

# ORBIT

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## THE BEST IN Science Fiction

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DO YOU BELIEVE IN GHOSTS—SPACE GHOSTS? MAYBE

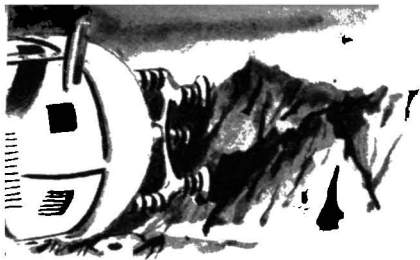
# ASTEROID 745:

by **Martin Pearson**

**I**T'S A rather strange thing to be expected to tell a ghost story out here in interplanetary space. The captain has asked me to do this rest period and I'm a man who obeys orders. He says you passengers asked for a ghost story this time and, what's more, you want a ghost story of space.

Now, that's not an easy thing to do. Ghosts and space travel do not quite hit it off with each other. Ghosts belong to the old world, the air-bound, land-bound, sea-bound world, a world where people were dominated by ugly castles and power-mad little men with twisted minds, and where the spirit was warped and bent by the desires of little, land-locked souls. Dirt and lust and night fright: those are the things that called forth ghosts. We haven't had much of that these past seventy years, thank heavens.





**NOT—BUT DON'T BE TOO SURE!**

# MAURITIA

Somehow, out here in the spaces between the stars, between the worlds, there's no room for that sort of horrible thing. There's fright, sure, for there's lots of danger between the stars. There's eeriness, sure, on those strange planets and bits of asteroidal rock. But there are no ghosts of twisted little minds, generally speaking.

Nonetheless, I do know one incident which I consider a true ghost story of space. I can't account for it any other way. The whole thing fits the ghost pattern, though of course we didn't realize it at the time.

It was many years ago, when I was only a junior hand aboard a prospector ship poking around the asteroids. We had been out for a month, had a few more days to go before heading back to base on Juno. We were all a bit rest-

less, because thus far we had had no luck. We'd made landings on three asteroids so far, without being able to get a worthwhile bite out of our Geigers. Chief Braun was in an ugly mood and we were all hoping we'd strike something on this fourth and last landing.

We were angling to make our hook-down on this last rock we had closed in on. Asteroid 745 it was, Mauritia by name, an average size for the type, perhaps twenty miles in diameter. From our radars and scopes it checked up as moderately spherical, primarily rock, no atmosphere, of course—you don't expect any—, probable outcroppings of metal, iron for sure, according to the reflected rays, but otherwise nothing to get excited about.

Braun swore he'd have us all transferred to base jobs if we didn't turn up something this time. He was never a pleasant man to work with, and I almost wished he'd make good his threat. He was excitable, given to sullen periods and violent dislikes. In fact, I think he was a trifle nuts. He was wild about a certain ancestor he claimed to have. A character named Hitler, who lived about two hundred years ago and figured in one of the last two or three world wars.

This Hitler figured as a sort of superman of that benighted cen-

ture. He'd made himself dictator of Germany—at that time the four German states were one country—and set out to conquer the world. Did a lot of damage, too, if I remember my history lessons. He was killed when his capital in Berlin was captured. Or so the books claim, anyway.

Now this Braun claimed to be a direct descendant of his. He had a long story that he claimed he had heard from his father who'd heard it from his mother. This Hitler was supposed to have died childless, but according to Braun he had one child who was given to his wife's family to raise and who took his wife's family name, which was Braun.

Anyway, it all seems downright silly today, but if a man's got a bug on a thing like this, I suppose it helps his ego. Just why he should think it means something to be the descendant of one of those Twentieth Century military nuts I don't know, but then I'm not Braun.

Whatever the case, Braun sure tried to act like his ancestor. He had books about this dictator, he had pictures, he raised a little toothbrush mustache like this character had, and in general he raised hell. He didn't dare try to rake up any of that old conqueror's race nonsense, because that's against the law, and the one thing this Braun bully was afraid

of was getting his record muddied. He'd probably have tried it if he dared.

So Braun lined us up when we'd completed our landing and secured the ship to the rocky plain about us. He read us the riot act, said we had better be sure we returned with some evidence of ore, said he'd keep his radio turned in to our helmet phones and he wanted us to keep ours turned on. We were to report everything to him as we progressed and he wanted to hear our Geigers clicking.

So the four of us prospectors humped out of the port in our suits, with our junk tacked on all around, and sailed our way off in all four directions. In spite of carrying a small mountain of equipment, we still weighed practically nothing and had to be careful how we bounded along. Braun stayed behind, alone. He was going to sit by the transmitter and heckle us. This had happened before, and it undoubtedly gave him a sense of power.

What I liked to do in a case like that was to get completely around the planetoid and turn off my helmet. I could claim that I couldn't receive him through the planetoidal core. He mightn't believe me, but he couldn't prove it, could he?

Anyway, I did get about four miles away, beyond a ridge of

rock, when I got some slight ticks on my counters. You are bound to get something, but unless it comes in strong it's never worth the effort to the Syndicate. Still, it's well to report these things. Besides, when you get a few ticks you may find a strong streak near it.

So I settled down, magnetized my land shoes, and started walking slowly about the vicinity, poking and probing. You can't imagine what it is like unless you have tried it. You may have seen photos and even movies of asteroid prospectors at work, but you have to be there to get the full effect.

You are out of sight of any living or moving thing. You are alone in a completely bleak landscape, all grey and black rock, with infinitely deep crevices, with nasty meteor scars that look like old-time battlefield shellholes. Above, the sky is dead black and filled with cold stars and occasional moving ones, passing asteroids. There is nothing, simply nothing, friendly or calming about the scene. It is a scene of permanent, perpetual death.

In the midst of this, you stalk slowly about, waiting for a series of clicks to sound in your ears. Also hearing Braun yap at you. He's sitting back there in the ship, listening to the sounds of our breaths over his pick-up, hearing

the slight clicks, and talking to us, urging us to greater effort, as if that could possibly do any good.

All this was going on in my ears as I strolled back and forth. I could hear him talking to the three other fellows. Incidentally, none of them had any more luck than I did.

Then I heard Braun swear. "Who's that coming back to the ship without notifying me?" he yells. There's no answer. He calls each of us separately and we all claim we're working. I heard each man reply myself. But Braun is still swearing.

"One of you is lying or else is crazy! I see you coming back very well, you fool! Whoever you are, you have left your equipment! You'll pay for it!"

I was a bit puzzled. I wondered who was coming back to the ship and why. Perhaps one of the other chaps had forgotten something and didn't want to admit it over the phones. Perhaps there was something he wanted to tell Braun in secret. It made me nervous.

Braun's voice sounded again in my earphones. "Who are you? Identify yourself! Any nonsense, and you'll never see space again!"

Still I heard no answer. At this moment my ticking prober sounded a bit quicker. I paid no more attention to Braun's ravings

against the man coming back and bent to my work. My streak seemed to be shaping up now. I worked the probe back and forth, traced the radioactivity to a whitish pocket near a small ridge. The white was frozen gas of some sort.

I unpacked my heater and melted the mass away. Underneath was a metallic outcropping which was surely radioactive. I unpacked my digging equipment and set out to blast off a chunk for further analysis. While I was working I heard Braun still ordering the returning man to identify himself and to explain what he was doing.

I leaned on my tools a moment and listened, for what was going on was quite unusual. Why should a man return—and without his stuff? Did he have an accident?

"Yes, the space lock is open, you dunderhead!" Braun was fuming. "Come in, come in, so I can report you! Did you break your communicator? You'll pay for it!"

In my helmet phone, I heard Braun get up from his seat and start the pump of the space lock. Idly I poked a loose rock with a tool, saw the rock fly off and vanish from the impact of my light stroke against its near-weightlessness.

The pumping sound of the lock

ceased. I heard the inner door click open. Braun's voice roared out, "Who are you? How did you get here? Where is your space suit?"

There was no answer that I could hear. "You don't need a space suit!" shouted Braun, a little high-pitched. "How is that possible? How did you get here?"

Again I heard no sound in reply. But Braun's voice, still higher in pitch, a trifle on the hysterical side, came again. "It's a lie! It's a trick! You can't be standing here! What did you say your name was? You look funny! You dress funny!"

No reply. But this time, after an interval, I heard Braun, apparently in a corner of the room, shouting hysterically, "Your name is Mauritz, Leopold Mauritz. Yes, yes. But what do you want of me? And why is your head so lopsided? What has happened to your skull?"

I heard a sound of rushing about, as if Braun was trying to hit something or somebody. Then there was a hissing sound as of air escaping, then silence.

I tripped my helmet phone on, called in. There was no answer. The line was dead.

Staking out my find, I hastily loaded my equipment and started back.

When I came within sight of the ship, the other three men

were also arriving. We stood side by side before the lock and conversed by means of direct contact.

What we saw was this: The space lock was open, the air had escaped, and Braun was lying half in and half out, dead from strangulation. That was all. How the lock had gotten open I can't say, except that Braun in his frenzy must have operated the hand switch from the inside without checking the outside controls. I find it hard to believe that Braun would do that, for he was much too experienced a hand.

But then if Braun had not done it, who had? There was no one else around. We four were the sum total of living things on the planetoid Mauritia. I checked with the others. They had all heard Braun's strange conversation. None of them had heard any answers.

It is down in the records that Braun died of a mental fit. We all four testified to what we had heard and the infallible lie-detectors bore us out completely. None of us had returned to Braun. But Braun was dead, cold and blue and frenzied of face.

That's the extent of my ghost story. I didn't see any ghost. I didn't hear any ghost. But it is

my opinion that Braun saw and heard one.

Why a ghost there, and why did it pick on Braun? Now that's a question folks always ask me when I tell this yarn. I gave it a lot of thought, and once when I had a leave on Earth I did some research.

I found that this planetoid, number seven-four-five, was first discovered about 1928 by an amateur astronomer named Leopold Mauritz. He named it after himself, Mauritia. Now this man Mauritz was a fairly successful businessman in his home town, which was Berlin in Germany. But he also happened to be of the Jewish religion, which was one of the things this German superman-character, Hitler, hated.

I couldn't find very much on Mauritz, except one final item. He jumped out of a window and killed himself in 1934. He was driven to suicide by the persecution and the lunatic laws set up by this Hitler.

I also think that Braun's story of being a direct descendant of that old dictator must be correct. A ghost — if it was a ghost — couldn't make a mistake, could he? Not on the ghost's own personal world, anyway. \* \* \*