of the story were much as we had expected."

“What were these important facts?”

“First, Macpherson was a sick man, or at least he was indisposed, when he set off to walk across the moor. Sir Murdo was of the opinion that he might have been sickening for influenza. If that illness developed, turned to pneumonia, perhaps, when he was in the ship, he might have died a natural death. In that case his body would have been disposed of as quickly as possible, and in the easiest way, for fear of the ship’s crew catching the contagion. You will remember we discussed that possibility.”

“And the second point?”

“That might be even more important. We know now that not one but *two* men went out on the moor together the day they disappeared. We know what happened to Macpherson, but what happened to the other, Donald Graham by name? His body has not been found, so it is fairly safe to assume that the unknown ship which picked up one also carried off the other. The question we are bound to ask ourselves is, where is he now?”

“We haven’t much hope of learning the answer to that,” replied Toby, dryly.

“What I should like to know even more is this,” came back the Professor. “What was the purpose behind the abduction? There must have been one. If we knew that we should be in a better position to judge whether or not the raid is likely to be repeated. In this account of the affair Sir Murdo could only get as far as the point where the two men sat down apparently to eat their sandwiches. Only we know what must have happened next. That is, broadly speaking, ignoring the details. I went so far as to drop Sir Murdo a hint about what might have happened—indeed, what we know *must* have happened. I said the men might have been picked up by an aircraft *of some sort*. Naturally, I did not specify any particular type of aircraft. Had I said a spacecraft he would have thought I was out of my mind. How did he take my suggestion of an aircraft, presuming an ordinary machine? He called it preposterous. Yet, mark this, on one occasion someone in the district actually saw what he called a flying saucer. Sir Murdo was told of this, yet, so loath are people to believe in anything they do not understand, or imagine, that he dismissed the report as ridiculous. That is typical of the ordinary people of this country. Not for an instant did it occur to Sir Murdo to connect that spaceship with the disappearance of his two men, even though, as he himself declared, he could offer no solution to the mystery. In short, having convinced himself that there are no such things as spaceships there could be no question of one landing. It is he who lacks imagination, accusing other people of having too much.”

“Were you surprised to learn that the disappearances occurred so long ago?” asked Toby.

“No. Had we not found the body it would probably be in the same condition, and possibly the same position, in a hundred years time.”

Tiger took up the story. “As I see it, what happened on the moor that day must have been something like this. The keepers having arrived at what Sir Murdo called the Plain, a convenient area from which to watch the ground for vermin, they put down their gamebags and guns prepared to eat lunch while they watched. The weather, we are told, was fair but cloudy. As they sat there the flying saucer dropped out of the clouds. They must have regarded it with amazement and a good deal of interest. No doubt they had heard talk or read newspaper arguments about flying saucers. Now here was one, preparing to land.”

“They might not have jumped to the conclusion that the thing was a flying saucer,” interposed Toby. “There are a lot of unorthodox, queer-looking aircraft, in the skies these days. Mostly experimental types, of course.”

“No matter what they thought,” went on Tiger. “What would they do? I say that behaving as ordinary people they would do one of two things. A few people would be afraid and run away, but I can’t see two stalwart, intelligent young Scotsmen doing that. It is likely that their chief emotion would be curiosity, particularly when the machine landed. Considering the locality a natural supposition would be that it was in some sort of trouble. It might have run out of fuel. The pilot might have lost his way. That is what the keepers would conclude, and in the circumstances they would advance to see if they could be of any assistance.”

“You’re not overlooking the possibility that the crew of the ship may have seen the men sitting there and landed either to grab them or have a closer look at them,” suggested the Professor.

“That could have been the case,” conceded Tiger. “It would come to the same thing in the end. The keepers walked up to the ship, whereupon they were either seized by force or invited to enter. Having done so they were not allowed to leave. Once off the ground they would be helpless.”

“It must have been something very much like that,” agreed the Professor. “Unless the ship happened to belong to friends of ours it would be useless for the boys even to protest, because no one would speak their language. As we know, one of them died, but the other probably survived, in which event he must at this moment be living a miserable existence on another planet.”

“Assuming it had an atmosphere and other physical conditions similar to those of Earth,” Rex pointed out.

“You may be sure that a people capable of operating a spacecraft would take that into account. If for some reason they wanted a live specimen of an

Earthman they would not be so stupid as to subject him to conditions altogether different.”

Rex shook his head. “Wherever he is he’s likely to remain there for the rest of his days.”

“Not necessarily.”

Rex looked surprised. “But with millions of planets in the Galaxy what hope have we of finding him?”

“You yourself have just supplied a clue, my boy. If Graham is still alive he will be on a planet where conditions cannot be very different from those of Earth. That also means that the atmosphere and pressure in the ship that carried him off must be the same, or very close to those in the *Tavona*.”

“I wouldn’t call that much of a clue. As we know from our own experience there are a great many planets on which it is possible for us to live without any sort of protection—pressure suits or artificial atmosphere.”

“I did not say that was the only clue,” argued the Professor. “Graham was carried off in a spacecraft. Of that there is no doubt whatever. As I said just now, that implies that the raiders came from a world with an advanced civilization. Ships that belong to such worlds travel far and wide, as we know, not infrequently calling on other planets. Some have been to Earth, to have a look at us if not to land. Ships of planets we have visited, Terromagna for example, are constantly making long voyages. If a man from Earth had been picked up word of it might go round, not so much perhaps as an item of news as idle gossip between spaceship commanders and crews. As a result of that we may hear something. Obviously we can’t go round every planet in the Universe, but on one of the worlds we know we might very well pick up the information we want. Vargo would help us when we tell him what has happened.”

Tiger stepped in. “Are you seriously thinking of looking for this man Graham?”

“Of course. I’m more than ever concerned with finding him, not so much for the sake of the man himself as to discover the reason *why* he was abducted. There must have been some definite purpose in that. It might be no more than idle curiosity; simply to learn about what we are doing here; what stage of development we have reached, and so on. On the other hand it could mean that some mischief was contemplated against us.”

“If we’re going to start looking for Graham,” said Tiger seriously, “I think the sooner we are on our way the better. Otherwise we may be here for some time.”

The Professor raised his eyes, pushing up his glasses. “And what prompts

that depressing thought?”

“You haven’t forgotten that Sir Murdo is going to hand Macpherson’s cap to the police?”

“What of it?”

“If I know anything about the police they’ll come here asking questions. They’ll want to know exactly where you found the cap, and in what circumstances. There could be other awkward questions, such as what induced you to go all the way to Inverness to make inquiries. People don’t normally go to all that trouble over a piece of headgear that has seen better days.”

“You really think the police will come here?”

“I shall be surprised if they don’t. What are you going to tell them? You may find them not so easy to deceive as Sir Murdo.”

“Hm. I take your point,” murmured the Professor. “The last thing we want here is trouble with the police. If they come I shall have to tell them what I told Sir Murdo and stick to my tale. We can’t leave here until Vargo comes back for us.”

“If they search your premises, when they see your workshop and laboratory they’ll wonder what you’re doing here, anyway.”

“Let them wonder. I shall tell them to mind their own business. What I do has nothing to do with them. Let us hope they delay their visit for a week, by which time we shall be out of their reach. Judkins can tell them, with perfect truth, that I have gone away on a protracted tour.”

“The police have a habit of keeping an eye on premises where they suspect something improper is going on. I still think it was a mistake to walk into that shop in Inverness with Macpherson’s cap in your hand. As a result it looks to me as if we have a fair chance of ending up in a lunatic asylum, or in jail for contempt of court or withholding information from the police.”

“It’s all very well to talk like that now we know facts of which we were unaware when we went to Inverness.” The Professor went on cheerfully. “Let us hope your fears are without foundation, my dear fellow. I will take the opportunity of writing up my notes while we await the return of the *Tavona*.”

To the relief of everyone the days passed without the arrival of unwelcome visitors wanting more particulars about Macpherson’s cap, which would have been difficult to supply without having to resort to downright lies. As Tiger remarked, nobody liked lying, particularly to police officers in the course of their duty. But what was the alternative? To tell the truth would serve no useful purpose because it would not be believed, and, moreover, might well in all innocence involve them in serious trouble. The police would think they were either being facetious, or trying to hide something, and become suspicious. It

was, they all agreed, an extraordinary and unfortunate situation in which they found themselves, as a result of trying to do the right thing by everyone. In fact, Rex was beginning to wish he hadn't noticed the body of the unlucky Highlander.

At last the day came when, according to the arrangement made with Vargo, the *Tavona* was to pick them up as soon as it was dark enough to prevent the ship from being seen by anyone who happened to be in the vicinity. Bags containing their toilet things were packed, with a few pounds of tea which they were unable to get on their travels, and with twilight closing in all was ready for departure when the front door bell rang.

A minute later Judkins came in to announce that two police officers, a detective-inspector and a constable, were outside asking to see the Professor.

"What did you tell them?" asked the Professor, sharply.

"I said you were about to leave for abroad, if, indeed, you had not already gone. I left them waiting, saying I would try to find out."

"Tell them we have left," ordered the Professor quickly. "By the time you get back we *shall* have gone—by the back door."

"Very good, sir." Judkins, the imperturbable, retired.

"Let us be on our way," said the Professor, picking up his kit. "We may have to wait a little while for the *Tavona*, but I'd rather wait on the heather than stay here to be cross-examined by these worthy policemen."

They went out quietly by the back door and walked through the overgrown gardens to a belt of shrubs. Behind this, out of sight of the house, the Professor halted. "We should be safe here," he said. "I suggest we wait until we hear the police car go before we expose ourselves on the hill. There might still be just enough light for them to see us, but every minute reduces the chance of that. It's almost dark."

As they stood there a thought struck Rex. "Suppose by a miracle we find Graham, what would you do with him? How could he account for his absence if we brought him home?"

The Professor frowned. "Dear me! I hadn't considered that. But the problem may never arise. If it does, well, we shall have to think of something."

Darkness had closed in before the slam of a door and the sound of a car retreating told them what they wanted to know.

"Good," breathed the Professor. "Now we can go on to the landing ground."

They had not long to wait. After a few minutes on the open ground the silhouette of the *Tavona* loomed over their heads. As soon as it was on the

ground and the doors had been opened they went in and took their usual places.

“Where are we going?” asked Vargo.

“For the moment, anywhere,” answered the Professor. “When we are clear I shall ask your advice about certain matters.”

With the vague outline of the British Isles, now sprinkled with a million specks of light, dropping away below, the Professor narrated the story of what their inquiries had revealed, and the position in which they now found themselves.

“You are hoping to pick up news of this Scotsman?” queried Vargo.

“Yes. I think there is just a remote chance we might find out what became of him.”

“So you don’t want to go to Venus?”

“Not now.”

Vargo looked at the Professor curiously. “Why are you so anxious to rescue this man?”

“It is not so much that I want to rescue him as find out why he was seized, in case it means there is trouble in store for Earth.”

“That doesn’t necessarily follow. The purpose could be no more than curiosity. It would be a simple way of finding out what is happening on your planet. This man Graham would know.”

“Without being able to speak the language of his captors how could he tell them?”

“An advanced people would soon speak his language. You will have noticed how quickly some of our friends learned English.”

“Yes. That’s true. You are sure none of your ships have landed on Earth?”

“That could not have happened without me hearing of it.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?”

Vargo thought for a moment. “First we go to Mars, where I would ask the captains of the Remote Survey Fleet if in their travels they have heard a rumour of a man being picked up from Earth. As you know, they make many calls, and might have heard the matter mentioned. If we learn nothing from them we could try some of the other planets which we know are equipped with long range ships. The ships of that super-planet, Terromagna, which you have visited, go far afield, and Multova, who speaks your language, would be interested had he heard mention of it anywhere. I think that’s all you can do. To tour all the planets within reach, even those well known to us, would occupy you for the rest of your life.”

“Very well,” agreed the Professor. “I accept your advice. First we will try the space captains of your home planet, and your near neighbours, Lentos and Mino.” He looked at Rex with a twinkle in his eye. “No doubt our young friend would like to see that charming girl, Morino, again.”

“I won’t deny that,” answered Rex.

“She was asking me if we were likely to bring you back,” remarked Borron the Navigator, who was Morino’s father.

Rex smiled.

The *Tavona* took up a course for Mars.

CHAPTER IV

COINCIDENCE—OR A CLUE

TO REX, after his many visits, the arrival on Mars had become a matter of routine, no more exciting than a visit to a town he knew on Earth. As they dropped in he looked over the spaceships standing on the cosmodrome—their own word for such landing grounds—wondering if the red-starred ship commanded by the mischief-making Rolto was there. He couldn't see it. There were in fact only three ships standing in the open, one of them, of rather unusual design, in front of the guest-house reserved for visitors. He recognized it as the type used on the planet Romunda. The last time he had seen this particular ship it had been under the command of an amiable captain named Pavlo.

Having landed there was nothing for them to do while Vargo and Gator made inquiries about the missing Scot at the Central Bureau of Information, a building where spaceship officers often foregathered. The Professor went off to pay a courtesy visit to the High Council, should the members be in session. Tiger and Toby went at once to the guest-house lounge to have some refreshments and make themselves comfortable.

Rex did not go with them because Morino, Borron's pretty daughter, was there to meet her father, the approach of the *Tavona* having been signalled. Dressed in the customary loose-fitting ankle length blue gown of the standard silky material worn by the women of Mars, with her honey-coloured skin, blue eyes, and long plaits of golden hair held in place by a diadem of lapis lazuli, he thought she looked more attractive than ever. They greeted each other like old friends, first embracing in the manner usual on the planet and then shaking hands as is customary on Earth, which Morino knew all about. She also knew about the habit of kissing, unknown on Mars, because Rex had demonstrated it; but on this occasion for some reason she did not offer her lips. At Borron's invitation he went home with them for a meal.

On all sides were signs of the restoration that had now been going on for some time, and remembering the state of ruin and decay the mosquito-ridden planet had been in when he had first set eyes on the place Rex hardly recognized his surroundings in this the most important town on Mars. Borron said that more and more of the descendants of the survivors of the awful disaster which had followed the disintegration of the planet Kraka, sweeping away practically all life, were returning to their ancient home from the

planetoids on which they had found refuge.

After the meal, and a pleasant hour with Morino, whose English was now nearly perfect, he rejoined the others at the guest-house for the night.

“Well, and how’s the girl-friend?” chaffed his father.

Rex did not smile. “She’s very well, thank you.”

“You don’t sound very enthusiastic.”

“Morino seemed a bit depressed.”

“Why?”

“No sooner is her father back than she starts worrying about his next trip.”

“Because she knows you’ll go with him?”

“Possibly. She complains that I say every trip I make will be the last—but it never is. She’s convinced that one day we won’t come back. That, she says, is the inevitable fate, sooner or later, of spaceship officers.”

“She should know,” put in Toby, with a shrug.

“What seems to upset her most is the way a ship can disappear, and nobody ever knows what happened to it. Most of the women here are against space exploration, which, if nothing worse, takes their menfolk away for long periods to no useful purpose that they can see.”

“Was—er—anything said about you getting married?”

“She didn’t mention it, neither did I.”

“Why not?” inquired the Professor. “I’ve always thought, and hoped, you two would marry. It would be an interesting experiment.”

“From your angle, the scientific one, no doubt.”

“Why not from yours?”

Rex shook his head. “We’ve had that argument before. It wouldn’t work. She doesn’t want to live on Earth—”

“Why not?”

“Apart from anything else she feels that if people knew where she had come from they would stare at her as if she was a freak.”

“She’s probably right, at that,” interposed Toby, drily.

“For my part I don’t want to spend the rest of my life on Mars,” went on Rex. “Oh, it’s a pleasant enough place, and I like the people, but it isn’t like home and never could be. I have a feeling I don’t belong, and I doubt if I could get over that. Something might happen that would prevent me from ever getting back to Earth, and with that thought on my mind I could never be entirely happy here.”

“Now that Mars is picking up more and more atmosphere, from the point

of view of physical comfort it would be no worse than living at a high altitude on Earth,” the Professor pointed out. “You would at least, be able to see Earth.”

“I know all about that, but I think Morino is right when she says I’d spend half my time looking at Earth, to make sure it was still in the right place. Vice versa, if we settled on Earth she’d spend her nights looking up at Mars, wondering what was going on there. Home has stronger ties than I had supposed.”

“It will work itself out in due course, no doubt,” decided the Professor, philosophically.

Vargo showed up shortly before lunch the next day.

“What news?” asked the Professor, eagerly.

“I haven’t had time to go into all the space reports at the Record Office. That would take a long while,” replied Vargo. “But I have hit upon what might turn out to be what you would call a clue.”

“Capital!” exclaimed the Professor. “This exceeds my hopes. Tell us about it.”

“It’s a curious business and I don’t know quite what to make of it,” went on Vargo. “It could be coincidence, but if it is it would be a remarkable one. Now, a word commonly used by you for a certain article of food is ‘sandwich’.”

“Quite right.”

“I myself have used the word, taking it from you; and on occasion I have eaten the food so named. If you heard that word on another planet what conclusion would you draw?”

“I would say that the person had either been to Earth or had made contact with somebody who had.”

“You don’t think the same word for the same article of food, on two different worlds, could be coincidence?”

“It would be an incredible one if that turned out to be the case. The word is, or was originally, the name of a man, a certain nobleman on Earth named Lord Sandwich. When he was hungry, and didn’t want to break off from what he was doing, he put some meat between two pieces of bread and ate it from his hand. Today, anything of that sort, not necessarily bread and meat, is called a sandwich. But tell me. How did this word crop up?”

“In the refreshment room at the Record Office I saw Grantos, a captain of our Remote Survey Unit whom, you will remember, we rescued from the planet Barida in the constellation of the Nine Horsemen.”^[3]

[3] See *Worlds of Wonder*.

“I remember him very well,” confirmed the Professor. “He speaks a little English through his association with you.”

“That is correct. Naturally, I asked him if, in his travels, he had heard anything of a man who had been picked up from Earth. Looking surprised, he said no.”

“Why should he look surprised?”

“Because, he said, most ships are now keeping well clear of Earth. Apparently word has gone round that the area is dangerous on account of the number of rockets and satellites Earth has put up without any means of controlling them. They may have been under control at one time, but they are now in such eccentric orbits that they cannot be plotted, and collision with one represents a very real danger.”

The Professor nodded. “I can well understand that.”

“Grantos asked me what had given me the idea of a man having been picked up from Earth, so I told him the whole story as far as we know it. When I had finished he thought for a little while and then said this might be the explanation of an incident that had puzzled him for some time. He told me about it, and while I may be jumping to a false conclusion it may, as I have said, provide a clue to our mystery.”

“Go on,” requested the Professor eagerly. “You excite my curiosity.”

“Grantos told me that not long ago he had seen a man eating just such an article of food which you call a sandwich.”

The Professor looked disappointed. “But that, my dear fellow, could happen anywhere. I don’t think we can conclude that a sandwich is an article of food peculiar to Earth.”

“There is more to it than that,” resumed Vargo. “Let me tell you what Grantos told me. On a recent voyage he had landed on a small planet of the Fourth Region hoping to find water, of which he was running short. He did find it, but with that we are not concerned. While he was on the ground, to his surprise, another ship came over and presently landed beside him. It turned out to be a ship from the planet Vallon, also of the Fourth Region. The commander was a man named Molo. He was out looking for one of their ships that had disappeared, and seeing Grantos’ ship had landed to have a closer look at it. He was friendly, so presently they ate their food together. We now come to the point of the story. Grantos asked Molo what he was eating. Molo said it was a

jammysandwich. At least, that's what it sounded like. Molo offered him one of these objects and he accepted it. It turned out to be two pieces of bread with what looked like a concoction of boiled fruit between them."

The Professor had jumped up in his excitement. "Now I understand what you mean. I have heard that very word, jammysandwich, used in Scotland. It is a form of food commonly carried by men who are out for the day, as part of their lunch."

"So it's the sort of thing a gamekeeper might carry," put in Tiger, pointedly.

"Exactly. A man who used that word could have acquired it in only one way. It must have come from Earth. Proceed, Vargo. What else did Grantos tell you?"

"That's all. He had no particular interest either then or later. The incident was recalled to his mind by what I had told him about what we were doing."

"Grantos didn't ask Molo where he had learned about this food?"

"No. As I say, he had no particular interest. He would assume, no doubt, that as far as Molo was concerned the food was a new fad on Vallon. The name meant nothing to him. There was no reason why it should. Nor would it have meant anything to me had I not so often heard you use the word sandwich. When I heard it I pricked up my ears, as you would say, because I couldn't recall ever taking you to Vallon. For that reason, knowing about this lost Scotsman, I associated it with him."

"And I am sure you are right," declared the Professor. "Have you ever been to this planet Vallon?"

"Once, but it was long ago, when I was a young pupil pilot. When one has called at as many worlds as I have, perhaps only for a short time, one can't remember them all unless there happened to be a unique feature."

"Can you recall anything particular about Vallon?"

"No."

"To the best of your recollection, when you were there were the people civilized?"

"That would depend on what you could call civilized."

"Well, let us say, to the same degree as the inhabitants of Earth."

Vargo looked slightly amused. "Would you call the bulk of people on Earth civilized?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"My dear friend, I'm afraid you flatter yourselves," returned Vargo sadly. "I agree you are industrious and clever at making things, but mechanical and

scientific progress is not civilization. It seems to me, from what you tell me, that you are moving away from it. Scratch the surface of many of your people and what do you find? A savage.”

“Oh, come now, Vargo, you can’t really say that,” protested Toby.

“But I do say it. You still have the lust for killing, or in some way shedding blood. It finds an outlet in many of your activities.”

“Such as?”

“You have told me that men, and even women, will pay money to watch two men trying to knock each other unconscious with their fists, what you call the boxing. The sight of blood delights them. This spectacle is so popular with the masses that it is shown constantly on your television. This is not civilized behaviour, and while you prefer violence to philosophy you will never become civilized.”

“Let’s forget it and get back to Vallon,” requested the Professor. “What sort of people are we likely to find there?”

“As far as I remember, in about the same stage of development as the people of Earth—a few thousand years in advance in the mechanical field, perhaps, and consequently in the Space Age. They may have changed since I was there.”

“Let us get down to our plan,” said Tiger. “If we are to follow up this sandwich clue it means finding this man Molo.”

“As his home is on Vallon it means going there.”

“If they have a Scotsman in captivity they might keep us there,” put in Rex, dubiously.

“I’m afraid that’s a risk we would have to take.”

“Would there be any difficulty in finding this planet Vallon?” the Professor asked Vargo.

“There shouldn’t be, although it might take time. I can offer a better suggestion, or, at least, a safer one.”

“And what is that?”

“Before landing on Vallon it might be a wise precaution to land on one or more of the planets nearest to it. In that way, should the people of Vallon be misbehaving themselves—”

“Misbehaving themselves—how?” interposed Toby.

“By raiding other planets for prisoners.”

“We’ve no real proof that has been done.”

The Professor came back. “Those two young Scotsmen would not have left their own country, never mind their home planet, voluntarily. I could

understand Vargo, or some of our other friends, going to Earth and offering to take in any people who felt like having a change of planet. That would be a very different matter. They would act openly, not swoop down on a lonely Scottish moor like a bird of prey.”

“I was saying, or about to say,” continued Vargo, “that should the people of Vallon be behaving like slave traders the peoples nearest to them would be the first to suffer. At all events, they would know what was going on.”

The Professor looked at Vargo over his glasses. “You think their attention may not be confined only to Earth?”

“That is what I would imagine. Of course, the unknown ship may not have gone to Earth with the deliberate intention of taking prisoners. The captain might have been surveying Earth, as we ourselves have often looked at other planets, and seeing two men alone, in an isolated place, decided to have a closer look at them. Later, for one reason or another, he conceived the idea of taking them away with him. As we know, one of the men died. The question is, what has become of the other?”

“Obviously, if he survived, they would take him home with them, wherever home happened to be,” said Rex. “I thought that was a foregone conclusion.”

Vargo agreed that was the most likely answer. “But,” he went on, “if they only wanted him for an experiment, rather than risk their own lives they may have used him.”

“In what way?”

“I could think of several possibilities. For example, they may have put him on another planet, or planetoid, to ascertain how long he could live in certain unusual conditions.”

“We seem to be doing a lot of guessing but it all boils down to this,” stated Tiger, always practical, as he filled his pipe. “Either we start a search for this wretched man Graham, or we do not. If we’re not going to look for him we need say no more about it. If we are going to try to find him then let’s get on with it. I suppose, if we go, it will mean a trip to the Fourth Region.”

“I will confer with Borrion about it,” decided Vargo. “He, as Navigator, must be consulted. Another day is neither here nor there, so I will go through what records we have of the Fourth Region, for any note our Remote Survey captains may have made in the past. There can be nothing recent, in my time, or I would have heard of it.”

“Very well, let us leave it at that,” said the Professor, on a note of finality. “We will wait here.”

“If nobody has any objection, instead of sitting here twiddling my thumbs,

I shall go and spend a little while with Morino,” stated Rex.
There was no answer so off he went.

CHAPTER V
EN ROUTE

THE *Tavona*, with no resistance to counteract, at a velocity exceeding that of radio rays sped on a course as straight as a beam of light towards the system of stars and planets designated by Martian astronomers as the Fourth Region. The numbers of these Regions defined a certain area of the Galaxy and bore no relation to their distance from Earth's Solar System—which of course included Mars. Even so, the system that included the planet Vallon, thought to hold the secret of the captured Scot, moved along its orbit at a distance from Mars which even by astronomical standards was considerable.

Vargo had been able to glean a little more information at the Records Office, where the reports of space explorers were filed. It was now known that Vallon was not a solitary, isolated body. That is to say, it had neighbours, in the astronomical sense, of course. It also had three satellite moons, close enough to make their presence felt.

In particular there were three planets of fair size in the same constellation as Vallon, all approximately the same distance from it. Their orbits were on the near side, which meant that the *Tavona* would pass near them on its way to Vallon. The largest of these appeared on Martian charts under the name of Zeta. This was for navigation purposes only. None of them had ever been surveyed, so nothing whatever was known about them. After some discussion it had been decided that as the *Tavona* would have to pass between these three smaller planets in order to reach Vallon they could be investigated on the way. Information so gathered might determine whether or not the *Tavona* went on to Vallon.

In the matter of size it had been ascertained that Vallon was of medium mass, about the same as Earth, for which reason the conditions of gravity and atmosphere would probably be similar. However, as its orbit circled its single sun at a distance rather less than is Earth from its own sun, the temperature could be expected to be high, although apparently not too high for human life. Anyway, this did not worry Rex, who preferred a hot climate to a cold one.

Of the inhabitants of Vallon little was known. There had been no contact for several generations. At the time of the last visit the people did not possess spacecraft, and that they now had such vehicles indicated a remarkable advance in scientific knowledge and engineering skills.

This sort of information no longer came as a surprise to Rex, who, previous

to his space travels, had, like most people of Earth although for no justifiable reason, cherished the illusion that his own planet alone enjoyed such qualifications. What had been a shock to him was to learn that Earth was in fact one of the backward planets in such developments. He had also learned that broadly speaking development was a matter of age; the older the planet the more advanced the people on it, although there were exceptions due to physical changes, sometimes violent, of position in the Galaxy, or angle of inclination, which of course affected the climate and caused a set-back.

Aside from these matters so little was known of Vallon that, as Vargo pointed out, it would be as well to be prepared for anything. The fact that it was presumably a ship from Vallon that had not only visited Earth, but had landed and carried off a man, was significant. It suggested that in landing on Vallon the *Tavona* would be taking a big risk; yet without landing it would not be possible to follow up the “sandwich” clue in the search for the missing Scot.

But, as the Professor had argued, it was not simply a matter of finding the man. The important question to be answered was *why* such a raid had been made. Why was Vallon interested in Earth? At all events, sufficiently interested to make the journey and land. Was this the first step in a war of worlds, involving Earth? As they were aware, there had been such wars, but so far none had been carried into their own Solar System. The Professor had always taken the gloomy view that this was almost certain to happen sooner or later, as more and more planets solved the problems of interplanetary flight.

“If that should happen it will at least have the effect of bringing Earth to its senses, and put an end to its own miserable wars,” asserted Tiger.

“If Vallon does intend to start something I can’t see what we could do to prevent it,” put in Rex.

“One can never tell,” rejoined Vargo. “We saw how Terromagna put an end to Ardilla’s ambitious scheme for interplanetary expansion.^[4] But let us not worry about things that lie in the distant future, or may never happen. If Vallon does engage in conflict with other planets, success or failure will depend on what new weapons it has at its disposal.”

^[4] See *The Death Rays of Ardilla*.

“It would need something extraordinary, and utterly devastating, to overcome that marvellous planet Terromagna,” declared Rex.

“The weapons of planets in advance of our own must always seem extraordinary to us,” said Gator.

“Speaking of Terromagna, the odd thought strikes me that ultimately there will have to be not merely a United Nations Organization, but a similar interplanetary body for mutual protection,” observed Toby, whimsically.

“You may intend that remark to be a joke, but it may come to that eventually,” said the Professor, seriously.

The *Tavona* continued on its course, annihilating space.

Silence fell, one of those long, time-wasting intervals that always occurred, and as far as Rex could see, always would occur in space travel. In the confined limits of a spacecraft, nothing more than an empty shell, there was little to do except talk, and however entertaining conversation may be it cannot go on indefinitely without a break. Meals did nothing to relieve the monotony, as without exercise the quantity of food required was negligible, and even that was in concentrated form. Rex had tried several ways of passing the time in the long gaps between landings. He had tried reading, the most obvious method; he had tried playing patience and solving crossword puzzles; but none of these things had really worked. He knew why. He was always conscious of where he was, and while it would not be true to say he experienced any sensation of fear—he had long passed that—there was always an atmosphere of strain, of nervous tension, which would never allow him entirely to relax as one could relax on the ground.

For the time being, until he was ready for sleep, he occupied himself by studying the chart of the Fourth Region which Borron had brought with him, memorizing the names of the planets, their positions, and the long elliptical tracks of their orbits as far as these were known.

In the end this had the desired result and he fell asleep, the only really satisfactory way of passing the time, even though sleep in such conditions tended to produce uneasy dreams.

So time passed; an unknown period of time; for time, as it is generally understood, is resolved on each and every planet by its own peculiar circumstances; on its position, its rate of revolution, its angle of inclination to the sun, the length and velocity of its orbit and other factors which fix day and night, the seasons, and therefore the calendar. There is no time in Space, wherefore it cannot be cut into small sections such as hours and minutes as is done on Earth. How could it be? One day on the Moon, for instance, is equal to twenty-seven and a half days on Earth. On Earth a year is 365 days. On Mars a year is nearly twice as long. For this reason, Rex’s watch, if he kept it wound up, could only tell him what time it was on Earth. Once he had left Earth the figures it showed were meaningless.

He was aroused from a reverie that was neither true sleep nor wakefulness

by the voice of Borron penetrating his wandering thoughts to announce they were entering the zone marked on Martian charts as the Fourth Region. He looked up with a start, and turning to his window observed a pattern of stars, some near, some far, unknown to him. A few glowed so brightly that he knew they could be no great distance away, and he wondered which of them was Vallon. He could not pick it out, but he knew that Borron would know. Outstanding was an area of blazing white light which marked the position of the sun around which the system of planets revolved.

The time for action had come, bringing with it, as always a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety.

“Where are we going first?” the Professor asked Vargo.

“I have spoken to Gator about that,” was the answer. “He says would you like to go direct to Vallon?”

“That sounds a bit too much like jumping into a lion’s den to find the lion,” put in Tiger.

“Gator suggests we take the planets in the order in which we shall approach them on our way to Vallon. We could look them over, perhaps without landing.”

“That sounds a better idea to me,” agreed Tiger. “If we could learn what sort of reception we would be likely to get on Vallon it would be all to the good. By the way, which of these planets is Vallon?”

“It can be easily identified by the three satellite moons keeping it company.”

“And what’s this planet we’re coming to now?”

“As far as we are concerned it has not been given a name. We will look it over in passing. Zeta is the brighter of the two some distance beyond.”

Rex had a good look at the planets under discussion. From experience he was now able to judge, from the appearance of a planet at not too great a distance, what to expect when he reached it. A dull effect meant that what was exposed was probably either rock or dense vegetation, neither of which present a good reflecting surface—bearing in mind that a planet has no fire of its own, and shines only with the reflected light of the sun of its own particular system. On the other hand, an exceptionally bright planet usually indicated much open ground, water, ice or snow, or even thick fog, all of which are good reflectors of light. The planet Venus shines so brightly that it can sometimes be seen from Earth in broad daylight, the reason being that it is always enveloped in a heavy cloud of vapour.

Rex observed that the planet they were now approaching was inclined to be dull, so he was not surprised by what he saw when the *Tavona* arrived within

easy observation distance. All that could be seen was a flat, unbroken sea of vegetation, obviously the tops of closely packed trees. In other words, primeval forest. If there were any rivers they must have had their beds far below the tops of the trees, for nothing could be seen of them.

For a time, while the ship circumnavigated the globe in different directions, from a low altitude, nothing was said. Then Tiger remarked: "We're not going to learn much here."

"It looks as if we shan't even be able to land," said the Professor in a voice of disappointment. "I can't see an open place anywhere."

"I think you are right," agreed Vargo. "I can see no break, even a small one, where we might get down."

"There would be no purpose in landing, anyway," contributed Borron.

"Why not?" queried Rex.

"Because there is nobody there. There may be insects, reptiles, and even animals, but there are no people like ourselves."

"There are places like this on Earth," argued the Professor. "Large areas still covered in virgin forest. Parts of South America, for example. Yet in those great forests there are primitive tribes of Indians."

"What sort of people are they by nature?" asked Vargo.

"Pretty ferocious, most of them. It is dangerous to approach them."

"That is what one would expect, and what the people here would be like if there were any. If we were able to find them it would be at the risk of our lives. There is no civilization here. Civilized people cannot live on a world without showing signs of their activities. It might be said that the more advanced the civilization the more apparent it becomes from a distance. Large areas of land are cleared. In their place appear the straight lines of cultivation, the crops with their different colours. Beside them are buildings, and connecting the buildings, roads. Here we see nothing of that sort. Which is rather strange."

"Why should it be strange?" asked Rex.

"Because there must be a good climate here, with a constant rainfall, to produce such a growth of vegetation. Why has it been allowed to run wild? Was it always like this, or has something happened to produce these conditions?"

"Somebody on Vallon should be able to tell us that. They should know," replied Tiger casually. "As far as I'm concerned I couldn't care less."

"If there are people here they could only be savages, with no language we could understand."

"If it comes to that, we shan't be able to talk to anyone in this Region,"

said Rex.

“That may not be so,” answered Vargo. “As you must have noticed, civilized people, even if they are not linguists as a result of space travel, have ways of making themselves understood. I speak a great many languages, and it would be remarkable if a man on a civilized world did not speak one of them.”

“By civilized you mean people with spaceships?”

“Of course. And we know, Vallon has such ships, so it is likely that other planets of the Region also have them. Remember what I have told you about Grantos landing on a small planet of the Fourth Region looking for water. There he was joined by a ship from Vallon commanded by a man named Molo. They were able to talk, and it is a result of their conversation that we are here.”

Rex nodded. “Yes. I’d forgotten that.”

“I don’t think we need waste any time here,” said Borron. “There might be people, but they could only be savages, and there might be many reasons for that.”

“Such as?” questioned the Professor.

“It is the sort of world where the dominant power could be insects. That as you know, once happened on Mars. Of all evils to eradicate insects are the most difficult. They overwhelm everything else by the sheer weight of numbers.”

“It would be interesting to see if your theory in this case is right,” murmured the Professor, hopefully.

“Without a place to land, that, fortunately perhaps, is out of the question,” said Vargo. “As we can’t land there is no object in making tests of the atmosphere.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” demanded Tiger, rather impatiently. “If we can’t land, let’s press on to the next planet and see if we have better luck there.”

“Do you mean Vallon?” asked Rex.

Borron answered. “Not yet. We have another planet, nearer, to look at first.”

Gator settled himself at the controls and the *Tavona* moved on, the unknown world shrinking behind them.

CHAPTER VI

MYSTERY ON MYSTERY

THE planet they were now approaching, which against the almost black background of infinite space had for some little while been a huge disc of dull gold constantly expanding, began to lose its reflected light and take on its natural colours. These were mostly greens, light and dark, with areas of shining white which, looking like pieces of broken mirror glass, Rex identified as water. A pale blue tint in the sky around the *Tavona* told him that the planet had an atmosphere and that they were already in it. As they were still some distance away the belt of air surrounding the planet was obviously a thick one.

The ship, with its jet brakes hissing, dropped nearer, the blue of the sky deepening in colour all the time. A white glare marked the position of the sun around which the planets of the constellation were in orbit. Rex had more sense than to look directly into it, knowing that the orb of the sun itself might cause damage to his eyes.

"I don't see much open ground," observed Tiger. "The place might be the twin brother of the world we have just left—all forest and jungle."

"It will be warmer," informed Borron. "We are much nearer to the sun. We may find the heat intolerable."

"I don't care what the temperature is like as long as we can land," said the Professor.

"I see no signs of human occupation so we may not want to land," surmised Vargo. "There's plenty of humidity, anyhow," he added, as they passed through a tenuous mass of vapour. "One would expect that, of course, with so much heat and plenty of water. During the day the sun must suck it up in enormous quantities."

Emerging from the base of the cloud which had temporarily obscured the scene below, the surface of the unexplored globe now lay open to inspection. All eyes were on it. The *Tavona*, at a height of less than a thousand feet, now began to travel horizontally to bring more ground into view, and, of course, to look for an open area should it be decided that a landing would be worth while.

One thing soon became clear. There was nothing to be seen, no roads, no buildings, no towns, none of the usual indications of a human population. As Tiger had remarked, the place might have been the twin of the planet they had just left. All dry ground appeared to be covered with a dense growth of

uncontrolled vegetation, although of what exactly this was composed could not be made out. The big difference between this and the last planet was the presence of water in the form of several large lakes. One of these, almost entirely surrounded by mountains, was of considerable size.

“If there are people here this is where we should find them,” asserted Gator. “Almost everywhere, where it is possible, people will put their homes near water. Water is a necessity, and if there are fish in it so much the better.”

“Then we can be certain there are no people here,” declared Tiger. “In order to take advantage of the fish they must catch them, and for that the first requirement is a boat. In my experience, no matter how primitive a tribe may be they invariably manage to get on the water, even if to do that they can produce nothing better than a raft or a dugout canoe. I can’t see anyone fishing; nor can I see on the water anything remotely resembling a craft.”

The Professor, in a melancholy voice, agreed.

The *Tavona* did a complete tour of the lake. On one side cliffs rose sheer from the water. Clearly, from that bank the lake was unapproachable. On the opposite side, however, at one place there was a long, fairly wide strip of beach, mud or sand—it was impossible to say which—with tongues of reeds or rough grass running across it from the slightly higher, forest-covered ground.

“There’s something very queer about this,” muttered Tiger. “One would have expected to find animals along the edge of the water, drinking or wallowing.”

“It is most extraordinary,” confirmed the Professor. “If no animals there should be reptiles, crocodiles for example. And surely there should be birds, waders like storks, or swimmers such as the duck tribes. I’m afraid there must be something wrong here—very much wrong. I’m most curious to know what it could be.”

Vargo agreed that it was unusual to find a planet, apparently so well adapted for a human or animal population, lifeless except for vegetation.

“The atmosphere must be poison,” conjectured Rex.

“In that case why do the trees flourish?” questioned Toby.

Vargo answered. “It may be that the vegetation has managed to adapt itself to conditions which prohibit the existence of warm-blooded animals.”

“We should be able to check that when I test the atmosphere,” said Gator.

Rex broke in. “Wait a minute!” he exclaimed. “There is something here—or there should be.”

“What is it?” asked the Professor, sharply.

“I can see a track. Or it looks like a track to me. You see that bright green

belt of lush reeds that runs between the forest and the water—it's almost directly below us now. Through the middle there is a straight line, as if the reeds had been trampled. Nature doesn't work in straight lines. *If* that isn't a track what else could it be? If it is a track then somebody, or something, must have made it.”

“I believe the boy's right,” said the Professor, staring. “How about going down for a closer look at it? As far as one can see from here there is no danger.”

“I have heard you say that before, but you were not always right,” returned Vargo, with a faint smile.

“At least we should test the atmospheric conditions at ground level,” pursued the Professor. “That might give us the answer to the riddle of why no one is here.”

“I see no reason why we shouldn't land provided there is a tolerable atmosphere,” agreed Vargo. “I leave the decision to Gator. He's in command. The ship is his responsibility.”

Gator raised no objection. The *Tavona* began slowly to sink, and presently its legs scraped softly on the sandy beach that bounded the reeds to which Rex had called attention.

“This is the moment when we would be well advised to take care,” advised Vargo, as preparations were made for the customary tests. “It so often happens, as you cannot have failed to notice, that it is on the most harmless-looking worlds that perils can suddenly appear. What is Rex looking at so hard?”

Rex replied. “Only the beach. This sand we've landed on.”

“Is there anything unusual about it?”

“Nothing beyond the fact that there isn't a mark on it. It's as smooth as a slab of marble, like a seashore beach at home that has just been washed clear by the tide.”

“Well, there can hardly be a tide on this particular sheet of water for it is obviously a lake.”

“I wasn't suggesting it. It merely struck me that as the water should be fresh, one would have expected to see the marks where animals have crossed it to drink—if there are any animals.”

“We have already decided there aren't any,” said Tiger.

Tiger was loading his rifle. “A different thought strikes me. In the rainy season here, and I'm sure there must be one, the water must fairly pour off these hills surrounding the lake. They must have rain. Look at the mist over the water. That's evaporation. There's an old saying, what goes up must come

down. Come to think of it, we came through a pretty thick cloud on the way in. It happens in the tropics at home. All day the hot sun is sucking up moisture, and when there's a drop in temperature down it comes. No matter. We needn't worry about rain. If we run into trouble, provided it's flesh and blood I should be able to deal with it."

"Flesh and blood, as you so unpleasantly put it, is not the only danger one encounters on unexplored worlds," reminded Vargo sagely. "Nature itself can be even more savage."

"I hadn't forgotten that."

At this juncture, to the satisfaction of everyone, for this meant that no special equipment would be required to leave the ship, Gator announced that the atmosphere was good. "There is plenty of it, too," he added. "The pressure is considerable. So, I need hardly say, is the temperature."

"Capital!" exclaimed the Professor. "Efficient though it is, I for one shall be glad to escape for a little while from the close confinement of the ship."

With the double doors open Gator had already stepped down and was stretching his arms and body as he looked around. Tiger, with the rifle tucked under his arm, followed him. Rex went next, quickly to discover that what Gator had said about the heat was understatement. It struck like a blow. The sun was a large white glare. Again he took care not to look directly at it for fear of injuring his eyes. "Phew!" he gasped. "Talk about an oven!"

"We shall become accustomed to it after a little while," promised Vargo.

There for a minute or two they all stood, close to the open doors, taking stock of their surroundings, ready to retire should danger threaten.

The thing that struck Rex harder than the bars of white heat flung down by the sun was the stillness, the silence. There was not a breath of air moving, not even a ripple on the dark face of the water. All was as lifeless as a picture. The silence was the silence of death, utter and absolute. It was not simply the quiet of a rural scene on Earth, where there is always sound even if remote; the call of a bird, or an animal. The hum of traffic on a distant road. Here it was a complete absence of sound which, because it seemed unnatural, worried the ears and tensed the nerves.

"Well, don't let's stand here like a bunch of frightened children," broke out Tiger impatiently.

"What do you propose we do?" queried the Professor.

"I wonder if that water is safe for a bathe," suggested Rex. "I could do with a dip. Mind if I have a look at it?"

"Watch your step," cautioned Tiger.

Rex advanced to the edge of the lake, a matter of not more than thirty paces. He surveyed it. Looking over his shoulder at the others he called: "It's as clear as gin." Stooping, he touched the water and raised a little to his lips. "It's sweet, but no use for drinking," he called. "It's quite warm. I might say hot."

"Then don't waste any more time," ordered Tiger. "Let's have a look at the track. If it is a track it should lead somewhere."

"Careful," warned Vargo.

"We shan't learn anything standing here."

"If we leave the ship we may learn more than is good for us," said Vargo, seriously. "I'm always suspicious of worlds that look so innocent."

Tiger did not answer. With the rifle under his arm he strode towards the broad green belt of reeds. Compared with the forest trees they were vivid green in colour, possibly on account of the proximity of the water. Otherwise there was nothing remarkable about them. They were about six feet high with the feathery tips common to the same plants on Earth. With Rex following closely they pushed their way without difficulty to what was undoubtedly a track. The way the reeds had been broken down proved that.

"Quite a path," said Tiger, stopping to look at it. "The question is, what made it? Whatever it is must come along here pretty often."

Rex was looking up and down the track. It ran straight from the forest to the water. "Something must come this way to drink," he guessed.

"Well, have you reached any conclusions?" inquired the Professor, coming up.

Tiger shook his head. "If we were in India or Africa I'd say this was a typical game track. What puzzles me is the way it stays inside the reeds. To reach the water it would be easier to walk across the open ground."

"Maybe it stays in the reeds because it doesn't want to be seen," offered Rex.

"That implies that it is afraid of something."

Rex mopped his sweating face. "Gosh! It's hot. If the thing, whatever it is, doesn't want to be seen, it can only mean that it has an enemy. That in turn means there must be at least two creatures here."

"A perfectly logical argument, my boy," agreed the Professor. "The question arises, what are we going to do about it?"

"Is there any point in doing anything about it?" asked Vargo, joining them. "If you are still looking for this man Graham you're not likely to find him here."

“It would be interesting to know what made this track,” said the Professor, wiping his spectacles.

Tiger resumed. “We might follow the track a little way. There should be a footprint somewhere which would give us the answer. There’s no point in going towards the lake. If there was anything there we’d see it. I’ll follow the track a little way towards the jungle. Don’t worry. I shan’t go far. By the way, what are the others doing?”

“Standing by the ship in case we come back in a hurry,” informed Vargo. “I think that’s quite likely.”

Tiger smiled. “Let’s see if you’re right.” He set off up the track, walking slowly, making as little noise as possible and stopping from time to time to listen. The silence persisted, with the result that any sound they made was magnified. In this way they reached the fringe of the forest. It was, in fact, the usual strip of young trees and mixed undergrowth, often called jungle, that forms a border of any tropical forest. There were some monstrous plants, some varieties of tree ferns and shrubs and creepers bearing fruits or fascinating flowers which gave off a heavy perfume.

The track ran on through the jungle so there was no necessity to force a passage, which could only have been done with a good deal of noise. The heat was suffocating, and Rex realized that had it not been for an unusually thick, moisture-laden atmosphere, to filter the burning rays of the sun, conditions would have been worse. He wondered how long the day of this particular planet lasted, for night would bring relief; but there had been no indication. All remained silent. Nothing stirred. The giant forest trees just ahead of them might have been painted stage scenery. It was all very weird, and uncomfortable.

Then it happened.

Rex was walking close behind his father keeping a sharp lookout for tracks, and at the same time keeping an apprehensive eye on the jungle on either side, when an object, almost covered by coarse grass beside the track, attracted his attention. It was quite small, and at home would have been so common that he wouldn’t have given it a second glance. But here, having the appearance of a man-made article, it had particular significance. Stepping aside he reached down and picked it up. Then the import of what he had found burst upon him.

It was a tin; an ordinary tin about four by two and a half inches and half an inch deep. The sort of receptacle which, when new, might have contained tobacco. It was polished and slightly dented as if from long and constant use, so much so that the inscription it had originally carried had almost been worn

off. But enough remained, in faint blue and gold lettering, for him to read part of it and guess the rest. It was these words that struck him speechless. They were, or had been when complete, Player's Navy Cut. He shook the tin. There was a soft sound inside. He opened it. The contents consisted of one half smoked cigarette; a cigarette that had been nipped out before it was finished. He took it between fingers and thumb and looked at it. The name of the brand, in minute blue letters, was there, although obviously it was not that of the original contents, which he thought had been pipe tobacco. WILD WOODBINE he read; and in flowing letters the name of the makers. He stopped in his tracks.

"Move on, Rex," requested the Professor sharply, whose progress had been impeded. "What are you doing?"

"Look what I've found," said Rex, in a sort of dazed voice. He held out the tin for inspection.

"What is it?" asked Tiger, turning.

"It's an old tin which I think has been used as a cigarette case, since there's a half smoked cigarette left in it. The writing on the tin has pretty well been rubbed off, but you can still just make it out."

"What does it say?"

"Player's Navy Cut."

Tiger's face assumed an extraordinary expression, almost comical in its incredulity. "You mean, a tobacco tin! English?"

"Yes. The cigarette, or what's left of it, is a Woodbine."

"Impossible."

"Look at it for yourself," offered Rex helplessly.

Tiger took the tin. He stared at it as if it was something he had never seen before. He looked inside. He read aloud the name on the cigarette. He passed it to the Professor. "This beats everything," he murmured. "What do you make of it?"

The Professor took the tin. He looked at what was left of the writing on the lid. He polished his spectacles and looked again. "I have had some surprises in my life, but never anything to match this," he said slowly. "There is only one explanation. This tin didn't come here under its own power. Fantastic though it must seem, someone has been here who has also been to Earth."

"Graham," breathed Tiger.

"Either that or we are on the brink of a general space age, with more people doing what we are doing than we suspected."

"It's the sort of tin a man working in the open might use as a case to keep

his cigarettes dry.”

“A gamekeeper, for instance.”

“You’ve read my thoughts.”

Vargo stepped in. “We can’t deny the evidence of our eyes. Someone from Earth has been here, and walking along this track lost his cigarette case. He wouldn’t be likely to throw it away with half a cigarette left in it, knowing he could get no more here. It looks as if he was smoking his last cigarette, a little at a time, for that reason.”

“Could the ship that we know went to Earth have obtained some cigarettes while it was there?” suggested Rex.

“No. For what reason would they be wanted? To the best of my knowledge you people of Earth alone have the habit of smoking tobacco. Besides, this is obviously an old tin, one that has been in use for a long time.”

“How did it get here, of all places?”

“That is a question I shall not attempt to answer,” replied Vargo.

“Let’s go on a bit,” said Rex. “We might find something else,” he added hopefully.

“That’s a possibility,” agreed Tiger. “We might even find the man. This track has been in constant use, and recently.”

They resumed their walk, with even more caution than before.

CHAPTER VII
ONE SHOCK AFTER ANOTHER

THEY had not far to go before they did find something else, and if anything it gave them even greater cause for amazement.

It happened when there appeared in front of them a small open area, irregular in shape, about the size of a tennis court. The forest trees did not stop abruptly at the edge. They dwindled down to it until they came to an expanse of moss of the most vivid green imaginable, although why this should be was not apparent. Not that any thought was given to it at that moment, attention being held, to the exclusion of everything else, by what occupied the middle of the open space.

It was a spacecraft. From its condition, dirty and weather stained, it had obviously been abandoned. Tilted on one side, its landing legs were so deeply buried that the ship actually rested on the floor of its cabin. The doors hung open. To them ran the track, just discernible in the moss.

For a minute nobody spoke. Then it was Tiger who said: "Great heavens! What have we here?"

"Clearly, a lost ship," answered Vargo, calmly. "As you know, it can happen, and does happen sometimes."

"A lost ship! That rings a bell in my head. Remember what the man Molo of Vallon told Grantos when they met? Molo said he was looking for a lost ship. This may be the one."

"It looks that way to me," said Rex. "It all adds up. When that ship crashed Graham was in it. He wasn't killed. He got out alive. That would account for the cigarette tin. He must have lost it."

"If he wasn't killed, what about the crew?" asked Tiger.

"They may be inside—dead."

Vargo spoke. "We may be wrong in assuming the ship crashed." He stepped forward, carefully testing his weight on the moss. It was soft and appeared to rock slightly. He went on. "It seems to me more likely that the ship, seeing this little patch of open ground, landed on it—for what purpose it would be futile to guess—not realizing it was coming down on a bog."

"Is it a bog?"

"It isn't one now although the ground is still soft. But it may have been a bog when the ship landed. That was why the legs went right in. It stuck and

couldn't get off. That is how I see it. As the ground hardened it would hold the legs even more tightly. That's a risk one takes when landing on unknown ground."

"If, as you surmise, the place was a bog, the crew wouldn't be able to get clear."

"They would have stores to last them for some time. They may have got away when the ground hardened. There's just a chance that if this was the ship Molo was looking for he may have found it and picked up the crew."

"Someone got away. That's proved by the track."

"Unless the track was made by natives who may have seen the ship come down."

"We haven't seen any natives."

"That doesn't mean there are none here."

"Why are we standing here talking about it when we shall probably find the answer inside the ship," said Tiger, shortly. "Let's have a look at it. Do you recognize this type of ship, Vargo?"

"No. I've never seen one quite like it before. There are, as you know, many types." Vargo looked at the sky. "We'd better hurry. I think, from the way the clouds are forming, we are going to have rain, and in a climate like this it could be heavy."

"It looks to me as if there's going to be a rattling good thunderstorm," returned Tiger. "Let's get on with it."

With Tiger leading the way, his rifle ready for action, they walked forward, slowly, without speaking, towards the open doors of the lost ship. It was a tense moment. What were they going to find inside? Rex was prepared for anything. The ground underfoot was soft, the moss bouncing slightly like a spring bed, confirming the supposition that the green area was, or had been, a bog. The actual surface was fairly hard, no doubt as a result of having been dried out by the blazing sun; but it was clear that this was no more than a skin over mud or possibly water. Walking on it produced an uncomfortable sense of insecurity, as if one might break through into something unpleasant. For this reason, acting on Vargo's advice, they walked a little distance apart, to spread the weight.

When he was within a couple of paces of the doors Tiger raised a hand in a halt signal, and then crept forward, a foot at a time, alone, until he could get a glimpse of the inside. After a comprehensive look he beckoned the others forward. "Okay, there's nobody at home," he said cheerfully. "But there has been somebody here, and not so long ago, I fancy," he added.

The others joined him.

Tiger was still standing outside. He pointed to a heap of palm fronds and dry moss on the far side of the cabin floor. It looked as if it had been pressed flat. "What do you make of that?" he asked.

"It looks like a bed," answered the Professor, peering in.

"That's what I thought."

"If that is so then somebody must be using, or has used, the ship, as a place to sleep," said Rex.

No one disputed this. They went in.

"Now we're faced with another tricky question," said Tiger, looking around. "Is the person who made this bed still alive? Is he still using it?"

"Is he still on the planet?" murmured Vargo.

"If he is, to look for him would be a hopeless business," averred Tiger.

"The alternative is to wait here for him to come back."

"We might have to wait a long time." Tiger brushed away the cobwebs that festooned the windows to let in more light and so enable a search to be made for clues. Nothing was found.

"There must be spiders on the planet if nothing else," observed Rex.

"Well, I don't know what to make of it," said Tiger, finally. "All we can say for certain is, there has been some sort of contact between Earth and this planet, otherwise that cigarette couldn't have got here. We know of one man who was picked up from Earth, Graham, so it's reasonable to suppose he has been here. In fact, there's no other possible explanation. Where is he now? Is he still here? Has he been picked up again and taken off? Is he dead?"

"Had he died he would probably have died in here, in which case the body, or the skeleton, would remain," said Vargo. "In my opinion he's still on the planet, and in all probability alive. There's water to drink, and fruit for food provided it hasn't poisoned him."

For a little while they stood discussing the mystery, and they were about to move off, as there was nothing more they could do, when something smacked loudly on the outside shell of the ship. Startled, they looked at each other. Tiger had taken a pace towards the doors when the sound was repeated, once, twice, and then several times in swift succession, like the rattle of machine gun bullets. After that there were no more individual shots. They closed up into a single deafening roar.

"What the devil . . . !" Tiger reached the doors and stopped. He saw the others looking so no explanation was necessary.

It was rain, but such rain as Rex had never seen nor imagined. It might be more correct to say it was water falling from the sky, falling not in single drops

but in a mass. The din was as if a thousand fire hoses had been turned on the ship.

“We’d be drowned if we went out in that.” Tiger had to shout to make himself heard. “I’ve seen some heavy rain in my time but never anything like this.”

The Professor answered. He, too, had to raise his voice. “At home I believe the record is held by Assam, which once recorded forty inches in a day.”

“This must knock that hollow.”

“It can’t keep it up for long,” declared Rex confidently.

“This might happen here regularly, at about the same time,” said Vargo. “Ample water and excessive heat are responsible. You remember a little while ago we discussed this very question. The atmosphere gets overloaded with humidity, and at a slight drop in temperature down it all comes. This planet has a very thick atmosphere so it would hold a lot of water.”

“Are you telling me?” shouted Tiger.

“This may explain why the man who made that bed decided to put it inside the ship,” said the Professor.

“At least it’s cooled the air a bit,” remarked Vargo. “I only hope that all this water doesn’t refill the bog and make it impossible for us to get away. No doubt it was water running off the hills that created this bog. It must be deep, too, which would explain why trees cannot get a foothold in it.”

“The rain would have to fill the lake before it could overflow as high as this,” said Rex.

“At this rate it wouldn’t be long filling the lake,” predicted Vargo, looking anxious.

“What are you worried about?” asked Tiger, shrewdly.

“I was thinking about the ship. It isn’t far from the water and the beach is practically flat. Gator might have to take off if there is a risk of the ship being flooded.”

“That’s a nasty thought.”

“It may have been something of this sort that caused the ship we are in to get stuck.”

“If you feel like that do you think we ought to make a dash for it now?”

“No. If we weren’t drowned the rain would beat us down. We wouldn’t be able to find our way.”

“Then we’d better keep an eye on things,” said the Professor seriously.

Rex was standing as close to the doors as was possible without getting splashed when he had such a shock that it sent him reeling backwards. Almost

at his feet had appeared a man, a body, a black man, naked, streaming water. It had obviously been his intention to jump into the ship, but seeing Rex standing in the doorway he had disappeared in a flash.

Tiger had caught Rex to prevent him from falling. "What's wrong?" he asked sharply.

"I saw a man."

"What sort of man?"

"A black man. A negro. I'm sure he was coming into the ship when he saw me."

"Where is he now?"

"Gone. Bolted."

"It must be the man who's been living here, who made the bed," asserted Vargo.

"But Rex says he was a *black* man."

"What of it?"

"These people of Vallon. Are they black?"

"No. I understand they are pale brown, almost yellow."

"Then the man couldn't have been one of the ship's crew."

"It seems unlikely."

"What is more to the point, it couldn't have been Graham," put in the Professor.

"This gets worse and worse," muttered Tiger. "Are we to believe that the cigarette tin was dropped by the black man Rex has just seen?" He looked hard at Rex. "You're quite sure you saw a man?"

"There was no mistake about that. I know a man when I see one," returned Rex indignantly.

"We'd better name this Problem Planet," said the Professor shaking his head. "I imagine that wretched negro was coming in out of the rain. Well, there's nothing we can do until it stops. Would anyone like a caramel? Luckily I brought some with me." He offered the paper bag all round.

He had just returned the bag to his pocket when there came an interruption so violent that for some seconds all was confusion. A black man, naked except for a strip of dirty cotton rag round his waist and carrying a cudgel formed by a piece of old root with a bulge at one end like an Indian club, leapt into the cabin from outside in one single bound and ignoring the occupants began dragging on the heavy door to get it closed. As he did this he shouted: "Quick, boss. Dey's a comin'."

To say everyone was bewildered, flabbergasted, by this wild intrusion, would be to put it mildly. The effect can be imagined. The arrival of the negro would alone have been a shock; but there he was, crying aloud *in English*.

Rex jumped to the outer door to see what was coming; what had thrown the intruder into a panic. One look was enough. The ground outside was awash with water. That was not all. It was swarming with eels, or snakes, he was not sure which. He wasted no time studying the details, for there was a multitude of them, advancing like a grey wave. Overall they were not very large, perhaps a yard long, but their heads seemed out of proportion to their bodies. Their lips were drawn back showing red gums. As they came they appeared to fight among themselves, making a horrid croaking noise which could be heard above the storm.

So much Rex saw in a single glance. The next instant, after a yell of warning to the others, he was helping the negro with the outer door which, as a result of the ship being at an angle, hung back. But Tiger, too, had by this time seen what was outside. He came to the rescue and the door slammed shut. The negro fell inside. Rex, white-faced, sank back with a gasp of relief. There was no need to wonder why the negro had come back.

Tiger looked at Vargo and the Professor in turn. "Did you see what was outside?"

"The water in the lake is rising," said Vargo, with his usual imperturbability. "That's where the creatures must have come from. In times of flood they must come ashore, presumably for food."

"How very unpleasant, not to say alarming," said the Professor, cleaning one of the windows with his handkerchief to see more clearly what was going on outside. "What can we do about it?"

"For the present, nothing," returned Vargo.

"We are lucky to be inside the ship. As those beastly creatures can't get in we are in no danger."

"That depends on for how long, and how far, the water continues to rise," replied Vargo. "One thing is certain. We can't go out. I hope Gator saw what was happening in time to save the ship."

"I hadn't thought of that," muttered Tiger.

Attention turned to the negro, now squatting on his haunches as far inside the ship as he could get. He was quite a young man, not more than twenty, and well built although so thin that his ribs could be seen under his shining black skin.

"How you talk English?" demanded Tiger, apparently trying to solve the greatest mystery of all.

“Me work for English boss, sah,” was the reply.

“Where?”

“M’Bula. He has farm there.”

“Where is M’Bula?”

“Tanganyika, sah.”

“So you’re an African?”

“Yes sah.”

“How did you get here?”

“Men brought me in dis airplane.”

“Did you know where you were going?”

“No sah.”

“Do you know where you are now?”

“No sah. I run away. Want to go home.”

“I’m afraid you’re farther from home than you imagine,” returned Tiger drily. Turning to the others he said quietly: “I don’t think he realizes he’s on another planet.” Holding up the tobacco tin he went on: “Does this belong to you?”

The dark eyes brightened. “Yes sah. I lose it when I run away.”

“That answers one question, anyway,” Tiger told the others, softly. He resumed the interrogation. “Why did you run away?”

“I don’ like these men who catch me. I want to go home. I got a job to do for de boss. He Mr. Smith. He good man. Now he think me bad boy, run away.”

“Tell me how all this happened,” requested Tiger.

The black boy told his story simply, and to the best of his ability in his limited English. It was much as might have been expected. His name was Ebutu and by parentage he was a Zulu. He worked on a farm for a Mr. Smith, looking after the cattle when out grazing. Some had gone astray, and he was out on the open plain looking for them when an airplane—as he called it—came down close to him. Some strange men had got out, but he had seen planes before so he did not expect any trouble. The men had wanted him to go with them, but he refused, saying he had to find his master’s cattle. Then something had happened to him. He didn’t know what. He remembered nothing until he woke up in the plane. The plane had brought him to this place. He had no idea where it was. He thought something had gone wrong with the plane. When a chance came he had run away to continue his search for the missing cattle or make his way home. But he found himself in a strange country and didn’t know which way to go. That was all. The only thing that

seemed to worry him was what his boss might be thinking of him.

“This sounds like the story of the missing Scots all over again,” observed Tiger quietly to the others, who of course were listening. Turning back to the Zulu he went on: “How long have you been here?”

The boy didn’t know. He had lost count of time.

Tiger pointed to the bed. “Did you make this?”

“Yes sah.”

“Why did you come back to the plane?”

Ebutu said because he was hungry. It was hard to find anything to eat. He had managed on roots and fruit. Also there were the snakes which came out of the water every time it rained, and it rained at the same time every day. He had escaped by climbing trees. Finally, not knowing which way to go to get home he had returned to the plane. The men had gone.

“Do you know what happened to them?” asked Tiger.

“No sah.” Sometimes he had seen other planes, he said, but he had not seen one land until today—meaning, of course, the *Tavona*. He had hidden for fear he would be punished for running away. He had been watching. When the snakes appeared he had come back to the ship rather than be eaten by them.

“Do you know what they eat—why they come out of the water?” inquired Tiger.

Ebutu did not know, but with simple logic he assumed the snakes came ashore because there was nothing left in the lake for them to eat.

Considering the numbers of them Rex found no difficulty in believing this.

“Tell me,” went on Tiger. “Was there another prisoner in the plane with you—a white man?”

“No sah. But dese bad men say I meet a white man where I am going. I would be able to talk to him.”

Tiger stared. “Do you mean the bad men who owned this plane could speak *English*?”

“One man. He could speak some words, not very plain.”

“How could that happen?”

“Dunno, boss.”

The Professor broke in. “This sounds to me as if these raiders had learned some English from Graham. From what the boy says they were already holding a white man prisoner, and that in all probability was Graham, although of course it may have been someone else who had been picked up. I’m beginning to wonder how long these raids on Earth have been going on.”

Vargo gave his opinion. “I don’t think this Zulu man can tell us any more. He has told us all he knows. Obviously he has no idea of where he is. He imagines he has been landed somewhere else on Earth. We can keep him with us and talk to him again later. We may be able to make him understand what has happened, although he won’t find it easy to believe. For the moment we had better be considering our own position, which might turn out to be serious. The storm seems to have abated, so the sooner we try to make contact with the *Tavona* the better. If Gator saw the snakes he will be worried. The rising water may have forced him to move.”

The Professor spoke from a window. “I can see plenty of water, but I can’t see any snakes, or whatever those horrible creatures were.”

“Let’s hope they’ve gone back to where they came from,” wished Rex, fervently. “I’m beginning to understand why the planet isn’t exactly teeming with life. Any ordinary animal would have a poor chance here.”

CHAPTER VIII
SERIOUS TROUBLE

THEY surveyed the scene from the door of the ship. Water stood in puddles, large and small. From the saturated ground clouds of mist were coiling upwards. Everything dripped, every tree, every bush. The fronds of the great tree-ferns sagged under the weight of water they were now discharging. As Tiger remarked, conditions were like those of an equatorial rain-forest on Earth, but more so; much more so.

A thorough inspection revealed no sign of the loathsome reptiles, eels or water-snakes, whichever they were. It was still not known for certain where they had come from, or where they had gone. Nor, for that matter, had there been any proof that they were dangerous to human beings.

“They might not even be venomous,” said the Professor, as he stood at the door looking out. “Eels at home are said to make mass migrations from one river or lake to another at certain seasons, although I have never seen it happen.”

“My hope is that the ugly brutes have gone for good,” said Rex, with feeling. “Is it my imagination or has the ship sunk a little since we came in?”

“It could have happened,” answered Tiger. “With the ground becoming softer and our combined weight it might well have gone down a bit.” He stepped out, instantly to sink up to his waist in black, noisome mud. He might have disappeared completely had he not grabbed the handrail, by which, with the help of the others, he was able to drag himself back into the ship. He had evidently disturbed something under the moss, for all around bubbles were rising and breaking as from a cauldron of boiling oil. “I spoke too soon,” he concluded grimly, looking at his legs in disgust, for the stench was awful.

Rex couldn't repress a smile.

“This is no laughing matter,” snapped Tiger, curtly.

The Professor spoke reprovingly. “Oh come, my dear fellow. Never lose your sense of humour.”

Tiger went on. “Whoever said this was a bog was dead right. I don't see how we're to get off it until the ground hardens again, and we haven't a clue as to how long that's going to take.”

“Very provoking,” muttered the Professor. “We have only ourselves to blame. In view of what has happened to this ship we should have been

prepared for something of the sort.”

“She’s sinking deeper now,” declared Rex succinctly. “I distinctly felt her move.”

“Good gracious! Don’t say she’s going right in!” returned the Professor, a note of alarm in his voice.

Vargo spoke. “It might be a good thing if we all stood on the highest part of the floor,” he suggested. “That, obviously, is a harder part of the bog.”

This advice was followed.

“Can anyone think of a way to get off?” queried the Professor. “The idea of staying on a ship, knowing it is gradually sinking into the mire yet being unable to do anything about it, is most disturbing.”

“I have a suspicion that isn’t the only thing likely to worry us,” said Tiger.

“Whatever next?”

“Those bubbles. Do you notice a queer smell? There’s gas of some sort below us, possible marsh gas, as well as mud and water. Let’s pray it isn’t lethal.”

“We must have been crazy to get ourselves trapped like this,” grumbled Rex.

“It’s always easy to see one’s mistakes after things have gone wrong,” said Vargo, without emotion. “We know we take risks. But if we didn’t we would never go anywhere.”

“Listen! I can hear someone calling,” cried Rex tersely.

“Then it can only be someone from the *Tavona* looking for us. It’s good to know they are safe, anyway.”

Tiger advanced to the door and let out a hail. “Here we are.”

There was an answering shout.

“Sounds like Toby,” said Tiger. He shouted: “This way, but mind how you come.”

They crowded round the door, watching, Tiger calling at intervals.

Presently Toby appeared. He was wet through and splashed with mud from head to foot. He waved a greeting. “So there you are. We were getting worried —” he broke off, his jaw sagging with amazement when he realized he was looking at a spacecraft.

“That’s far enough,” yelled Tiger. “Don’t step on the moss.”

Toby looked down. “What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s a bog. You may go through.”

“How did you get to that ship, then?”

“It was dry when we found it. It was the rain that turned it into a morass. Now we’re stranded.”

“The devil you are! That’s awkward.”

“It’s worse than that. This old crock is slowly sinking.”

“Is the *Tavona* all right?” asked Vargo. There was no longer any need to shout because Toby had stopped at a distance of less than thirty yards.

“Yes, the *Tavona*’s all right but we had to move her to keep clear of the water. The lake boiled over when the rain came down. I came along to let you know our new position in case you couldn’t find us. We haven’t moved far away.”

“We’re stuck here,” informed Tiger. “What can you do about it?”

Toby was staring. “Who’s that black lad you’ve got with you?”

“A native African. He’s a Zulu. He’s been living here.”

“A Zulu! Are you kidding?”

“No. It’s true.”

“Good lor! What next?”

“Never mind about him. You’ll have to get us off or we’re likely to be here for a long time.”

“Did you see the snakes?” called Rex.

“See them! We saw ’em. The lake must have been crawling with ’em.”

“Do you know where they are now?”

“They’ve gone back, or some of ’em have. Wait a tick. Let me think.”

Toby considered the situation for a minute. Then he said: “I should be able to do something about this.”

“What can you do?”

“Fetch an axe from the ship and lay a corduroy path of timber, enough to support your weight. There’s plenty handy. I shan’t be long.” With that Toby turned and disappeared in the direction from which he had come.

“That should solve the problem,” Tiger told the others confidently. “Lucky for us he found us. All we can do now is wait.”

“I hope we shan’t have to wait too long,” said the Professor, meaningly.

They waited. Conversation became desultory and soon died away altogether.

It was Rex who broke the silence. “I don’t know about the rest of you but I’m feeling a bit sick and dizzy. It may only be the heat, but I’m wondering if it could be anything to do with the gas coming up from the bog.”

“I feel it, too,” admitted Tiger. “It must be the gas. Probably methane. If so

it's highly inflammable.”

Vargo said: “That is the cause. I became aware of it some minutes ago. Don't try to light your pipe.”

“Whatever it is there's nothing we can do about it,” observed the Professor, philosophically. “Everything now depends on how long it will take the Doctor to get back and make a track. He may be overcome by the gas, too, before he's finished the job.”

At that moment Toby reappeared, carrying the small axe that was part of the equipment of the ship. With him was Lesta, one of the two crewmen.

“You'll have to make haste,” said Tiger urgently. “There's some sort of gas rising from the bog and we suspect it's poison. If we pass out you'll have to carry us out.”

“We shan't be long.”

Toby wasted no more time in unnecessary conversation. He started cutting the saplings nearest to him and Lesta carried them into place, laying them crossways as close to each other as possible so that the finished effect bore some resemblance to the cloth that gives this form of path its name.

To those watching from the door of the ship progress seemed to be painfully slow, although it was realized that this was a task that could not be done quickly. Rex was beginning to feel really ill. There was not a whisper of breeze to carry the gas away from the spot. His great fear was that Toby and Lesta might be overcome by the fumes before the task had been completed. He was sure they were working more slowly than when they had begun the job; and that, he suspected, was not just weariness. He did not mention this to the others because there was no point in it. Toby was doing his best, and he could not do more than that.

In the event his fears proved groundless, but it turned out to be a close thing, with Toby and Lesta swaying like drunken men as they put the last poles into position. As to do this they had to walk on what they had already done the track would obviously serve its purpose.

“Right,” announced Toby. “Come on.”

The Professor went first, walking unsteadily. He was followed by Vargo, helping Ebutu. Rex went next and Tiger brought up the rear. They did not stop when they reached dry ground but staggered on until they thought they were clear of the gas. Then they paused to rest, and in fresh air recover from the effects of it. Everywhere the ground was soft, like a marsh, after the drenching it had received. Their condition improved rapidly, and they were soon well enough to continue their journey, Toby saying they had not far to go.

By this time all traces of mist had vanished and the sun was blazing down

from a sky of deepest ultramarine blue. As if this was what they had been waiting for every flower poured out a cloud of wonderful perfume. It was pleasant enough, if rather overpowering, as if the party had walked into the shop of a scent establishment.

“That’s nice,” said Rex. “Particularly after that stinking mud.”

Hardly had the words left his lips when the bees appeared; if in fact they were bees. They looked like bees and behaved like bees; but they were far from ordinary bees; at least, as far as size went. They were more the weight of small birds. More and more appeared until the air was so thick with them that Rex nearly panicked. Indeed, he would have run had there been anywhere to go. But there were bees everywhere. Their buzzing was like the drone of distant aero engines. Where they had all suddenly come from was a matter for conjecture.

“I don’t think much of this,” said Rex, alarm in his voice.

“Keep your head,” ordered the Professor sharply. “Don’t strike at them or do anything silly. Let’s hope they have the good manners of our bees at home. Left alone they’re inoffensive creatures.”

One settled on Rex’s face, but apparently it didn’t like the smell or taste of him for it flew off again—to his great relief, for he assumed its sting would be in proportion to its size.

It was soon clear that the bees were concerned only with the flowers.

“Why didn’t we see any when we first landed?” questioned Tiger.

“I imagine they were waiting until after the rain before going to work,” replied the Professor with a chuckle. “Being highly intelligent creatures they must have known what was going to happen.”

Moving slowly they passed through this unnerving barrage without anyone being stung, although, of course, it was not known if the bees had stings. It was a matter no one was anxious to test. Anyway, everyone agreed it was a good thing the creatures were not hostile, their nests, perhaps, being some distance away.

“I have an idea there is more life on this planet than we supposed,” remarked Tiger, as they reached more open ground.

Leaving the path that had been made by the lost Zulu, Toby was able to point out the *Tavona* standing on some rising ground on the edge of the forest, partly under some great trees. Gator and Borron were standing by the open doors and no time was lost in joining them. To do this it was necessary to walk along the side of the lake, for the water had risen considerably.

“Let’s get out of this,” requested Tiger, on arrival.

“What happened?” asked Borron.

“We can tell you about it when we’re clear.”

“But wait a minute,” put in the Professor. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Forgetting what?”

“The crew of the lost ship. They may still be here, marooned.”

“You’re not suggesting that we start to search the planet for them!”

“They may not be far away. It could be to our advantage to find them.”

“How so?”

“According to Ebutu at least one of them speaks English. In his gratitude for being rescued he might give us the information we want about Graham.”

“Hm,” pondered Tiger. “You may have something there.”

“Apart from personal motives it’s up to us to help these lost travellers if it is within our power,” put in Vargo. “Mutual assistance in case of trouble is one of the first rules of space flight. Imagine how you would feel if you found yourself stranded here with little hope of rescue.”

“I wouldn’t feel too good,” admitted Tiger.

“It might happen to us one day.”

“Don’t remind me of that. Talking of rescue, it’s possible that the crew of the lost ship have been picked up. We have reason to believe that a ship was out from Vallon looking for them.”

“But surely had that happened Ebutu would know about it? He’s been here all the time and he’s never been far from where we found him. That being so a ship could hardly land without him being aware of it,” argued Vargo.

Tiger shrugged. “I leave it to you what we do. When I said let’s get off right away I spoke without giving the matter any thought. Maybe I was afraid of getting stuck here, too. It didn’t occur to me that there was any reason for staying a minute longer than was absolutely necessary.”

“It’s beginning to get dark, so you’d better make up your minds,” interposed Gator. “I’ll do anything you wish.”

Tiger glanced at the sky. “Very well. I’m open to any suggestion, but mine is that we stay here for the night, and when it gets light have a cruise round the locality for any signs of the lost crew. We would then not have it on our consciences that we had abandoned them without making an effort to find them. In view of the ground being flooded by rain, and what we believe lives in the lake, if they are here they may have moved to higher ground. If so I don’t see what we can do about it. It would obviously be impossible to make a thorough search of a planet this size.”

“There won’t be any more rain tonight,” prophesied the Professor. “There’s none left in the atmosphere to come down. We’ve had it all until the sun gets busy again tomorrow. Judging from the time we’ve been here this planet has a slow period of rotation, which, with one sun, means it must have a long day, with a night of comparative duration.”

“And as it has no moon, when it is dark it will be very dark,” said Vargo. “Not that it matters. We’re not likely to leave the ship.”

After further discussion it was decided to adopt Tiger’s proposal and wait until the next day before leaving. Arrangements for the night were therefore put in hand, a bed being made up for Ebutu, who had the virtue of not speaking unless he was spoken to.

They need not have hurried. Twilight was a prolonged affair, the sky glowing with gold, red and green, before the light really began to fail. And as it failed, so silence, utter and complete, settled once more over the lonely planet. The darkness, when it came, was just as absolute, and Rex realized for the first time how much Earth owed to its moon.

There was some argument as to whether the doors should be left open or shut, but it ended, as a result of the stuffy heat, with them being left open.

Vargo said this meant that someone should keep guard, but as no one was keen on such a duty Tiger rather pooh-poohed the idea, asking rather sarcastically what they were to guard against?

“If I knew the answer to that the question would not arise,” replied Vargo, quietly. “Because we have seen nothing except some reptiles which live in the lake you are content to believe there is nothing else here. I, having learned to take nothing for granted, do not share that view. On a planet almost entirely covered with forest there may be some surprising things. All the requirements of life are here—atmosphere, water and heat. Just what form that life takes depends upon minor circumstances, which here are unknown to us. It is strange, but not unique, that on a planet of this size there should be no human form. In such cases there is usually a reason, and we might well wonder what is the nature of that reason here.”

A compromise was reached when Rex offered to keep watch for a while on the understanding that if he heard nothing—he knew he wouldn’t be able to see anything—he could use his own discretion about retiring.

So it was agreed.

CHAPTER IX

AN ALARMING NIGHT

DEEP night had fallen, bringing a darkness so intense that it had almost the quality of being something tangible.

Rex had taken up his position on the top step of the open doorway, sitting on a cushion with which he had provided himself. A little to one side and just behind him squatted Ebutu. He couldn't see the Zulu but he knew he was there. He wouldn't have been able to see him had his skin been white; as it was he could only sense his presence.

Why had he chosen to share his self imposed vigil Rex did not know. He hadn't spoken to him. When the light in the *Tavona* had been switched off the boy had crept forward. Rex had raised no objection so he had stayed. Maybe he slept badly; maybe he felt lonely. Anyway, Rex was soon glad he had a companion, for night-guard duty in any circumstances imposes a strain on the nerves, and here, in the sultry heat and the silence of death, with an unseen, unknown world in front of him, he was uncomfortably aware of it.

All he could do was listen for sounds of movement, and this he did to such a degree that it seemed as though all his faculties were concentrated in his ears—as no doubt they were. Time passed. All he could hear was a regular breathing inside the ship which told him the others were asleep.

Inevitably his imagination began to play tricks, as so often happens on a night vigil. He thought he could hear stealthy creepings and rustlings under the trees which almost surrounded the ship; but he wasn't sure of it. He realized of course that in a silence so profound even a falling leaf would make a noise which in the ordinary way would not be heard. Once he thought some winged creature passed close to his face. He heard nothing, but felt a movement of air.

Time dragged on. He knew he was getting drowsy, if not on the point of dozing. The usual cure for this is to move about, if possible take a short brisk walk; but there could be no question of that here. However, presently he was alerted by Ebutu touching him gently on the arm. "Something comes," breathed the Zulu in his ear.

Rex listened. At first he could hear nothing; but he was prepared to concede that the black boy's ears were probably sharper than his own. Staring into the darkness he continued to listen, and presently there was borne to his ears a sound which he made out to be the brushing of twigs and the crushing of dead leaves underfoot. Under the feet of what? It was, he thought, some

distance away. Very soon there was no doubt about it. Something was moving in the forest; but of what size the creature might be there was no indication. One thing was certain, however. While still distant the sounds were coming closer.

The problem was what to do about it—if anything. Naturally, Rex was loath to awaken the others, perhaps unnecessarily, from their first sleep. A false alarm might disturb the ship for the rest of the night. After some hesitation he resolved to wait a little while to see if anything developed. The thing might come no nearer. It might go off in another direction. He hoped it would. If only he could see, he thought desperately; but all he could do was try to probe the darkness with his eyes, even though he knew it to be futile. For all he learned he might have been staring at a wall of pitch.

The sounds were coming nearer, but still he had not the slightest idea of what was making them. It could have been a small creature wandering about carelessly, or a heavy animal moving cautiously, perhaps making its way to the lake for a drink. He was inclined to think the answer was the latter, for there were moments when the sounds reminded him of nothing so much as an object being dragged through bushes.

Then, suddenly, they stopped. Why? What was the thing doing? Had it seen the ship and paused to investigate? For Rex this uncertainty was the worst moment of all. While he could hear the thing he could form a rough idea of where it was. In the silence he knew nothing. Deciding he couldn't stand the strain any longer he was about to warn the others that something was afoot, so that they could please themselves about shutting the door, when there burst upon his ears a noise so frightful that he fell backwards with a shuddering intake of breath.

Never had he heard anything like it. That it was made by a beast was evident, and from the volume of the sound it could only be a creature of extraordinary size. Not even an elephant could have uttered such a cry. Starting on a low note it had risen to such a screaming wail that the air seemed to quiver. Yet there was a terrible quality of despair about it, a heart-breaking appeal, as if the planet itself was crying all its sorrows to the Universe.

There was no need for Rex to awaken the others. A wild scramble and an incoherent muttering told him they had been jerked from sleep in no uncertain manner. Ebutu's teeth could be heard chattering. Someone switched on a light, dazzling Rex after his prolonged period of darkness.

“What the devil was that?” barked Tiger, rifle in hand.

All Rex could say was: “I don't know.”

“Where is the thing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Didn’t you hear it coming?”

“Yes, but it was moving quietly, some way off. I didn’t want to wake you without a good reason.”

“You’ve no idea what it is?”

“None whatever.”

“Give me a torch someone and I’ll find out.”

“Are you raving mad?” demanded the Professor.

“I suggest we shut the door,” said Vargo calmly. “We should be safe inside the ship. Let us leave any investigating until daylight.”

This was sound advice. With some commotion the door was closed and fastened.

The Professor was crawling about looking for something. “Mind my glasses,” he requested plaintively. “In my first affright I knocked them off.”

Tiger drew a deep breath and put down the rifle. “What a shocker!” he exclaimed. “I’ve never heard anything like that in my life.”

“I’ve heard of one’s blood running cold, but this is the first time I have actually experienced it,” confessed the Professor. “I shall never forget that last agonizing scream.”

“What’s the beast doing now, I wonder.”

“I would advise switching off the light,” put in Gator. “The beast may suppose the portholes are eyes and attack the ship. We don’t want that to happen because I’m afraid we should get the worst of it. Only a creature of enormous bulk could have made such a sound.”

This made sense, so the light was switched off.

Then as they all stood there in the darkened ship, listening, there came a repetition of the sound, but from a long way off.

“Good. It’s gone,” said Tiger. “To cover the ground as fast as that the brute must—”

The rest of what he was going to say was lost in another deafening bellow just outside the ship. Under the impact of it the *Tavona* seemed to vibrate.

“By gosh! It’s still with us,” cried Tiger, with a hint of anxiety.

As the fearful cry died away another sound could be heard. It was of crushing and smashing as if a ponderous body was forcing a passage through the undergrowth. Nearer and nearer it came. Then it stopped, as if the creature had sighted the ship and was contemplating it. Then the trampling went on and the giant footsteps could be followed all round the *Tavona*. There came a jar as

if the creature had bumped into it, causing everyone to stagger.

“If the brute is going to knock a hole in us I’d better try to discourage it with my rifle,” said Tiger.

“It would be useless to go out. You wouldn’t be able to see a thing,” protested Rex.

“The boy is right,” said the Professor. “We are better where we are, uncomfortable though it is.”

Again came the ear-shattering bellow, so close that Rex winced.

Within a few seconds, from a long way away, came the answer.

“Could that be an echo?” queried Rex.

“I don’t think so,” answered Vargo. “There are at least two of the monsters. The one nearer to us may be calling to its mate.”

“Then let’s hope they soon meet,” said the Professor in a melancholy voice. “I find this most disturbing. You were quite right, my dear Vargo, when you said you suspected there might be more here than eels.”

“I take back all I said to the contrary,” apologized Tiger.

“I believe the thing is moving off,” said Toby, as again came the sound of crashing, now receding.

There was another bellow, but not so close.

Said the Professor, as the tension eased: “I’d dearly love to see the beast that can make such a frightful outcry.”

“I’m sure you would,” returned Tiger, with a suspicion of sarcasm. “Why not go out and inspect it? You should have no difficulty in finding it. If noise is anything to go by it must have left a track like a motorway.”

“Why didn’t we see tracks of the beast when we landed?” inquired Rex, in a puzzled voice. “There wasn’t a mark on the beach.”

“I think the answer to that is, assuming the beast goes to the lake, the water had risen and washed them out,” said the Professor. “In periods of heavy rain the water must rise and fall like a tide.”

“I see nothing remarkable in finding huge beasts here,” put in Borron, looking at him. “You have told us that in a remote age there were stupendous creatures roaming about Earth.”

“Quite right.”

“Then why shouldn’t they occur here?”

“No reason I suppose. But to find a prehistoric skeleton is one thing. To find such a creature in the flesh is another.”

“I think we might put on the light now,” suggested Gator. “If the beast

comes back we should hear it.”

The light was switched on, when it could be seen that everyone had been shaken by the recent events. No one felt like going back to sleep.

“We might open the door to let in some fresh air,” suggested Tiger. “I’m suffocating in this muggy heat. Besides, I’d like a smoke, and I don’t want to choke the rest of you.”

No one objected so the doors were opened and Tiger, after staring into the darkness and listening for a while, sat on the step with his rifle across his knees. The monsters were still at intervals filling the sultry atmosphere with their mournful screaming roars, but these were now some distance away. Tiger said he thought he could hear splashing in the lake. Rex formed the opinion that there were a number of the creatures about. Turning to the Zulu he asked him if, as he had been there for some time, he had heard the noises before.

“Yes boss,” replied Ebutu. “Every night. If I can’t get in airplane I climb tree.”

“Have you ever seen one of the animals in daylight?”

“No boss.”

“Could they be elephants?”

“No boss. Not elephants. Me seen and heard plenty elephants in my country.”

“Have you ever heard anything like it, anywhere?”

“Not till I come here, sah.”

“It must be something that doesn’t occur on Earth,” decided the Professor. “If it did we should have heard something about it.”

“Well, I suppose there’s nothing we can do until daylight. I don’t know how long that will be so we shall just have to be patient,” said Toby. “We may get a clue when we can see what we’re doing.”

Rex told the Professor about his impression that something had flown past his face when he had been on guard. “I saw nothing, but I felt a draught on my face and, although this may have been imagination, I thought I heard the faint swish of wings.”

“I find that very interesting because it helps to confirm an idea that has been taking shape in my mind,” answered the Professor, producing his bag of caramels.

“And what is that?”

“I have a suspicion that much, if not all, of the animal life on this planet is nocturnal. The creatures we have heard obviously had no difficulty in moving about after dark. We could see nothing, but they could, or they would not have

been abroad at this hour. Why this should be, if I am right, I don't know, unless the absence of a moon has something to do with it. It may be that the wild life here has adapted itself to such a condition. One of the first laws of nature is adaption; it had to be, or nothing would have survived. Change goes on all the time, and creatures, both large and small, which are unable to cope with them become extinct. We call this evolution, and as a result the species we know on Earth are very different from their original forbears. Don't forget we have nocturnal creatures at home, although I have heard it claimed that none can see in *absolute* darkness."

With this theory to think about Rex said no more. Silence fell. The night wore on. It seemed interminable, and Rex, in spite of his efforts to keep awake found himself dozing. From time to time he was vaguely aware of the others talking. He heard the Professor say: "I believe I can see the first grey glimmer of light. We had better prepare ourselves for some surprises."

"I'm prepared for anything," mumbled Rex. "I'm fast coming to the conclusion that the whole Universe is crazy."

"In what way?" asked the Professor.

"In every way. We find an unknown ship on an unknown world, and who do we find in it? A Zulu from Africa. Could anything be crazier than that?"

"Dawn is on the way," said Tiger, getting up. "We should soon know all about it."

As it became lighter everyone left the ship to stand just outside the door in order to survey the scene and breathe some fresh air, even if it was warmer than one would have wished.

The actual sunrise was a spectacle to remember. The depth and density of the atmosphere may have been responsible. Lances of glowing light were hurled upward from behind the hills that bounded the far side of the lake, presently to flood the sky with streaming gold and scarlet. One by one the colours changed to green with eggshell blue between them. These quickly deepened, and the heavens took on their normal ultramarine blue serenity.

By this time certain details of the landscape had come under Rex's scrutiny. The first was the water of the lake; that is, the level of it. It had reached to the level of the previous day, exposing the beach. There was not a mark on it. It seemed that the water must have subsided very quickly after the beast they had heard had walked across the open ground to drink—if in fact it had done that—thus obliterating any footmarks.

He did not waste time trying to work out how this could happen because he was confronted by another puzzle, even more difficult to explain. This was presented by something in the lake. Although the far side of the water was still

in deep shadow, the sun being low over the horizon, he was able to observe two objects which he was sure had not been there before. He made them out to be islands, or, more likely, mudflats, since they carried no vegetation. They were of fair size and exactly alike. Naturally, the thought that struck him was, why had they not been visible on the previous day when the water was, if anything, lower than it was now?

A third and minor point was, where had all the surplus storm-water gone? How could it have gone so quickly? There was no sea anywhere on the planet for it to run into. In the absence of the sun during the night there could have been no evaporation. This was proved by the crystal clarity of the air, anyway.

“How did those islands get there?” he asked Tiger, wonderingly.

Tiger was looking at them. “I don’t think they are islands,” he surprised him by saying. “Since I first spotted them I’m sure they’ve drifted closer together.”

“Do you mean—they’re alive!”

“I can think of only one alternative. They could be masses of vegetable matter which, rotting on the bottom of the lake, have accumulated enough gas to bring them to the surface. It happens commonly in lakes at home.”

The Professor entered the argument. “Then tell me this,” he requested. “Why, as there is no current, should they move closer to each other?”

“There may be a current for all we know.”

“In which case what affected one should affect the other to exactly the same extent.”

“One would think so,” conceded Tiger.

The explanation was forthcoming when the objects under discussion began to move along the surface of the lake, keeping to the middle.

“Ah!” breathed Tiger. “So that’s it. Apparently Loch Ness isn’t the only lake to have a monster. Here there are two—at least.”

Of this there was no longer any doubt, for the two supposed islands now increased their momentum to a point where they left a wake behind them. Long lines of ripples ran towards the shores.

“Great heavens above!” ejaculated the Professor. “To displace so much water those creatures must be enormous. Unfortunately we can only see the tops of their backs. What a pity they don’t break surface and so enable us to see exactly what they are.”

“They must be the monsters we heard last night,” said Rex.

“That might well be so.”

“Then let’s hope they stay where they are,” murmured Toby.

“We should have no difficulty in finding their tracks,” asserted Tiger. “If one of them was our nocturnal visitor it came pretty close to the ship, if it didn’t actually bump into it. A beast that size must have left a trail like a steam roller.”

“As we’re on the spot, and in no great hurry, we might as well have a look round,” agreed the Professor.

CHAPTER X

MORE FOOD FOR THOUGHT

THERE was no difficulty in finding the track made during the hours of darkness by the unknown but alarming visitor. It ended close to the ship, on the forest side. Its size spoke for itself. Unfortunately there was no bare ground to show the imprint of a foot, hoof, or whatever it might be. All that could be seen, and this was plain enough, was a broad path of crushed vegetation, and this told them nothing beyond what was already known. The way the herbage was pressed down confirmed that the creature was one of great weight, and, presumably, size.

“You know, there’s something odd about this,” observed Tiger, after studying the track from where it almost touched the ship to where it vanished in the forest. “The beast came here; that’s perfectly clear. Then, as the track stops short it must have gone back the way it came. I was under the impression it went on to the water, but obviously it didn’t or we should at least see traces of a track going that way.”

“The answering call of the second beast may have caused it to change its mind,” suggested Rex.

“We only assume it went to the lake, and accepted it as proof when we saw those monsters in it a minute ago,” the Professor pointed out.

“Then it looks as if there are two species of big beasts here, those that live on land and others in the water.”

“I see no reason why there shouldn’t be many sorts of big beasts here. There’s plenty of room on the planet.”

“But surely if that were so we must have seen something of them, tracks, if not the actual beasts, when we surveyed the place before deciding to land? In Africa you’ll always find animals round a lake, or any water hole.”

“This, my dear fellow, isn’t Africa,” reminded the Professor, pithily.

Tiger stepped on the track.

“What are you going to do?”

“Take a walk along the track to see where it goes. With luck I might get a glimpse of this monstrosity and so put an end to any further argument about it.”

“Capital idea. I’ll come with you,” decided the Professor, with alacrity.

Vargo shook his head sadly. “Why can’t you leave well alone? Why worry

about these creatures as long as they don't bother us? I've warned you often enough to control your insatiable curiosity."

"What is the use of visiting unexplored planets if one doesn't make a note of their unique features? That's the whole purpose of walking on untrodden ground."

"I shan't go very far," promised Tiger. "At the first indication of anything unpleasant I shall turn back."

"I trust you'll be able to turn back," answered Vargo, meaningly. "I'll make a pot of tea against your return."

The party that set off along the track comprised Tiger, Rex, the Professor and Ebutu, who asked permission to go with them. As he had been some time on the planet, and for that reason might be helpful, permission was granted.

The first thing that became apparent was this: the track did not wander. It ran a straight course, as if the creature that had made it knew exactly where it was going. The ground underfoot became steadily more soft, even spongy. At times Rex thought it quaked slightly, as if it was waterlogged. But this, he thought, in view of the quantity of rain that had fallen, was to be expected. Under the trees the air was hot and heavy with moisture. Quite a few of the trees had fallen, Rex noticed, and lay with their roots sticking up in the air, as if they had been laid low by a high wind. The fallen trees were not all old ones, and he came to the conclusion that their roots had failed to hold them because of the boggy nature of the ground.

From time to time he caught a whiff of a wonderful exotic perfume. This was not really remarkable because there were flowers, many of them of the orchid family, on all sides, not only on the ground but clinging to the trunks of trees. Which of them was responsible for the divine scent he did not trouble to ascertain. It could have been any or all of them. It became so strong as to be almost overpowering.

Presently the source was revealed.

They came to a glade, or it might be more correct to say an open area formed by the number of trees that had fallen and lay half buried in the mire. Occupying this space, which in the absence of trees lay open to sunlight, was a spectacle that brought everyone to a halt.

From the soft ground, carpeted here with moss and a tangle of bright green herbage, grasses and the like, there sprang, on stems as straight and stiff as ramrods, tall clumps of flowers in the manner of lilies. At least, they had the habit of lilies, although of such a size and colour as no man on Earth had ever seen. The trumpet-shaped flowers, forty or fifty to each plant, formed a crown at the top of a stalk about ten feet high. The colour was blue, a brilliant,

dazzling, azure blue. The flood of perfume they gave off was intoxicating.

One odd thing Rex noticed was the absence of bees, although it was known there were plenty in the vicinity, bees of a size proportionate to the flowers. Another thing he observed was disturbed ground at the base of some of the clumps as if something had been grubbing for the roots, probably bulbs.

“What a sight!” breathed the Professor. “This was worth coming a long way to see. What would an enthusiastic gardener at home give to possess a specimen of this glorious flower.”

“He’d certainly knock other competitors flat at the local flower show,” asserted Tiger, smiling. “Something seems to have been having a go at the roots, and I fancy it wasn’t a rabbit. Well, the track goes right on through the middle of ’em. Do we press on any further or do we turn back?”

“I think we might go on a little way,” replied the Professor. “I’m still hoping to catch sight of some of the creatures that inhabit this strange world. I feel sure there must be several forms of life. Where do they hide themselves?”

“Why are there no birds? I haven’t seen one of any sort. That strikes me as being most peculiar.”

“That is a question I shall not attempt to answer. There must be a reason. It could be they have not yet had time to develop. If they did, they must have perished in a violent visitation of which we have no knowledge, or possibly the tremendous rain which would beat young ones to the ground and drown them.”

They had started to move on, and coming to the first clump of lilies Rex put out a hand to pull a flower down to his own level in order to examine it more closely. With a cry the Zulu jumped forward as if to restrain him; but he was too late. Hardly had Rex touched the stalk than he released it with a gasp of pain. Thrusting the hand under an armpit he stood for a moment or two bent double, while the perfume of the disturbed flower poured down in waves.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” asked Tiger quickly, stepping to him.

When Rex looked up there were tears in his eyes. “The confounded thing stung me,” he said through his teeth. “Talk about stinging nettles—”

Tiger took the injured hand and examined it. The Professor came to look. The tips of the fingers and thumb were scarlet and large white blisters were beginning to form.

The Professor went to the venomous stalk and studied it closely, but without touching it. “The thing looks as harmless as a stinging nettle,” he said, “but I can just perceive tiny hairs all the way up the stem. One wouldn’t suspect it but they must be unbelievably sharp and extremely poisonous. But we have many things at home that are more vicious than one would suspect. How are you feeling, Rex?”

“Not too bad.”

“Don’t you think you’d better go back? The Doctor may be able to do something to relieve the pain.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” answered Rex, opening and closing his fingers. “Luckily for me I didn’t grab the thing really hard. Only my fingers touched it. They’re still tingling, as if I’d picked up a hot poker, but it seems to be wearing off. I’d rather stay with you. No doubt we shall all be going back in a few minutes.”

Tiger looked at Ebutu. “You tried to stop him touching that flower.”

“Yes sah.”

“Then you knew what it would do?”

“Yes sah.”

“Which means you’ve seen these flowers before.”

“Yes boss. When I first come here. I try to walk through some. I go pretty sick. Now I don’ touch dem no more.”

“I’ll bet you don’t,” put in Rex, grimly.

“Let’s go on a little way,” requested the Professor. “Not far. For all we know the track may run on for miles.”

They continued on their way across the glade taking care not to come into contact with the flowers of such deceptive appearance, Rex making a mental note that they would not be as popular at home as he had first imagined. Reaching the far side of the open space they saw the track going on into the gloomy twilight under the trees of the forest. They moved now with caution, stopping every few yards to peer ahead and listen.

In this manner they had covered about a hundred yards when they stopped. This was not a matter of choice. They had no alternative, because the track dived into a hole that might have been the entrance to a railway tunnel, although somewhat larger. All around the outside the ground had been churned up like a cattle pen in winter. A pungent musty stench filled the nostrils.

“So this is where the beast lives,” remarked Tiger. “What might truly be called the end of the trail. Why, in the name of all that’s fantastic, does a beast this size choose to live underground? The only things that do that are those that are afraid of something.”

“This one *may* be afraid of something,” replied the Professor softly.

“You may be right, but if you are it’s beyond my imagination.”

The Professor took a few slow paces forward and raised a finger. “Listen,” he whispered, as if afraid of being heard by whatever was inside.

From deep down in the tunnel came the splashing of water mingled with

grunts and gurgling noises.

“It sounds as if there’s a lot of water down there,” remarked Tiger.

“Considering the saturated nature of the soil one would expect that. Moreover, since the ground has been falling somewhat I imagine there’s more to it than that,” answered the Professor.

“What exactly do you mean?”

“The lake must drain this way.”

“But the soil here could hardly hold that quantity of water.”

“It could if there was a cavity. From the splashing we can hear the water is not entirely held by the soil. A considerable quantity of it is free. In other words, either the ground below our feet is a system of caves filled with water or there is an underground lake. It might even be more than that.”

“What more could it be?”

“A sea.”

“A *sea*.”

“Well, a considerable expanse of water. Why not? Why should a sea necessarily be on the surface?”

“This isn’t the place to talk about it. The beast might come out. Let’s move back a bit. Then you can tell me what’s in your mind.”

When they had retired to a more comfortable spot, although still within sight of the mouth of the tunnel, the Professor went on. “An idea has just occurred to me that would explain a lot of things we’ve been unable to understand. Everywhere we’ve been since we landed we found the ground waterlogged; some of it bog. We thought we were standing on soft mud. Now I believe the ground we’ve been walking on is nothing more than a skin of decayed vegetable matter floating on water. That theory is supported by the way the landing legs of the unknown spaceship broke through it. Again, you must have noticed how many trees have fallen. I suspect that when they reach a certain size, their roots, not having a firm grip in the ground, can no longer carry their weight. Then they fall, and sinking into the mud help to thicken the skin over the subterranean water. We can only guess at what the area of this water may be. It could be a lake, or a series of lakes, possibly connected so that creatures could move underground from one to the other. That would account for the surprising rise and fall of the exposed lake. It could also explain how the beasts we saw in the lake got there without leaving a track to the edge of the water.”

Rex stared. “You mean—they could go down this hole and come up in the lake?”

“It is possible. What I have said is only a theory, and one we’re never likely to prove. We thought the creatures here might be nocturnal in their habits. Eyes wouldn’t be much use to them underground, so they might not have eyes. In nature life does not develop what it does not need. On the other hand, of course, the inhabitants of this planet may have developed exceptional sight and are able to see in the dark.”

“Had the visitor that called on us last night been blind it might have bumped into the ship without seeing it,” suggested Rex.

“It might. On the other hand it might have seen it, or scented it, and deliberately gave it a bump to find out if it was alive. I mention scent because in nature if a thing is deficient in one sense it usually makes up for it with another.”

Tiger stepped in. “All this talk is getting us nowhere. Assuming we’re not going down that hole—at least, I’m not—we might as well be getting back. We said we wouldn’t be long.”

“Quite right,” agreed the Professor. “We don’t want to bring anyone out to look for us. There’s nothing more to learn here so we’ll leave the beast in peace.”

The return march to the ship was made without accident, but even before they reached it they saw that the water of the lake had risen again although there had been no rain.

“This seems to bear out what I said about the lakes, both above ground and below it, being connected,” observed the Professor. “This one may serve as an overflow. If so it would rise and fall in sympathy with the rest of the water on the planet. From here we can see only a small part of it. For all we know it may be pouring with rain beyond those hills.”

They rejoined the others in the *Tavona*, or rather, outside, for becoming anxious those who had remained behind were watching for them to appear. They had related their adventures, and Rex, although his hand was not paining him so much, was having some lotion applied to it by Toby, when a movement in the sky caught his eye.

For a moment he stared in astonishment. Then he let out a cry. “Look! A ship! It’s low, and coming this way.”

CHAPTER XI
DISCONCERTING NEWS

THE sudden appearance of the strange ship—for none of the crew of the *Tavona* was able to identify the type—caused anxiety as to the character of its occupants and speculation regarding its purpose. As Vargo said, the people on board might be friendly, or they might not.

Those standing at the door of the *Tavona* had this advantage; they could see without being seen, at all events for the time being, because they were practically under the trees on the edge of the forest. The first question to arise, therefore, was should they reveal themselves or remain concealed.

“That ship is obviously going to land,” asserted Tiger, as it began circling at a low altitude. “It’s looking for somewhere to get down, exactly as we did.”

“It might be looking for someone, or something,” countered Vargo.

“Such as?”

“The lost ship or its crew.”

“You mean, they might know the ship is here, on this planet?”

“No, I didn’t mean that. But if that ship is from Vallon it would be known that one of their ships was missing. We ourselves learned that through Grantos. This may be a unit of an organized search. We have undertaken the same duty on more than one occasion.”

“The trouble is, we don’t know where this ship has come from,” put in Gator. “It may belong to Vallon. I hope so, because we have no reason to think the people of that planet are hostile.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” disputed the Professor.

“If what we believe is correct, a ship from Vallon wasn’t above landing on Earth and making off with two of its inhabitants. I’m thinking of course of the two Scots lads, one of whom died and was callously put overboard. It seems likely that the same people abducted Ebutu, although for what reason is beyond my comprehension. If a planet has taken it into its head to do that sort of thing there will be no peace for anyone.”

“I based my assumption that the people of Vallon were friendly from what I learned from Grantos about the ship commanded by Molo,” answered Vargo. “You will remember Grantos met Molo by chance on a planet of the Fourth Region. Grantos was looking for water and Molo was searching for a lost ship. They took a meal together, so there could have been no animosity on that

occasion. No doubt Molo could have seized Grantos, and his ship, had he wished to do so. The fact that he did not attempt anything of the sort suggests he had no particular interest in him. Anyway, as Molo was then looking for a lost ship it seems not unlikely that this is him, still looking for the missing vessel.”

The Professor shrugged. “The decision as to what course we should take rests with you and Gator. The *Tavona* is in your charge. In any case it seems certain that we shall be discovered, for here is the stranger coming down, almost on the same spot where we originally landed.”

“Someone on board may have spotted the ship in the bog,” suggested Rex.

“It wouldn’t be easy to see from the air, for which reason we didn’t notice it,” returned Tiger. “If we couldn’t spot it why should they? They’re probably landing where they are for the same reason that we did. There aren’t many places where a landing is possible. But let’s stop guessing and watch what happens.”

The unknown ship, which was more of the “flying saucer” type than the *Tavona*, settled on the shore of the lake as lightly as a thistle seed. After a brief delay the doors were opened. Two men, dressed in tight fitting black jackets with knee length shorts below, stepped down and stood talking as they gazed around.

Tiger beckoned Ebutu. “Have you seen those men before?”

“No boss.”

“Were the men who kidnapped you dressed like that?”

“Yes sah, jest the same.”

“Hm,” murmured the Professor. “Then these fellows must be part of the same lot who have been raiding Earth. I wonder how many prisoners they have taken. An odd thought strikes me. The next time someone on Earth is reported missing who would believe that he might possibly have been picked up by a spaceship? It’s amusing to think what the police would say if we put that forward as a theory.”

The two men who had disembarked still stood looking about them as if in doubt as to what they should do. As Tiger remarked, that was understandable. If they were hoping to find something, where was the best place to start looking?

“They will see us presently,” said Vargo. “Rather than it should be thought we were afraid of them I will go and talk, if that is possible. I may be able to tell them what they want to know. On their side they might volunteer some information about Graham. If they could do that it would save us a lot of time and trouble.”

“You mean you’ll tell them about a lost ship being here?” queried Tiger.

“Yes. I feel sure that is what they are looking for. If not the ship, then the crew. That is what we would do had we lost a ship, so we can hardly do less.”

“I will come with you,” offered Gator. “One of us should know something of a language they understand. Having a spacecraft they must have visited many planets, some, no doubt, where we have called.”

Rex sat on the step and watched Vargo and Gator walk towards the strangers. That they were seen as soon as they had left the shadows cast by the trees was evident from the way the new arrivals turned towards them. As they were now facing the right direction it seemed equally certain they would see the *Tavona* in the background. Vargo raised a hand in greeting. The other party did the same.

Presently they met, and it was soon clear from the way they stood talking that they had found a common language. Conversation went on for a considerable time, much to Rex’s curiosity, for naturally he wondered what they were talking about so earnestly. The sun climbed higher and began to flay the ground with its blistering rays. Mist began curling upwards from the surface of the water, causing Rex to remark that sooner or later all the moisture would come down again in another cloudburst.

Eventually Vargo walked back, leaving Gator still talking. “We are going to show them the abandoned ship,” he informed. “They are friendly.”

“Then you managed to find a language you both know,” said Tiger.

A curious expression of whimsical amusement came over Vargo’s face. “Yes,” he said.

“What was it?”

“One that will surprise you.”

“Do I know it?”

“Better than any of us.”

“What is it?”

“English, with what I believe to be a slight Scottish accent.”

Everyone stared.

“But that’s preposterous!” blurted Tiger, when he was able to speak.

Vargo smiled at the expressions on the faces around him. “Not so preposterous as you might think. In fact, the explanation is simple.”

Said the Professor: “I have always maintained that in space anything is possible, but I must confess this strains my credulity. How could this happen?”

“This ship is from Vallon. The man now speaking to Gator is Molo, the same captain who spoke to Grantos and gave him the information that brought

us here. He learned to speak English from a man of Earth who undertook the task of teaching Vallon spaceship commanders his language. Now do you understand?”

“I understand how the word sandwich got into Space,” said Tiger.

“What was the object of this?” inquired the Professor suspiciously.

“I can answer that question. When—”

“Just a minute,” interrupted Tiger. “Would this man who taught Molo English be a Scot named Graham?”

“You have grasped the situation.”

“Where is Graham now? Is he still on Vallon?”

“No. I was about to explain. It is true that Graham and his friend Macpherson were deceived when they were picked up—”

“Deceived?” questioned the Professor sarcastically.

“Yes. They were asked if they would care for a ride in a spacecraft. They, being young and careless, said they would like that very much. They went into the ship without being forced—”

“And also, I imagine, without being told where the ride was going to land them?” sneered Tiger.

“That, I fear, is true. Macpherson was not well when he embarked. He was having difficulty in breathing, and it may be that the conditions in the ship aggravated his condition. Anyhow, he died, whereupon he was put overboard in some haste when Graham, who thought his friend had died of pneumonia following influenza, indicated the disease might be infectious. That, I think, would be understandable in the circumstances, and you may remember we discussed that very possibility.”

“Then what happened?” asked Rex.

“Graham was taken to Vallon. There he was told that if he would cooperate by teaching his language to spaceship commanders, he would, after a while, be taken home. That promise was kept. Graham was quite happy on Vallon but he still wished to go home, so a ship was detailed to take him back to the place from where he was picked up. Nothing has been heard of that ship since it left Vallon. It is now listed as missing. Unfortunately it is not known whether the ship ran into trouble on the outward journey or on the way home.”

“Which means there’s just a chance that Graham has got back home,” said Tiger.

The Professor shook his head. “Had he reached home we should have heard about it when we were making inquiries about Macpherson. He had certainly not reached home then. Had he done so, and told what had happened

to him, the newspapers would have been full of it—unless he was put in a lunatic asylum. I'm afraid the ship in which he was travelling was lost on the way out."

"He wasn't in the ship that was lost and abandoned here, that's certain," asserted Tiger. "Had that been so, Ebutu, being in that ship, would know about him."

The Professor turned to Vargo. "Why are the space captains of Vallon so anxious to learn English? I don't like that. It suggests they have designs on us."

"I can only tell you what Molo has told us," returned Vargo. "Vallon is a progressive planet. The scientists and engineers, for their own advancement, are anxious to learn all that is known on other planets. For that reason they have for some time been making long distance flights of survey, looking over many planets. They observed a great deal of activity on Earth. The problem was how to find out what was happening. To obtain this information they adopted a policy in which they think the means justifies the end. They would land on a planet under observation—not necessarily Earth—and if possible pick up one of the inhabitants."

"They have actually been doing this?" interposed the professor.

"Yes."

"And Earth was one of the planets invaded."

"Yes."

"And that's how they got the two Scots and Ebutu."

"Of course. Graham was taken to Vallon. He was treated as a celebrity. Everything possible was done to make him happy. He was told that when he had served his purpose he would be taken home. We may regard such behaviour as inexcusable but it has achieved its purpose in that by this method Vallon has acquired an immense amount of knowledge of the Universe; what the various planets are doing and how far they have advanced in technical science. They argue what is the use of a spaceship if it is not to establish contact between planets? And that cannot be done to any useful purpose until the language barrier has been removed. Molo assures me that no one has been hurt and no harm has been done."

"Does Molo know we are here looking for Graham?" asked Toby.

"Yes. I made no secret of it. He is doing more or less the same thing, in that he is looking for the ship in which Graham started for home."

Rex joined in again. "I may be dense, but there's a side to this I can't understand. What about Ebutu? Where does he fit in? What's he doing here?"

Vargo answered. “Naturally, I asked that question, and this is the explanation I was given. It seems that Graham, when he was on Vallon, said not all the people of Earth looked alike. They had skins of different colours, white, black and brown. This caused surprise, because no one on Vallon had ever seen a black man. It was decided to fetch one, and Graham showed on a map where such men were to be found.”

“Presumably Africa.”

“Yes. Well, a ship was sent to collect a black man, and this was not entirely a matter of curiosity. In their thirst for knowledge the scientists on Vallon wanted to know why skins should be black in one place and white in another, on the same planet. It may sound absurd to us, but they were curious to know if a black man would turn white if he was taken to another planet. The ship that went on this mission has not returned.”

“That must be the one we found here,” said the Professor.

“Of course, since Ebutu is here.”

“So the ship succeeded in finding a black man and was lost on the return journey. So much is clear. But what about the ship that was taking Graham home? What happened to that? Vallon must have two ships missing.”

“That is correct.”

“Then if Graham is not on Vallon there’s no point in going there. He might be anywhere between Vallon and Earth.”

Said Tiger: “Even if we knew he was here it would be a waste of time to start looking for him. Imagine trying to find a single individual on Earth if it was covered with forest. If the rest of the planets of the Fourth Region are smothered with jungle in the same way as this one, anyone stranded would be a Robinson Crusoe for the rest of his days.”

“For all we know Graham might not even be alive,” put in Rex, moodily.

“If something went wrong with the ship it might now be in orbit somewhere; anywhere, in which case it’s likely to remain on the same track for all time,” observed Vargo.

“If Vallon loses ships at this rate they can’t be very reliable,” said Tiger critically.

“That’s not fair comment,” objected Vargo. “What happened to the ship that landed here could easily have happened to the *Tavona*. We take the same or similar risks every time we land on an unknown planet. We know that and accept them. Again, these Vallon ships could have been wrecked by collision with a meteor, or a shower of meteorites. That is always a possibility.”

“Let’s not talk about that,” requested the Professor. “The question is, what

happens now?”

“I will show Molo the way to the abandoned ship,” replied Vargo. “That is his affair. Presumably we shall then part and go our own ways. We shall have to decide whether to return home or continue the search for Graham, which now seems hopeless.”

“A point arises when you talk of parting company with Molo,” said Tiger. “Will he want to take Ebutu with him?”

“I would object most strongly to that and do my utmost to prevent it,” said the Professor indignantly. “The unfortunate boy belongs to Earth and should be taken back there. He has no idea of what has really happened to him. Whatever excuses Vallon may make it was an outrage to carry him off.”

“The problem of his disposal may not arise,” returned Vargo. “Molo seems an amiable person and I don’t think he’d cause trouble if I insisted on taking Ebutu to his home. Meanwhile, I will show him where the lost ship rests.”

“Why does he want to see it?”

“I think he has an idea that it might be salvaged.”

“How?”

“By digging out the legs to free them.”

“That would be a big job even with the right tools,” said Tiger.

“He may not try to do it now, but he could fetch a working party from Vallon.”

“Ah! I see what you mean. Are you going to take Molo to the ship now?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll come with you,” offered Tiger. “I think it’s better that Gator should stay here with the *Tavona* in case it becomes necessary to move her again. On a place like this anything could happen.”

“Very well. I will ask Gator to return to the ship. Let us go.”

As Vargo and Tiger moved off Rex called: “Aren’t you going to take your rifle?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” answered Tiger. “I’ve been over the ground before so we should be back inside ten minutes.”

“By the look of the sky we’re about due for another deluge, so if you don’t want to be caught in it you’d better get a move on,” advised Rex, who had observed that the sun had already been dimmed by masses of threatening-looking clouds.

Tiger waved acknowledgement of the advice as with Vargo he walked across to the Vallon ship. After a few words Gator came strolling back to the *Tavona*, while Vargo, with Tiger and Molo, set off for the belt of reeds through

which ran the track to the bogged-down ship.

Rex watched them until they had disappeared from sight into the rushes. Then, fetching a hard biscuit from the food cupboard he sat on the top step to await their return. The clouds, he noticed, were beginning to look really evil. He hoped his father, knowing what this portended, was also keeping an eye on them. For the rest, there was neither sound nor movement anywhere. Once more the silence of death had settled over the planet.

CHAPTER XII
THE MONSTER

REX, sitting on the step nibbling the biscuit, stopped eating with his mouth half open to stare at something on the far side of the lake. From the hills, or beyond the hills, a thin column of smoke, as straight as a lance, was rising into the stagnant air. So astonished was he by this that for a few seconds he found it difficult to believe his eyes. Smoke could only mean one thing. Where there was smoke there was fire, and if there was fire . . . When there was no longer any doubt he called to the others, who were still inside the ship, and invited them to come out to look at something interesting.

“What do you make of that?” he inquired, pointing.

The Professor gave his verdict. “It could be spontaneous combustion. If it isn’t, then as animals don’t normally light fires there must be somebody there.”

Toby came in. “I suppose there’s a remote chance that it could be the crew of the abandoned ship, or possibly Graham, if it was on this planet that his last flight ended. After all, we’re still in the same Region as Vallon.”

“We could soon settle it,” averred Rex.

“How?”

“By taking the *Tavona* across and having a close look at the spot from which the smoke is rising. It should be easy enough to find.”

“No,” said Gator. “This is not the moment to leave here.”

“Why not?”

“It could start raining at any moment, and if we were caught in the sort of rain we had yesterday we wouldn’t be able to find our way back here.”

“We could rise above the storm and wait while it lasted.”

“Haven’t you forgotten something?”

“What?”

“Your father. To be caught out in the storm could have serious consequences.”

“He could find shelter in the Vallon ship.”

“And perhaps be forced to remain in it. It seems that Vallon ships have made a habit of collecting men from Earth.”

“I see what you mean,” replied Rex, slowly. “We’d better not risk that. It would be better to wait till the storm is over. We can go over and look at the

smoke any time. There's no desperate urgency about it."

There was a long pause in the conversation as they all stood, or sat, gazing at the smoke, which remained curiously static. Then Rex said, with a tinge of anxiety in his voice: "They're a long time. They should have been back by now."

"If Molo is contemplating the salvage of the ship he would need to make a thorough examination of it," Borron pointed out.

"They'd better be quick or they may not get here at all," said Toby sharply.

"You mean—the storm?"

"No! Look what's coming across the lake."

All heads turned in that direction. Silence fell. For there was certainly something coming across the water, leaving a turbulent wake, although being awash it was not possible to make out what it was. On Earth it could have been a submarine, without conning tower or periscope. On and on it came, always at the same speed, heading in a dead straight line towards the beach at the point where the bed of reeds ended at the water. It reached the shallows, and there, as it was bound to, it showed itself for the first time.

Still nobody spoke. Rex could only stare. When, presently, the creature seemed to bounce its way to the more or less firm ground it was the size of the thing that shook him. He thought its body would never stop coming out of the water. For the moment he could think of nothing with which to compare it, although it reminded him vaguely, very vaguely, of something. In the matter of bulk it might have been the front half of a whale, but its shape was more that of a sea elephant, although instead of being furnished with fins it had legs, the back ones bent double and clearly longer than the front ones. It had enormous webbed feet on which it dragged itself along, clumsily, as if it was really a marine creature able to live on land. When it stopped it had a curious way of holding its head high so that its back sloped down to the tail. Its mouth stretched from one side of its face to the other. Under it a big pulse seemed to beat in its throat, like a clockwork toy. Its eyes were horrible. They were flat white, as large as dinner plates.

Then, suddenly, it jumped, a full thirty feet, to the reeds.

"It's a frog!" cried Rex. "A fantastic frog! I'll tell you something else. Those things we thought were eels or snakes, with big heads, could have been tadpoles of a sort—I mean, in proportion."

"Bless my heart and soul I do believe you're right!" exclaimed the Professor. "I was thinking more of an enormous species of sea lion."

The monster made another plunge, right into the reeds.

"Give me the rifle," panted Rex. "Tiger and Molo will walk right into it."

“Leave it alone,” ordered the Professor curtly. “I doubt if you could kill it and to wound it might make it savage.”

At this juncture the creature raised its head high above the tops of the reeds and let out the awful cry that had startled them during the hours of darkness. It was obviously the same monster, or another of the same species.

“Well, you’ve had your wish. Now you can see it,” muttered Rex.

The crew of the Vallon ship could be seen standing in the doorway also watching it.

“It isn’t coming this way, anyhow, thank goodness,” remarked Toby.

A moment later Tiger, Vargo and Molo, burst from the reeds about twenty yards in front of the beast and raced flat out for the ships. The creature must have seen or heard them, for it raised its head still higher, facing in their direction. At this critical moment Tiger tripped over something, and after a stumble fell headlong.

Rex let out a gasp of horror.

As things turned out he need not have worried, for the thing merely stared stupidly, a film rising and falling over its eyes in the manner of certain reptiles. It made no attempt to pursue the invaders of its territory. Molo reached his own ship. Tiger, of course, scrambled into the *Tavona*.

“Spare my days!” he panted. “What a beauty! When I came a cropper I thought I’d had it.”

“In my opinion the creature is perfectly harmless—unless anyone is foolish enough to interfere with it,” said the Professor calmly. As the animal concerned disappeared into the forest he slapped his thigh. “Idiot that I am, I had a chance for a photograph; but to tell the truth I was so fascinated by a beast so remarkable that I forgot all about my camera. Now it’s gone. Dear—dear! What a pity.”

It was at this stage of the proceedings that the storm broke; and it wasted no time in preliminaries. It started in full force, so to speak. Simultaneously with the deluge thunder crashed and lightning flashed. Hail, or what was presumed to be hail since it was hard to imagine what else it could be, struck the ship like cannon balls. Had the fall of ice not been broken by the branches of the trees overhead this might have been serious. The noise was indescribable. Tiger shouted: “This is worse than yesterday.” Rex heard no more for he put his hands over his ears to shut out some of the din.

The forces of nature, unleashed, raged on. Rex thought the storm would never end. Sitting at his window seat he could see little through the curtain of spray and water pouring off the top of the ship; but one thing he did see gave him cause for concern, if not alarm. Water was lapping around them. He

shouted: “The lake must be out of its bed. The whole place is flooded. Hadn’t we better get off before we get stuck in the mud?”

Gator answered. “No. We’d be in greater danger trying to get through the storm than staying here. The clouds must be miles thick. The hail would batter us before we could get above them.”

After that there was only one remark, for conversation was difficult. It was made by the Professor. “I begin to understand why the place is one vast bog, and why no one lives here.”

It must have been late evening before the fury of the storm abated and the air began to clear. The first thing that became evident was the lake had disappeared; or to put it another way, it had expanded to cover all the ground surrounding it. The *Tavona* was standing in a world of water. The water had reached the level of the top step. The Vallon ship was even worse off. Her steps could not be seen at all, and Rex, as he watched it, formed the opinion that either her legs were sinking deeper or the water was still rising.

Vargo, Gator and Borron, held a short conference.

“As conditions may get worse we’ve decided to get off while we can,” announced Vargo, at the conclusion.

“What about the Vallon ship?” asked Rex.

“For the moment it will have to take its luck. There’s nothing we can do. We can’t get to it—unless anyone feels like swimming.”

Rex did not feel like swimming. He hadn’t forgotten the eels, or whatever the creatures were that had come out of the lake.

Gator took his place at the controls. He went through the motions of starting, but nothing happened except that the water round the ship boiled and bubbled. “We’re stuck,” he said presently.

As Rex realized what this meant his stomach seemed to drop to his feet. “What can we do?” he asked in a thin voice. He didn’t really expect an answer so he was relieved when Tiger said: “We might try rocking the ship. That’s been known to move a boat stuck on a mud-flat.”

This was put into effect by the only expedient possible, which was for everyone to run together from one side of the ship to the other, although it seemed to Rex that if this did not loosen the legs it was likely to put them farther in. While this operation was in progress Gator stood at the controls applying full power at intervals. It may have been the rocking, or the mud being cleared by water swirling round the power jets, or possibly both, that did the trick. At all events, the ship suddenly unstuck, with the result that before it could be checked it had struck the branches above it with a crash that threw everyone—except Gator, who had the controls to hang on to—to the floor.

Gator rose to the occasion, like the good captain he was, with some brisk movements. As the ship rebounded from the branches, before it could strike the water again he caught her, and moving horizontally took her clear. Another second, even before those who had fallen could pick themselves up, they were above the flood.

“I think we got off just about in time,” said Tiger, soberly. “What about Molo?”

The air was still thick with fine mist or drizzle, but the Vallon ship could be made out, just as they had last seen it, surrounded by water. It looked like the top of a half submerged tent.

“Can we do anything to help them?” asked the Professor anxiously.

Gator answered. “Not now. I daren’t risk landing in the water not knowing what’s underneath. It would be better to wait for the water to subside.”

Rex remembered the smoke and told Vargo and Tiger about it. They had of course been absent when he had noticed it. With visibility still not more than two or three hundred yards it could no longer be seen.

“We might go across and have a look at this while we’re waiting for the water to go down,” suggested Tiger. “I doubt if there will be any smoke now. That storm would have dowsed any fire.”

As the *Tavona* took a little more altitude those inside found themselves looking down on a world of water. Only the hills, and on other rising ground the tops of trees, were clear. The rest was one great sea, although as the water lay motionless it looked more like a lake. Moving slowly and still keeping low the ship was soon over the hills, which turned out to be a group and not a range as had been thought. They ran back for some distance, and could be seen fairly well because the air was still clearing. The orb of the sun, blood red, was sinking behind them. There was no smoke anywhere.

“As I said, the storm would put out any fire,” said Tiger. “Moreover, with everything soaking wet anyone down there would have a job to kindle another.”

“Which means there’s not much point in sitting here,” observed the Professor. “In that rough country it wouldn’t be easy to see an army, much less an individual.”

Hardly had the words left his lips than what Rex at first took to be a column of smoke shot up close to the ship, causing it to rock. “There it is,” he rapped out.

The *Tavona* turned sharply away. “That’s not smoke,” said Gator evenly. “It’s what I believe you call a waterspout.”

“A geyser,” corrected the Professor.

Another plume sprang up in front of them and again the ship had to turn to avoid it. It also moved to a higher altitude.

Rex was disappointed. “Naturally, from a distance I took it to be smoke,” he said. “I was hoping to find Graham here. What do you suppose is causing these geysers?”

The Professor had one possible answer ready. “If some of this weight of water is finding its way through to the white-hot molten core of the planet—assuming the planet is normal in that respect—there is bound to be steam; and steam under pressure must escape somewhere or it would blow the place to pieces. These geysers—they occur on Earth as you know—are the safety valves that save the planet being torn apart by subterranean explosions. That could happen anyhow. Mountains at home have exploded into volcanoes for that same reason.”

“Then what do we do?” asked Rex. “Wait here for the water to go down?”

“Go down? The question is, where?”

“It could fill the honeycomb of caves which you thought existed here.”

“I suspect it has already done that. If the level of all this water we can see is to drop, the surplus can go only in one of two directions. It can seep down into the fiery heart of the planet, in which case the whole area is likely to disintegrate in a colossal explosion. The other direction is upwards, by evaporation, and that I think is the way it will go.”

“I hope you’re right,” rejoined Rex fervently. “Have you a reason for thinking that?”

“Of course, otherwise I wouldn’t have said it. This sort of rainfall must be a common occurrence here. Obviously, in the past the floods have been reduced by evaporation, because had the water found its way downward through flaws in the basic rock the planet would no longer be here. I suspect the real trouble with this planet is, it has too much water. That probably explains why there are so few forms of life here. Any that existed formerly either perished by drowning or managed to adapt themselves by becoming amphibious—like the eels and the monstrous beasts we have seen.”

Tiger stepped in. “Instead of sitting here waiting for the place to blow up don’t you think it would be a good idea to get a bit farther away?”

Vargo answered. “As there is no likelihood of finding Graham, having no other reason for being here I would advise leaving the place altogether were it not for the Vallon ship. They may be in difficulties. If so we must try to help them.”

“I can’t see how you’re going to do that.”

“The first thing we must do is go back to them to see how they are getting

on,” decided Gator, and without any more ado he set a course for the spot where they had left the spacecraft standing in the water.

It was still there, but not quite level. The water had gone down far enough to expose the landing legs, which meant that it now had a depth of only a few inches. The doors were open and faces appeared.

“They’re in trouble or they’d be outside,” said Tiger.

“Don’t say they’ve got themselves bogged like the other ship abandoned here,” returned Rex.

“That’s what it looks like to me.”

“Dear—dear! How unfortunate for them,” murmured the Professor. “What can we do to help?” He looked at Vargo.

Vargo turned to Gator. “Can we do anything?”

“To land near them could mean getting caught in the same trap. The place was soft before the rain. Now it must be mud.”

“I suggest we get within talking distance and hear what they have to say about it,” rejoined Tiger. “We should be able to do that without actually touching down. There’s no point in getting in a flap until we know for certain they’re grounded.”

The *Tavona* closed the gap between the two ships, and by skilful handling became stationary a little above the open door. Leaning out Vargo called: “Are you all right?”

Molo answered. “No. We can’t move. We thought you had left us.”

“We went to look at what we thought was smoke, but it turned out to be steam. What can we do to help?”

“The water is going down fast. When we are clear we may be able to dig ourselves out. We have no time to lose because we are still sinking deeper in. Nothing we can do will prevent that.”

Tiger took charge. In his early days, as a soldier in the Royal Engineers he had had some experience of this sort of thing. He called: “If the ground dries out quickly and the mud hardens you’ll never get off. Is it hard enough now to take your weight if you get out and stand on it?”

“I’ll find out.” Holding the guide rail Molo stepped down cautiously into the water, which only came to just above his ankles. He released his hold. “It’s all right,” he said.

“Good. Now do this. Put all hands on cutting reeds and bring them here to make a thick carpet for us to land on. That should hold us. If nothing else we would then be able to take you off.”

This was done, although it took some time. By then the water had gone,

leaving an ugly black mud in its place. Gator put the *Tavona* down lightly on the mat of reeds.

Everyone with the exception of Gator, who stood by the controls ready for action, stepped down, and an examination of the legs of the fixed ship was made. The real trouble was then discovered. The feet of the legs, which of course had to take the weight of the ship, were splayed out like large flat plates, the object being to prevent them from cutting into ordinary ground. But here they had broken through the soft surface, and to withdraw them would obviously be difficult, if not impossible, except by digging them out. Not all the legs had sunk to the same depth, which accounted for the ship resting at an angle. This, obviously, was what had happened to the ship that had been abandoned.

Tiger spoke to Molo. "Tell everyone to get out except one person at the controls. With less weight there's just a chance she may come unstuck."

This was done, and the attempt made. The ship vibrated under the strain as power was applied, but did not budge an inch. This having failed an effort was made to dig out the legs; but the mud was too soft and oozed back into the holes as fast as they were made. By this time everyone was wet to the waist and plastered with the stinking sludge.

Molo said: "It looks as if we shall have to ask you to take us home."

"To Vallon?"

"Yes."

"If we do, will you continue the search for the ship carrying Graham?"

"I think not. It's hopeless. This was our last chance. We've searched every planet, except one, on a direct course between Vallon and Earth."

"What was the exception, and why?"

"Mintona. It's no use going there."

"Why not?"

"The planet is over-populated and the people are savages of the worst kind. Having run out of food they have taken to eating each other. The tribes never stop fighting for that reason. If the ship carrying your man Graham had to land there the crew would at once be eaten."

"What a charming place," said Tiger, with icy sarcasm. "Where is it?"

"About half-way between here and Vallon. Its colour from a distance is bright yellow, so you can't mistake it. Don't attempt to land on it. But never mind Mintona. I'm afraid we shall have to abandon this ship. Will you take us home?"

"Before we talk of that I've thought of one more trick we might try." Tiger

turned to Vargo. “I can’t remember seeing it used but I think we carry a cable. Am I right?”

“Yes. What purpose have you in mind?”

“I don’t know if this is practicable. Gator will be the best judge of that. But it has struck me that if we passed the cable from the chassis of the *Tavona* to the lifting ring in the top of the other ship our combined power might be sufficient to haul our friends clear.”

Gator thought the plan over. “It might be done,” he admitted. “There can be no harm in trying.”

“As long as we don’t pull our undercarriage off,” said Rex, cheerfully.

The scheme was explained to Molo. The cable of braided artificial material which Vargo assured Tiger had a breaking strain of many tons, was fastened first to the chassis of the *Tavona* and then passed through the ring at the apex of the other ship, normally used to lift the ship for overhaul. To keep the weight down only Molo went into his own ship to operate the controls. The crew and passengers of the *Tavona* took their usual places, the doors being left open. The *Tavona*, rose slowly and took the strain. Debris flying from under the stranded ship told them that it was also under full power. The *Tavona* shivered like a frightened horse restrained by a shackle. Then, suddenly, with a sucking squelch, the bogged ship, dripping slime, was clear.

A little cheer went up from those inside the *Tavona*.

Gator moved over the bed of reeds and allowed his load to sink gently on it. Molo appeared and cast off the cable. Gator did not land again, one reason being that there was not room on the mat for both ships.

“Come and see us on Vallon,” called Molo, as the doors of the *Tavona* were closed.

A few seconds later the *Tavona* was rocketing skyward.

“Where are we going?” asked Vargo.

“I think we might have a look at this nasty planet Mintonia,” suggested the Professor tentatively.

“You’re not expecting to land there—I hope?”

“Oh dear no. I thought that as we were so close we might as well give it a look over,” said the Professor, coyly.

Vargo looked at Tiger and shook his head sadly.

CHAPTER XIII

MINTONA THE DANGEROUS

BORRON, with his chart of the Fourth Region on the map-stand beside him, set the course for the dangerous planet, apparently having taken the Professor seriously. Not so all the others. Rex was by no means sure that the Professor meant what he had said, for in view of what they had been told it seemed the height of folly. Tiger was not happy about it, voicing his disapproval by saying it was a waste of time to make a journey to a planet on which they had no intention of landing; for, obviously, as they had been warned, it would be little short of suicide to ignore the information Molo had given them. "If Vallon space pilots refuse to have anything to do with the place we may be sure it isn't without good reason," he concluded.

"Nevertheless, the ship in which Graham was travelling, finding itself in difficulties for one reason or another, may have been compelled to make a landing on the nearest body available, and Mintonia, according to Molo, would be on its course," argued the Professor.

"Even if that did happen neither Graham nor the crew of the ship are likely to be there now. They would have gone into the cooking pot. You heard what Molo said about the food shortage resulting in cannibalism. No doubt this unfortunate fellow Graham, being white, would be regarded as an exceptionally tasty morsel. Manna from heaven, so to speak."

"Shortage of food, particularly meat, which contains salt, is the primary cause of cannibalism, or so certain wise men would have us believe," rejoined the Professor. "After all, there's nothing remarkable about it. One could have found these conditions on Earth until quite recently, if in fact they do not persist in one or two places until this day. If the food supply fails to keep pace with the demand the result is almost inevitable. There are stories—how true I don't know because I wasn't there—of white men, notably shipwrecked sailors, being driven by desperation to this horrible means of sustaining life."

"Let's not go into that," requested Toby. "It's revolting."

There the argument ended. The *Tavona* sped on. Ebutu, who always appeared to take an intelligent interest in the conversation, squatted on the floor in an attitude of resignation. He seldom spoke unless he was spoken to. Rex settled down to contemplate the constellations that sprinkled the black, fathomless depths around them.

There followed the usual period of boredom, although part of it was

occupied by a discussion on what they had seen on the world they had just left.

“Life demands three things,” remarked the Professor. “Heat, light and water. Given those, Nature can produce astonishing creatures, both animal and vegetable. One can see that in a tropical rain-forest at home. On the planet we have just left, with a superabundance of the factors necessary for the production and development of life, it does not surprise me that everything is on an abnormal scale. The planet towards which we are now heading is likely to be altogether different. I am not thinking of landing, let me assure you of that; but it will be interesting and instructive to see a world in the throes of a food-shortage crisis.”

Eventually the time came when Borron announced that a planet which had been getting brighter, with a slight yellow tinge, was Mintonia, the next objective. With the exception of two small satellite moons, very close, there was nothing near it. The golden brightness increased as they closed the gap, but later, without the reflected light, it stood revealed for what it was, a dull, pale brown mass, which Vargo predicted was either sand or exposed brown soil. What this suggested was an almost complete absence of uncontrolled vegetation, forest, jungle or the like, and this they were soon able to confirm. There were a number of lakes, mostly small, but no sea—at all events, on the hemisphere they were approaching.

“I think I can see what has happened here,” observed Tiger, when the ship was down to an altitude of a few thousand feet. “The terrain reminds me of certain areas of China, where over a period of thousands of years the timber has been felled for buildings, firewood, and to clear more and more ground for cultivation as there became more mouths to fill. With no humus, rotting vegetable matter, to put back into the ground, the soil has become so impoverished as to be practically sterile, able to produce only the scantiest of crops.”

The Professor agreed. “If you don’t put back into the soil what you take out of it, it is only a question of time when it will produce nothing. In China, as you say, there are hundreds of miles where the soil is so hungry for nourishment that the peasants must also go hungry. There are certain places on Earth where in the past men have been guilty of the same folly. By cutting down the timber and then overcropping the herbage with sheep or cattle they have created deserts. Without cool woodlands to bring down rain the clouds pass over, and once evaporation exceeds the rainfall, as you would say, Group-Captain, you’ve had it. The great deserts on Earth were once fertile lands. The lesson we have learned is that if you exploit the good ground it will give you nothing. That, I am sure, is what has happened here.”

The *Tavona* was now low enough for those inside to see everything there

was to see on the barren surface of Mintona. It was not a pretty landscape. It was in fact a scene of desolation. Mile after mile, stretching away to the horizon in every direction, the land lay bare to the bone, with outcrops of bedrock often protruding, drab, monotonous and wearisome to the eye. Long, wavy dunes were forming, shallow undulations that seemed to have no end, the result, obviously, of windblown dust, there being little or nothing to hold it down. Yet there was some attempt at cultivation, mostly in low-lying places, pathetic squares of yellowish green, although the nature of the crop could not be determined.

Around these patches people swarmed like ants. Indeed, there were people everywhere, some working the ground, often in gangs, others sitting or walking about apparently aimlessly. There were no mechanical vehicles although there were suggestions of tracks. Nor was there a horse or an ass, or any other beast of burden, in sight.

There were plenty of villages. They dotted the landscape, although being colourless they did not attract the eye. Rex thought the buildings were made of wood, now in the last stages of dilapidation, and like everything else were covered with dust.

Tiger spoke. "What a dismal picture. I reckon you were right, Professor, when you said these miserable people must have just about had their chips. If they're still fighting for existence I'd say it's a losing battle. When their houses fall down, and that seems already to have started, without timber they won't be able to repair them or build new ones. I can understand why, according to Molo, the tribes fight each other. They've something to fight for. Food. People at home have no such excuse."

"A sorry spectacle, but not without interest, in that it shows what can happen to a world when the people on it abuse what they have been given."

"I can't imagine this happening on Earth," said Rex firmly.

"Why not? The people have already started down the same road, using every natural commodity as if there was no end to it, clearing the forests and damming the waters. But don't worry. What we see here is not the work of a few years, but thousands of years of blind stupidity. The trouble, once started, is how to stop. In the hey-day of the Roman Empire, and that was a mere 2,000 years ago, the deserts of North Africa were forests teeming with big game." The Professor chuckled. "But we needn't let that upset us. We're not likely to live 2,000 years."

A matter that struck Rex as extraordinary was this: the people seemed to take no notice of the craft only just above their heads. He knew they had seen it from the way one would casually look up and after a glance resume what he

was doing. People on Earth, reflected Rex, no longer took notice of a conventional aircraft passing overhead; but a spaceship would be a different matter. That could hardly fail to cause a sensation. He could only conclude that to the people of Mintonia a spaceship was no novelty. They must often have seen such ships, probably from Vallon, pass by, presumably without landing.

By this time the *Tavona*, cruising parallel with the ground, was not more than 500 feet from it.

“I think we might go a little lower,” requested the Professor. “I would very much like to see just what sort of people these are. I don’t see how they can do us any harm as long as we don’t put ourselves within reach of them.”

Tiger picked up and adjusted the binoculars. “I can tell you this,” he said. “Their skins are pale brown, the colour of *café au lait*. Their clothes are a few rags. What else could we expect? As far as I can see they’ve nothing that could be spun into cloth. Cotton? I doubt if they’d waste ground growing it even if they knew what it was. Wool? Where are the sheep? I don’t see any, or any other domestic stock if it comes to that. Not even a back yard hen. I’d say they’ve scoffed the lot. What a state they must be in.”

“If food is as scarce as that the population must drop quickly,” declared the Professor. “In that way the position might adjust itself. With fewer mouths to fill the survivors might get enough to eat, and in course of time undo the mischief they’ve done. It may be hard to realize but this sort of thing could happen anywhere, even on Earth. Chemical fertilizers without humus will produce crops only for so long. If—”

“Just a minute!” broke in Rex suddenly. “What’s that over there? Stop, Gator. Go back a bit, then to the left.”

“What’s all this about?” inquired Tiger, as the *Tavona* slowed down and began a tight circle.

Rex pointed. “That thing. Nearly buried. It looks like metal. If it wasn’t where it is I’d say it was the top of a spaceship.”

“He’s right,” said Vargo. “It is the top of a spaceship. It can’t be anything else.”

“In that case surely it can only be the one in which Graham was travelling,” asserted Tiger. “I’m afraid that answers our question in just about the worst possible way. The lad must be dead.”

“What atrocious luck, having to land here of all places,” murmured the Professor dolefully.

“Can you beat that,” went on Rex in a melancholy voice. “It would be bad enough to be carved up by cannibals at home, but to come all this way for such a fate . . .”

“If you’re destined to become somebody’s Sunday joint I don’t see that it matters much where it happens,” interrupted Tiger bitterly.

“This is no joking matter,” said the Professor severely.

“Crying about it won’t help,” retorted Tiger.

“I think you are all jumping to conclusions,” interposed Toby. “If Graham, and the crew of the ship, have been murdered—well, that’s the end, and there’s nothing we can do about it. The ship landed here, apparently in trouble. It wouldn’t have landed otherwise, because the commander must have known the reputation of the place as well as Molo. But until we know for certain they are all dead let’s be optimistic and hope they’re still alive.”

“A pretty poor hope, I’d say,” muttered Tiger. “Molo assured us the people were cannibals, and he must have known what he was talking about or he wouldn’t have said it.”

“That, I agree, was the reason he gave for not coming here. How did he get that information? Not by landing here or he himself would have gone into the pot. No, it was hearsay, and that isn’t always reliable. We’ve heard tales at home often enough which have turned out to be false.”

Tiger shook his head. “My dear fellow, you’re clutching at straws. Even if you were right what can we do about it?”

“I feel that even if the report about cannibalism is right it could mean that this is only practised between tribes that hate each other. It doesn’t necessarily follow that they would eat stray visitors. Wherefore I say before we rush off we should have a good look round.”

“For what?”

“Graham. If he’s alive his tartan kilt should be conspicuous. If he’s dead somebody will be wearing his clothes. That should tell us all we want to know. As we can see, the natives haven’t much in the way of clothes, and I can’t imagine them weaving Highland plaids.”

“Well, I suppose there’s no harm in looking,” conceded Tiger. “But how long is it going to take us to search the entire planet?”

“I can’t see any need to search the entire planet. If Graham is here it’s reasonable to suppose he won’t be far from where the ship went down.”

Vargo agreed, with the result that the *Tavona* began a search which to Rex seemed almost futile from the outset. By the end of half an hour, during which they investigated, without success, several groups of natives, he was convinced they were wasting their time. There was of course no question of landing, but when it was seen that the natives took no notice of the ship it was taken down to a few feet above the ground.

Rex suspected that the others, from their attitudes, were feeling as he did. The early enthusiasm was beginning to fade, and what they were doing had become mere routine. At any moment he expected someone to say they might as well give up and go home. After all, they had more or less succeeded in their purpose. They had learned how Graham had been picked up, and why. They knew he had been taken to Vallon and was on his way home when his ship was lost. It was only his ultimate fate that would never be known.

As so often happens it was at this, the most depressing moment of the quest, that the unexpected happened. In a moment the flagging interest had switched to excitement.

Oddly enough it was Ebutu who started it. Maybe his eyes were exceptionally sharp. They had passed over a fairly large village when in a matter of fact voice he said: "I see white man. See face when he look up. Now he wave hand."

"Where?" said Rex tersely, for there were a lot of people about.

Ebutu did his best to point. "Him stand alone by gang."

Everyone was now staring down.

"I've got him!" cried Rex. "You see that party of about a dozen men digging a trench. The man is about ten yards to the right of them."

"That looks more like a fair beard than a white face," said Tiger.

"What if it is a beard if it's fair? That scruffy-looking bunch near him are all dark. The thing he's wearing which looks like a bit of a skirt could be a kilt very much the worse for wear. If he's Graham you wouldn't expect his clothes to look new."

"I agree with Rex," said the Professor. "That is a white man."

"I wouldn't exactly call him white," said Tiger doubtfully.

"He would be sun tanned, working in the open without a hat," declared Rex. "He's paler than the rest of them, anyway. Let's go down and have a really good look at him."

Vargo did not look too happy about this. "Those natives are a wicked-looking lot."

"They can't hurt us," said the Professor. "I can't see anything that looks like a weapon. All they have are tools for digging."

"They look more like clubs to me. I have a notion they're guarding that fair-skinned type."

The man under discussion was still looking up. He waved again. As the others did not move Rex took this to be a good sign.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "I see no need for us to land. If we could get

within talking distance it should be enough. If he answers us in English that's all we want to know. He's still waving. There must be a reason for that."

"If he was hoping to be rescued I fancy he'd do more than wave," said Tiger drily.

"Perhaps he daren't. He knows that gang of toughs is watching him."

Tiger picked up his rifle. "If they try any rough stuff we'll see how they like this. They're not grabbing me for the pot. Get a bit closer, Gator. I'm ready."

"We'd better have the doors open," said Vargo, who had already made atmospheric tests.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TAVONA TAKES A CHANCE

GATOR continued to ease the *Tavona* down. "Is that close enough?" he asked.

"A little nearer."

"But surely he could hear you if you shouted," said the Professor.

"It may be necessary to do more than shout."

Rex looked curious. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll show you. You hold the rifle and be ready to hand it to me in a hurry if I ask for it. It's no use fiddling about. We'll settle the business one way or the other."

The man with whom they were concerned was still looking up, and it was now plain to see that he was unlike the men standing near him. They were short, with flat Mongolian faces, high cheek bones and narrow slanting eyes. The man who still stood alone, although the others had moved a little nearer, was tall and fair, a typical Anglo-Saxon figure. His hair was long and a curly blonde beard covered the lower half of his face. It struck Rex that the odd glance he threw at his companions was apprehensive. Certainly they were now taking an interest in the proceedings.

"You'll do," Tiger told Gator. Holding the guide rail he leaned out and called: "Who are you?" He spoke in English.

"I'm from Earth," was the reply, in the same language.

"Is your name Graham?"

"Aye."

"They got you in Scotland?"

"Aye."

"Do you want to get away?"

"Of course."

"Will the men with you let you go?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"They think I'm a god."

Tiger looked a little taken aback by an answer he did not expect. "All right!" he said. "Be ready to make a dash for it when I give the word. What

about the crew of the ship that brought you here? Are they about?"

"No. They're all dead. Murdered."

"I see. Jump in the ship when I say go. I'll deal with anyone who tries to stop you." Tiger held out a hand for the rifle.

"Buck up," pleaded Rex. "Those guards don't like us."

The natives were in fact beginning to move towards Graham, shouting.

"Go," snapped Tiger.

The scene on the ground jerked into life. Graham leapt for the doors like a rabbit into its burrow on the appearance of a dog. Quick as he was he was not quite fast enough. One of the natives must have been prepared for such a move and was poised ready to thwart it. He hurled the pointed stick which he had been using as a digging implement. It went between Graham's legs and tripped him up. He sprawled forward in the bare ground. In a flash the thrower of the stick was on him, holding him down—or trying to. Struggling they rolled over and over. This was an awkward situation, because Tiger, armed though he was, dare not use the rifle for fear of hitting the wrong man. To make matters worse the entire gang was moving forward to lend a hand.

It was now that Ebutu went into action. Impassive though he appeared to be he must have realized the position. With a mighty bound—for it must be remembered that the *Tavona* had not actually landed—with his cudgel raised he went to the rescue. Swinging his home-made club he brought it down with a crack on the skull of the man still hanging on to Graham. It was enough. With a shriek the man rolled over clasp his head, and so releasing his hold on the Scot.

The other natives had of course rushed in, so the situation still looked ugly. But reckoning—as he afterwards said—that the natives knew nothing of firearms, Tiger fired a shot over their heads. This had the desired effect. At the report they turned about and fled. They did not stop, although other groups were running towards the scene to see what was going on. Ebutu dragged Graham to the ship. They scrambled inside. The doors were at once secured, and with the two men still sitting on the floor, panting from their exertions, the *Tavona* rose to a safe altitude. Outside, natives were running in all directions.

"Okay," said Tiger, briskly. "That's all we want."

The ship, gathering momentum, continued its ascent.

"Have we finished with Minton?" asked Gator quietly.

"I don't think we have any further interest," answered the Professor, looking round over his glasses for confirmation.

"Then having found what we were looking for we now go home?"

“That, I am sure, will please everyone.”

Tiger smiled at Graham, who had now found a seat. “Presently you can tell us about your adventures. No doubt you’ll be glad to get back to Scotland.”

Graham looked puzzled. “To Scotland?”

“Why—yes. That’s where you started from, isn’t it?”

“Aye. But I’m no ready to go back.”

Tiger’s eyes opened wide. “Not ready? What else could you want to do? We were given to understand you were on your way back to Earth when your ship was reported missing.”

“Who told you that?”

“A Vallon spaceship commander named Molo. Do you know him?”

“Aye, I ken him fine. But he was away when I started. He must have got it all wrong.”

“Do you mean you were *not* on your way to Earth?”

“I was on my way richt enough, but not to stay.”

Tiger blinked in his astonishment. “I don’t understand. If you don’t want to go back home what do you want to do?”

“Go back to Vallon.”

“Then why were you going to Earth?”

“I have a little money there. I was only going to collect it.”

“But what use would that be to you on Vallon?”

“I wasna’ going to take it to Vallon. I was going to spend it, in Edinburgh, mebbe, or Glasgow.”

“Spend it on what?”

“A few things; mostly books and one or two presents. Then the ship was to pick me up again so that I could go back to Vallon.”

Tiger’s voice rose high in amazement. “Are you telling us—you want—to go back to Vallon for good?”

“That’s richt.”

“Why?”

“I like it fine. Besides, my wife is expecting me back.”

“Your *wife*! Was she taken there too?”

“No. I met her there. She’s a Vallon lassie. It was really on her account that I asked if someone could take me to Earth for a wee while so that I could fetch some of the things I’d told her about. I also wanted some books for friends of mine who have been learning English.”

Silence fell. Everyone was now staring at Graham as if he had just performed a miracle.

The Professor was the next to speak. "It seems we've been wasting our time," he remarked in a curious voice. "You realize, young man, that we've been to some trouble looking for you."

"How was I to know? How did you get to know about me disappearing, anyhow?"

"We, too, have friends on other planets, and often travel in their spaceships. Purely by chance we found the body of your friend Macpherson. Naturally, we made inquiries, and so learned how both of you had vanished from the moor where you worked."

"Ah. So that was it. Did you see Sir Murdo Tulloch?"

"We did."

"How was he feeling about me walking out on him, as he would suppose?"

Tiger answered. "He was pretty sore."

"Aye. I guessed he would be."

"What happened to Macpherson?"

"I haven't got over that yet. He was out of luck. I'd have been glad to have him with me, and he'd have enjoyed the trip fine. He shouldn't have come out with me on the hill that day. He was sick, a lot worse than he made out. He got so that he could hardly breathe. That was why we stopped—to let him have a rest. I couldn't carry him all the way back to the lodge. I was just going off to fetch a pony when the ship came down right beside us."

"Why did he go with you? Couldn't you make the captain of the ship understand he was ill?"

"No. I reckon Ian would have died anyway had I left him lying on the heather. He would have been there all night, and maybe the next day, before somebody found him. So he came along with us. He died in the ship. I fancy he had pneumonia. There was nothing we could do about it. The people in the ship were scared. They told me later on, when I could speak a bit of their language, that they thought he had died of something infectious. That was why they put him overboard."

Vargo put in a word or two. "Please let us get this matter settled so that Gator will know what course to take. Is this young man to be taken seriously when he says he wishes to go to Vallon?"

Graham answered for himself. "Aye, I meant that, if it isn't taking you too far out of your way."

"We can take you to Vallon," said Vargo. "Later, if you still wish to visit

Earth, no doubt your friends could arrange it for you.”

“So we go to Vallon,” continued Gator.

The Professor addressed Graham. “You realize the police are still looking for you?”

“I thought I’d be forgotten by now. Did you tell them what had happened to me and Ian?”

“Certainly not. We don’t want to be certified as lunatics.”

“Will you tell them where I am when you get back? I’d like Sir Murdo to know I didn’t just run out on him.”

“You can tell him yourself when you make the trip to Earth, but you’d better be prepared for him to call you a barefaced liar.”

The conversation continued, and as there was much information to exchange it helped to pass the time.

Graham told the story of how he had been picked up. With the exception of some details it was much as had been surmised. He also described life on Vallon, for which he had nothing but praise. Then, while he had a meal, for, as he said, he had never had enough to eat on Mintonia, Tiger and the Professor told him how they came to be travelling in Space. They described how they had found Macpherson’s body, and on learning from inquiries in Scotland that another man had been with him on the day he had disappeared, resolved to make a search.

“We certainly didn’t expect to find you,” admitted the Professor. “Still less did we suppose that you’d want to spend the rest of your days on another planet.”

“Why not, if it’s better than your own?” replied Graham, with simple logic. “I can tell you this. I never had much time for this talk of flying saucers, but now I know there’s a lot more space travel going on than anyone at home would believe. I heard rumours on Vallon of a ship going about with some people from Earth on board. That must have been you. Moreover, from what I’ve seen and heard I realize now that Earth isn’t as clever as it thinks it is.”

“You take it all very calmly,” observed the Professor.

“Where I’ve been the news is mostly about what’s going on, on one world or another, so you soon get used to it,” answered Graham casually. “I reckon there was a time when the people of England talked of Australia as if it was another world. Yet look at it now! People go back and forth over the weekend. It’s only a question of time before many civilized people will travel between the stars in the same way. Distance means nothing if you have the necessary speed to get about.”

“Perfectly true,” agreed the Professor. “And you really like life on Vallon?”

“I haven’t seen anything to beat it. What does it matter where you live if you can go home to see your friends when you want to? Vallon is streets ahead of Earth.”

“In what way?”

“Most ways. For one thing there’s no talk of wars, or anything else to worry about. The folks are really civilized, and I don’t mean they’ve cluttered themselves up with mechanical things. I’ve got an idea that once people realize they’re not alone in the Universe it alters their outlook on life. They see how daft it is to fight among themselves.”

“I see you’re quite a philosopher,” said the Professor, smiling. “But surely on Vallon there must be things you miss?”

“None that I can’t put right. I miss my oatmeal, always having had it since I was a kid, but I thought to bring some seed back with me from Scotland. I don’t see why it shouldn’t do all right on Vallon. I admit they haven’t a fish to touch the salmon, but there are plenty of bonny rivers and lochs in which they should do well. That was another thing I was going to bring back. Salmon eggs. I know where to get ’em.”

“No reason why it shouldn’t be done,” agreed Tiger. “We ourselves have introduced a few things to various planets.”

“If people would start swopping the best things they have instead of throwing bombs at each other we should all get on fine,” asserted the Scot. “I heard some folks from Earth had been busy on Mars, although that would have taken a bit of believing before I found myself on Vallon. I reckon that must have been you.”

“It was.”

“That’s really what started me thinking about what I could do after I’d settled down on Vallon. I wasn’t very happy about it at first, knowing how Sir Murdo would feel about me letting him down just before the opening of the shooting season; but the people on Vallon were so decent to me that I got to like the place fine. When I met a lass and we got married that settled it.”

“Tell me this,” requested the Professor. “Are conditions on Mintona as bad as Molo led us to believe?”

“They couldn’t be worse. Through ignorance—that’s all it is, ignorance—the people are starving to death. They haven’t a clue what to do about it.”

“Are they really cannibals?”

“Aye, they are so.”

“Then why didn’t they eat you?” Rex wanted to know.

“I couldn’t be sure because at first I didn’t know their lingo, but I fancy it was because I happened to be different from anything they’d ever seen before. Dropping out of the sky like I did they seemed to think I was some sort of a god the crew of the ship carried about with them for protection. They were always trying to stroke my hair, and my beard when it grew, as if it was some kind of magic. That I think is why they decided to keep me alive. I did my best to show them how to produce better crops, as much for my own good as for theirs, but it was no use. They’ve practically given up trying. I can understand that. They’re as weak as kittens. From want of food they haven’t the heart or the energy left to help themselves. Now they’ve taken to eating each other like a lot of animals, as the easiest way out, I suppose.”

The *Tavona* went on, speeding through Space.

The Professor spoke seriously. “Let me give you a word of advice, Donald. If you ever make a trip back to Earth be careful what you say. On no account tell anyone the truth, that you’ve been to another planet in a flying saucer, because if you do you’re liable to be clapped into a lunatic asylum. No one would believe you. A friend of ours, a Martian, paid a visit to Earth, and that’s what happened to him. When he was questioned he was foolish enough to say he was a Martian. That is why we told no one about our space flights.”

“I see what you mean,” replied Donald thoughtfully. “I was thinking about that, myself. Why wouldn’t I be believed if I told the truth?”

“Either because people haven’t the imagination to realize that the days of space flight are upon us, or because they don’t want to believe it.”

“Aye, I ken that’s the answer,” said Graham. “I was a bit like that myself not so long ago.”

CHAPTER XV
BON VOYAGE

“WE shall not be long now,” said Borron, looking ahead.

“You’re quite sure that if we land on Vallon no attempt will be made to keep us there?” the Professor asked Donald anxiously.

Donald smiled. “Nothing like that. No doubt they’d like you to stay for a while to teach them anything you know that they don’t know. They’re crazy for knowledge, although they know an awful lot already.”

“As a result of abducting people from other planets and picking their brains?”

“Partly. But they always take people home who don’t want to stay.”

“Do many people decide to stay?”

“Quite a few, mostly people who have no folks at home to worry about them. That’s how it was with me.”

“You’re sure you wouldn’t like to come home with us, having arranged with your friends here to pick you up when you’ve done what you want to do in Scotland? That’s what we do.”

“No thanks. I shall have to clean myself up and report on what happened to the ship I was in. Besides, having been reported missing my wife wouldn’t want me to go tearing off again right away. She’ll expect me to bide a wee while.”

“I understand,” acknowledged the Professor. “I was only thinking that if you did want to go to Earth it would be safer for you to come home with us and do what you want to do from my house in the Highlands.”

“What do you mean by safer?”

“Well, if you travel about in the ordinary way someone might recognize you.”

“What if they did?”

“The police have been looking high and low for you.”

“What about it? That’s their affair. I didn’t ask them to.”

“They would expect some explanation to account for your sudden disappearance while you were working for Sir Murdo.”

“But I haven’t broken any law that I know of, nor have I done anything to be ashamed of. I had no choice about leaving Earth. Don’t forget I lost my best

gun.” Donald smiled. “If they start asking me questions I’ll tell ’em a tale that should give ’em something to think about.”

“You tell them you merely went for a ramble round the stars, and, as I told you before, you’re likely to find yourself behind bars,” cautioned Tiger.

Rex put an end to the conversation on the subject by saying he could see a ship coming towards them.

“It may be to show you where to land,” informed Donald. “I’ve known them to do that for strangers.”

“Are there any messages you’d like us to take home for you?” said Vargo. “I’m asking that now because we shan’t be able to stay very long. I would prefer to get home before we are officially posted missing. We don’t want to cause our relations unnecessary anxiety, so as soon as we’ve put you down we shall be on our way.”

“No, thanks. I’d like to let Sir Murdo know I’m all right, but I don’t see how you could do that without telling him everything, in which case you’d be the ones in trouble, not me.”

“You’re quite right there,” agreed Tiger. “Anyway, we’ve a lot to do. Put Ebutu down near his home in Africa, for one thing. We could hardly turn him loose in Scotland and leave him to make his own way home.”

Donald said he understood that.

His prediction about the purpose of the approaching ship proved to be correct. As the *Tavona* went down it closed in and took the lead. This, as Vargo remarked, was all to the good, as it settled the question of where they should land.

“That ship is, I think, the one Molo was using when we met,” observed Rex. “I recognize it.”

“Quite right; and no doubt he has recognized us,” replied Vargo. “I imagine he will be surprised to see Donald, and even more surprised when he learns we picked him up from Mintona.”

Nothing more was said. Rex was looking down on the planet of which he had recently heard so much, and noting the usual signs of an advanced civilization; the general neatness, the arrangement of the towns and the way the land surrounding them had been brought under cultivation, both for major crops and the smaller, more regular patterns of vegetable gardens. He was also glad to see flowers everywhere, as on Terromagna, for he knew from experience that primitive peoples were not concerned with beauty.

Following Molo’s ship the *Tavona* went down and landed beside it on the cosmodrome. Doors were opened, and in a few minutes the captains of both ships were greeting each other. Molo let out a cry when he saw Donald.

There is no need to dwell on the *Tavona's* brief stay on Vallon. Donald, after thanking all concerned with his rescue and promising to call on them one day in Scotland, hurried off to let his wife see that he was back.

The service staff at the cosmoport could not have been more friendly, but after a meal in the guest-house Vargo explained why they must be on their way. The chief reason was to be home before the ship was officially reported missing, for if that happened all available spacecraft would be sent out to search for it. He accepted an invitation to call at some future date and spend more time with them. There was of course a great deal of interest in Ebutu, for nothing like him had ever been seen before, but no attempt was made to detain him. They had seen him, and as he would not be able to teach them anything useful, that was enough. So, in an hour or two good-byes were said and the *Tavona* took off for its own section of the Universe.

There is little more to tell. The *Tavona*, having reported its safe return, spent a couple of days at home, overhauling and refitting, which gave Rex a chance to spend a little more time with Morino. There were the usual tears at parting, when the *Tavona* went on to Earth. On arrival Tiger undertook the task of showing Gator the area in Africa from which Ebutu said he had been picked up.

The operation of landing was made at night to reduce the chances of anyone seeing the ship, and as Africa is a continent of wide open spaces there was no difficulty about this. The Zulu was told he was now back home, whereupon, having stood at the open door for a moment or two sniffing the air, and presumably finding the smell familiar, he stepped down and disappeared into the darkness. That was the last that was seen of him.

As the Professor said, as the doors were closed behind this unusual space traveller, there was no likelihood of him telling anyone where he had been, for the simple reason he didn't know. He knew he had been to another country but that was all. To try to make him, with his limited knowledge of anything outside his own little domain, understand that he had been to the stars would have been futile, and could only have confused him. He would never know how lucky he had been to see his home again.

This part of the programme completed it did not take the *Tavona* long to make the short run to Scotland, where the landing was made at Glensalich Castle, the Professor's home, just before dawn. It stayed only long enough for the crew to enjoy a pot of tea and some light refreshments, and then it was off once more, on its way home.

For which Rex, for one, was not sorry, because with the relaxation of strain inseparable from space exploration, he was conscious only of feeling very tired, and asked for nothing more than to creep between the sheets of his own

bed and sleep.

After all, he soliloquized, wonderful though some other worlds might be, there was no place like home.

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.

[The end of *The Man Who Vanished into Space* by Capt. W.E. (William Earl) Johns]