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COLLISION ORBIT

B Y K. M A C L E A N

The mountain men who opened up the frontier in the west weren't settlers, they were trappers, traders, fighters and gunmen—the men who didn't fit back home. The kind of men who will be needed on the frontier of space. . . .

I was drowsing when I heard the airlock clanking and banging. Anyone can come into my ship, glance through the magazines, play the films and select food from the stock without me bothering to wake up until they're ready to buy something, but this sound was different. By the way they were clanging and cursing and trying to get the airlock to work, they were strangers. I came wide awake.

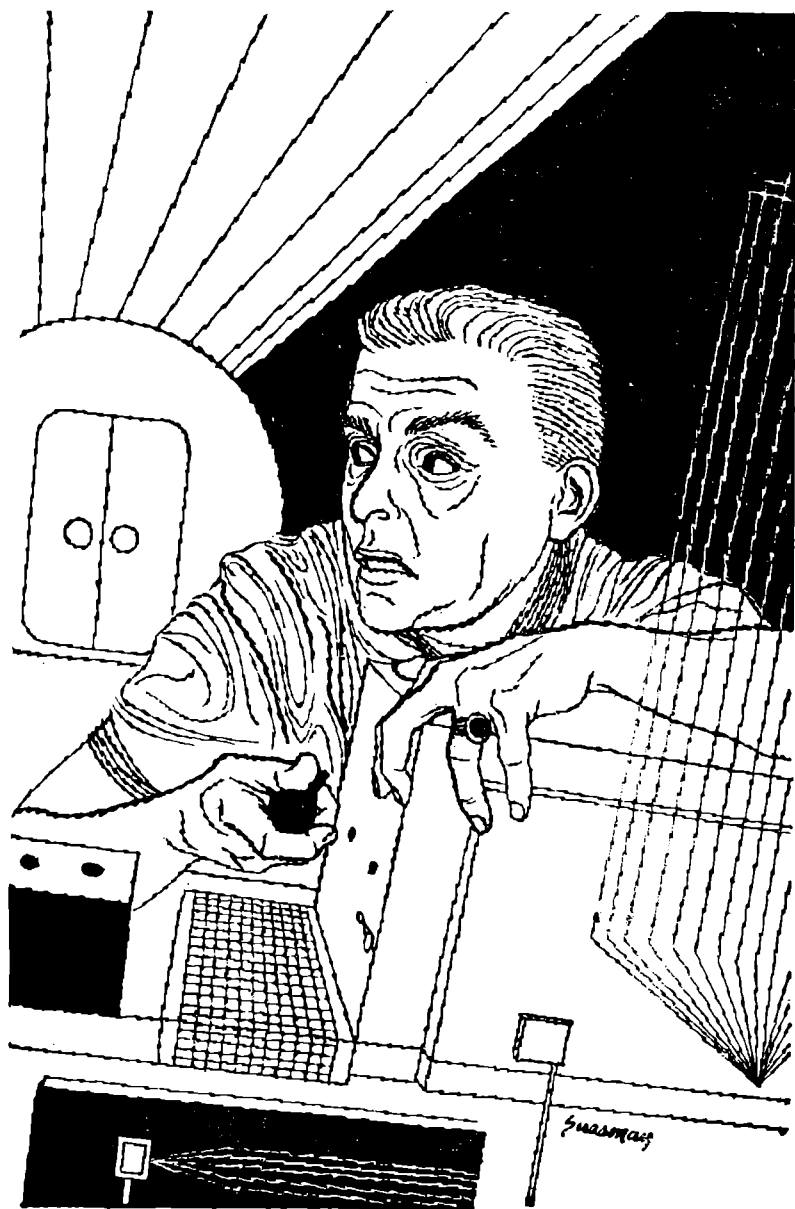
Last month's load of news from Earth had some interesting stories. Four convicts were missing from New San Quentin. There had been a bank robbery three days later with a really terrific haul of money taken. After that the Earth to Moon lift ship had taken off with ap-

parently a full load, but six of the passengers never reported in on the Moon after the ship landed and were considered to be missing, and one of them had been found dead on Earth a mile away from take off point.

An hour and a half after the Lift ship had landed at Luna, the space ship Phobus, of the Luna to Phobus-Mars run, took off suddenly without waiting for cargo, and vanished into space with only her pilot and first engineer known to be on board.

The news was a month old by the time it got to me, but it was easy to add those three items up. The convicts had the ship and were heading for the Asteroid Belt.

Well here they were at the



Asteroid Belt. First stop, Sam's Place. I grinned slightly and unscrewed two of the knobs, on the radio screwed one back in the wrong place and put the other under the counter. Then I switched the radio on to Send, in spite of the fact the knob said Receive. They were coming. Yawning, I swung around on my revolving chair.

"Careful with the airlock. Air's not free around here."

They crowded in, four figures muffled in heavy spacesuits with green globes concealing their heads.

"Don't move, Mister." Two guns were suddenly pointed at my middle.

"Good evening, Gentlemen," I said amiably. "I was expecting you would drop in. What can I sell you?"

"You didn't expect *us*, Fatty," said one taking off his helmet and showing a young haggard face that needed a shave. He snickered nervously, put out his hand and was given a gun by one who reached up and began taking off his own helmet. The young one was nervous but not stupid, for with the gun pointing steadily at me he moved quickly to one side as far as he could get. He leaned against the front wall to cover me from the opposite direction of the other gun holder. Whatever ideas I'd had

about maneuvering one in front of the other and grabbing a gun vanished right then.

"Shove that funny - talk, Mister." said the other, a husky with a stiff crewcut. "We're not buying anything, we're taking this place over."

The other two had their helmets off now. There was a big thoughtful looking one who went over to look at the supplies, and a lean one who went off looking for the can. They all looked haggard, underfed and tired. Probably they were haggard from having trouble holding down their food. Spacesickness gets practically anyone the first months out.

The big one wandered into the stacks of supplies and began opening cartons and nibbling anything edible.

That made me mad, but I didn't say anything, just got up and looked to see what he was opening, and almost got shot as the young gunman's hand jerked nervously at my motion.

"Sit down and turn off those neon signs and radio beams. We've got to get moving."

"Yeah," said the husky, as if surprised that he'd think of it. "Turn em off."

There was a big neon sign wrapped around my ship, saying, SAM'S. I flipped a couple of switches, and it went off for the

first time in a long time. There was also a set of swinging radio beams like lighthouse beams which said "Sam's Merchandise" in my voice. It was a sound that spacemen could home in on when they ran out of food or something broke and they needed a spare part. I flipped another switch and that went off too for the first time since I'd set it up. A lot of men depended on that radio beam.

But I didn't expect it would stay off long.

The radio was humming quietly at "Rec." as if waiting for incoming calls, but what it was doing was broadcasting everything that was said inside the store. It wasn't beamed at anyone, so the signal was weak, but anyone who wanted to know why my homing beams had gone off could find out by tuning to my frequency and listening.

Ferguson's place was on my orbit, somewhere close ahead. If he noticed me going by, he'd wonder why I didn't stop to deliver the mail and the groceries.

All I had to do was to stay alive for awhile, or make sure they killed me in a certain way.

"Man the controls, Mister," said the husky one. "Take us out of here before someone comes to see why the lights went off."

"Any direction," added the

big man who was chewing at the supplies. He had an easy deep drawl. "We'll tell you later where to go."

The fourth man came out of the can and laughed at that, bringing clear the idea that I wasn't going to be around long.

Abruptly I realized I had made a bad mistake. "Wait a minute," I said, letting myself sound startled. "I'm not wearing my coverall." I was wearing jockey shorts, nothing else, and I figured that they'd think I was modest. I spotted the coverall lying across a case of algin butter and reached for it. "Mind?"

The husky with the gun waved it at me, "Get those jets going," he snarled. "Stop stalling around."

"Let him put his pants on," smiled the big one, coming forward again with an open magazine in hand. "No reason for anyone to be closer than a thousand miles, people spread thin in space. They won't all arrive here for a picnic before he gets dressed."

I didn't wait for the gunman's nod, just took a chance and grabbed the coverall to put it on. They did not object again, apparently taking the big one's say as the final word.

The coverall slipped silkily over bare feet and legs, pulled up and zipped tight to cover

body arms and hands comfortably in thin, flexible, silky fabric, with a fancy looking collar, high behind the neck, low and open in front, and held in shape by the edge being a light metal ring, with another light metal ring and a little mirror-like limp plastic hanging down the back attached from the collar, like the space suitish touches that were the style in men and women's coats on Earth.

The material had a mixture of slow and fast elastic threads so that it fitted like skin, but gave easily with every motion, and it was painted with a coating of aluminum, so that it shone like a flexible mirror.

It was an intensely practical outfit, used by almost everyone in the Belt. The rest of mankind didn't have anything like it. Give an amateur necessity and not much material to work with and he can out-invent any hired expert.

But it looked useless, ornamental and gaudy, and I did not cut much of a figure in it. Lots of people get fat around the waistline in space. Something to do with not enough exercise for the legs. No place to walk to.

I looked like I'd just put on a coat of aluminum paint and a fancy collar, and knew it. There were stares and grins.

Let them laugh now.

"Look at that, a silver plated man."

"Isn't he *purty*."

"Look at those muscles bulge. Or are they muscles?"

I clenched my teeth together, climbed into the pilot's chair and pushed the steering rod forward cautiously until I could feel the jets beginning to thrust.

The big one, the one who was probably the brains of the outfit, came forward and leaned over my shoulder watching what I was doing. He chewed crackers noisily beside my ear and turned the pages of a magazine. "We're well stocked back there. Enough food and entertainment for a year."

"It's all due to customers," I said. "Two months' worth, per person, to be delivered here and there." I was bearing down on an irregularly shaped lump of rock on the screen that was probably Ferguson's camouflaged place. It turned red on the screen, meaning I was on a collision course. I couldn't tell that it was Ferguson's without having the radio open to his signal, but if that was his place, probably all his alarm bells were ringing inside, and he was screeching into his mike, trying to warn me to change course.

I moved the control rod a notch sideways to avoid it, and the screen turned it white again,

showing it was no longer a danger.

"How about putting on some more speed," drawled the thinker. He was used to having people take his advice, it showed in his voice.

"Don't want to shift the cargo, might break the eggs," I pushed the rod forward a notch more, and with the extra fraction of a gee acceleration the inertial pull toward the rear grew noticeable, and everyone stood slanted as though the floor were tilting back.

"Eggs." They all laughed nervously. I could tell from the sound they still weren't used to space travel, and the tilting floor had them queasy again.

"Yeah, eggs," I said irritably. "It took me fifteen hundred dollars to have them ship a box of fertilized eggs and hatching chicks out here. That's investment enough to make sure there is eggs for the store."

"You kidding?" asked the young gunholder and laughed. "Where's the chickens?"

"Some of the boys took on the job of raising them. If you boys will tell me your specialties, safe cracking or what—I'll tell you what kind of a job you'll fit."

For an instant there was an angry surprised silence, then the nervous gunboy with a smile that was half a snarl, walked

over behind me and clunked me on the side of the head with his gun, not hard, just enough to hurt a little as a warning.

"Look, Fatty, we aren't here to apply for a job."

"You'll be working anyhow," I said.

The blow that hit my head that time crossed my eyes for a minute. The young gunman's voice was pitched almost to a falsetto with irritation. "We don't need any work. We've got nine hundred thousand to hide out with until it cools, and we ain't going to spend it buying eggs!"

The husky made a reproving noise and the gunboy turned on him defensively and barked, "Why not tell him? He won't tell anybody anything, after now."

I had not expected them to keep me around their hideout for a pet after they took the store back to the stolen spaceship, but this sounded like I was closer to getting a bullet in the back of the head than I expected.

"We won't need him for a pilot much longer," the Brains of the gang said calmly, still looking over my shoulder. He had not made a sound of objection when the kid clunked me. "The way I see him working this rig, you just push that stick forward to go, sideways to turn and

harder to go faster. If you're going to hit anything the screen turns it red and you steer around. Simple. I can handle the piloting myself."

I hadn't expected him to catch on to the way the controls worked. Suddenly they didn't have any use for me, and no reason to keep me alive. I had to give them a reason, and fast.

I turned and grinned. "You'd better try another tack, boys, or you're likely to find yourselves kicking in space with your space-suits off." I should have planted the idea sooner. This late, talking big might set off those already tightened triggers.

Nobody pulled any triggers, they were a cool bunch.

"Find out what he means," said The Brains. He slid calmly into the control seat as the others yanked me out, and rested his hand lightly on the control rod. "Maybe he wasn't kidding when he said he expected us."

They dragged me upright, and Husky swung a blow to my wind. It didn't penetrate. I keep fit. He looked surprised when I didn't double up. "Blubber," he growled uncertainly, rubbing his fist. "You got a trap for us? Talk quick." He rubbed his knuckles and looked at my nose.

I value my nose. "No trap. There are better ways of approaching the Belt than you

boys are using. The woods are full of fugitives. I'll give any of them a stake and a start and a place to live where no one knows the orbit but the guy who delivers supplies, that's me. But if you try anything else . . ."

He grunted something and swung, and I barely moved my nose out of the way before getting a fist in the face. The second swing connected and made my nose a throbbing radiating ache in my face. The two men at my arms hung on while I tried to pull loose and get at the husky, and we thrashed around the room for a few moments until I cooled off and they brought me back standing facing him.

He was getting impatient, hefting a pistol by its barrel like a short club. He glanced from it to my face.

"Spit it out!"

Behind me at the controls came the Brains' smooth drawl. "He was probably running us into a trap. I've changed course."

"Brother," I said, breathing through my mouth. "If you do anything to me—" While I was talking they let me turn to the Brains, and he swung around to look at me. I kept talking.

"If you do anything to me, you are running yourself into a trap. I've got friends. Around here, when people get obnoxious they are likely to find themselves

stuffed alive into a garbage chute and the lever pulled for them to go fight space, if they like making trouble! It's an interesting way to die, and it doesn't leave a mark."

During that speech the Brains and I were staring into each others eyes. I jerked my head sideways to indicate the garbage chute when I mentioned it and his glance flicked over to see where it was, and then locked with mine again until I finished talking. Then he spoke coldly.

"You've named it, Buster."

He looked at the others. "Stuff this bag of wind down the garbage chute. And make sure he's conscious."

It took all three of them some fifteen minutes to do it. I was careful to keep the fight away from the supplies so as not to break anything, but otherwise I gave a good Br'er Rabbit imitation of a man fighting to stay away from death. Their faces were the only part that stuck out of their spacesuits, but I bent Gunboy's nose, almost closed both of Number Four's eyes, and made a good try at yanking off a part of Husky's left ear.

I don't like being called Fatty.

They got mad enough to have shot me, but they had already put their guns away to make

sure I'd be alive to appreciate what was going to happen to me.

For one lucky moment in the scramble I had all three of them tripped and down, and had a knee on Gunboy's back, fishing in his spacesuit leg pocket for his gun. Then somebody kicked me in the groin. I lost track of what was happening and just tried to breathe. When I came back to noticing anything they were busy stuffing me into the garbage chute, putting muscle into straightening me out from my curled up crouch, and making laughing cracks about it being a tight fit.

I clawed to get out and tried to choke down a few more deep breaths, but I was still to jangled inside and too weak for my arm-waving to bother them.

They pushed my head down with the lid, clanged the lid on and locked it into place. It cut off the sound of their laughing to a distant murmur.

Then someone must have found and pulled the disposal lever.

The bottom of the chute opened. Air pressure fired me out into space like a human cannonball from a circus cannon.

For a moment, I flung end over end, the multicolored lights of the milky way, and the intermittent harsh burning glare of the sun flashed into my naked

eyes, then I shut my eyes tightly, while the pressure of air bulged my chest out and whooshed out my mouth, pushing it open like a soft expanding pillow.

I clenched my eyes more tightly closed. I wasn't going to explode like the characters in visio stories, pressure drop was not enough for that, because I never kept more than three pounds pressure in the store atmosphere anyhow. A pressure drop like that can't kill, but it might rupture the bloodvessels in my eyes.

Like a mousetrap the ring that hung down from the back of my collar swung up on a hinge, bringing a collapsed balloon of mirror coated plastic over my head and swung down past my face, nearly taking off the tip of my battered nose. As it clanked into place over the collar ring, suddenly the air pushing out of my lungs filled the soft plastic bag and it expanded with a pop into a helmet globe, darkly transparent from the inside, mirrorcoated on the outside to reflect most of the sun's destructive glare.

I was protected by an emergency spacesuit. From the outside now I looked like a solid silver figure with a round silver sphere instead of a head.

The mousetrap spring on the

helmet globe was set to dangle down the back, and its catch was supposed to hold it back there until a sudden pressure drop expanded a tiny balloon under the catch and slipped the spring free.

I'd tested them in space before distributing them, but this was the first time my coverall had been tested with me in it, and I found myself considerably surprised and grateful that it really worked.

There wasn't much air in the emergency headglobe with me. I should have been breathing heavily up to the last minute to store oxygen in my blood, but the kick had stopped that. There was barely enough breath to pray with.

I had to be lucky twice. My second guess had to be right too.

It was.

Just about the time I could no longer tell the sun from the spinning bursts of white light in my head Fergason's scooter showed up along side with its jets trailing blue light and his anxious face peered out.

After that I was out of the fight.

For three hours the store went on, picking up more and more quiet little scooters as the settlers trailed after the inter-

esting conversation being broadcast by my radio. They followed closely, but always a little to one side, so none of them ever went on "collision" course and rang an alarm in the store control board. They were quiet and inconspicuous, listening on their radios with great interest to the talk of nine hundred thousand dollars, and to the fugitives talk of hiding out with the supplies in the store.

It was not until my stolen ship came to a meeting place where floated the huge shiny expensive Phobus, the ship they had taken from the commercial line, not until the convicts began coming out the airlock to go back to the Phobus—not until then did the scooters close in.

The settlers brought my store back to me, its thin walls plugged full of holes, and patched, and brought back one survivor, Mister Brains. He must have needed brains to survive, since the settlers had probably been over-enthusiastic in the capture. I did not ask what became of the other five convicts or the kidnapped pilot and first engineer of the Phobus. I believe in being tactful.

I took the survivor's fingerprints, and gave him a stake of supplies and a spinhouse to grow vegetables in until he decided what kind of work he could do.

We called a conference of all settlers over the radio to decide what to do with the loot, and on vote, divided up the nine hundred thousand among us as a penalty to the Brains for not using his brains, barging in and making a row, when he could have found out on Earth how to be smuggled out here quietly on the regular run. He had a vote too, and voted against it, but it didn't do him much good. We're a democracy, and one vote doesn't go far. Nine hundred thousand divided fifty ways is pinmoney, compared to the prices of things out here anyhow. Frontiers always get bad inflation.

I sent the new one's fingerprints down to my strongbox in a bank on Earth. Everyone's fingerprints are in there, and everyone knows that anytime I disappear suddenly the box will be opened and the prints handed to the police. But I don't blackmail them, and they trust me to keep that box closed, because my prints are in there too.

It just makes everyone very careful of my health, so that they are inclined to resent outsiders trying to kill me.

That's why I can leave the airlock open for anyone to walk in. I know when I'm safe.

The parts of the Phobus are coming in very handy for building. We'll have a city here yet.