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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES



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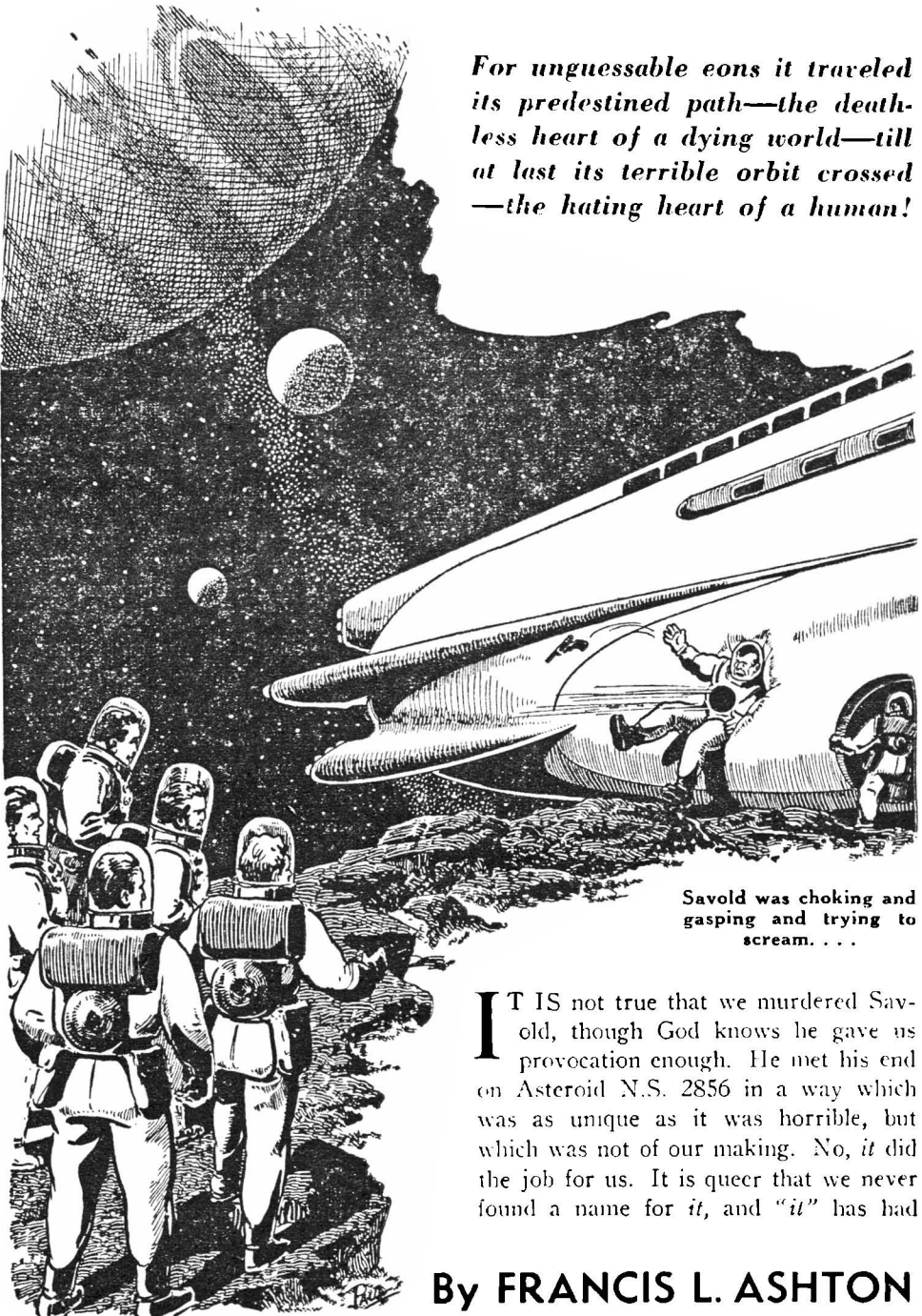
Inside Illustrations by Finlay, Lawrence, Paul, Van Dongen and Fawcette

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Published bi-monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a subsidiary of Popular Publications, Inc., at 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Indiana, Copyright, 1950, by Fictioneers, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25¢. Annual subscription for U. S. A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.50; other countries, 38¢ additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana, or 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in U. S. A.

ETERNITY ORBIT

*For unguessable eons it traveled
its predestined path—the death-
less heart of a dying world—till
at last its terrible orbit crossed
—the hating heart of a human!*



Savold was choking and gasping and trying to scream. . . .

IT IS not true that we murdered Savold, though God knows he gave us provocation enough. He met his end on Asteroid N.S. 2856 in a way which was as unique as it was horrible, but which was not of our making. No, *it* did the job for us. It is queer that we never found a name for *it*, and "*it*" has had

By FRANCIS L. ASHTON

to suffice; but it is a sure thing that, if those scientific fellows get to the asteroid in time, *it* is going to startle the scientific world from top to bottom and become for a while the wonder of the Solar System.

We landed on the asteroid on the way out to Jupiter. It was in our contracts that we should be given a run ashore on an asteroid when we crossed the belt, and we had expected to put into Ceres, for she lay right on our course. But it was just like Savold to choose an uninhabited lump of rock like N.S. 2856.

As soon as we had anchored ship, the six of us went off together, leaving Savold alone with a worm of a man called Stoep. We went to find a place where we could talk mutiny. Savold knew what we were about, but he could not stop our going.

There is no atmosphere and there is precious little else on that desolate lump of rock. It is so small that you seem to be standing on top of a hill wherever you are, and the gravity is so slight that you expect to fall off the derved place any moment.

We found a small hollow at the foot of some rocks, which were a veritable range of mountains on that miniature world, for they were quite fifty feet high. And there we stood in our cumbersome spacesuits, with the dark star-bejewelled immensities above our heads, and the lifeless meteor-scarred planetoid beneath our feet.

We had brought some flex with us, and we connected up our mikes and headphones so that we could talk with no danger of being overheard back in the ship.

"What are we waiting for?" demanded Craig. "We are six to two and Stoep's only half a man."

Craig was really bitter; and he had every right to be, for it had been his brother's body that had gone down the waste chute two days out from Earth.

"He could do a lot of damage with that ray gun of his," said Ercolani.

"What's wrong with you, Erc, is you're scared!" Craig was getting emotional. "You're all scared. You are a bunch of cowards!"

"Listen to me, Craig," said Ercolani quietly. "We all know how mad you are with Savold and what good reason you have to be. But we've got to keep our heads. Who is going to navigate the ship if we kill him?"

"You could give us a course back to Earth," said Triart, the first pilot. "I'll do the rest."

"Maybe I could," Ercolani was becoming thoughtful, and his mind was only half on what he was saying. He was a scientist before everything else, and, unlike the rest of us who were obsessed with our grievances, he could not forget that he was on an unexplored world. He kept looking around him with the keen eye of the trained observer.

For my part, I was expecting Savold to surprise us any moment with his ray gun. I had no doubt that he would take some action to forestall ours. His problem was that he could not work the ship without our help, and, if he murdered the lot of us, he would be stranded on a desert asteroid with little hope of being taken off. I drew what comfort I could from the thought, but I could not share Ercolani's interest in the landscape. My one concern was to see if Savold were coming toward us.

Ercolani was looking up at the rocks above our heads, and from the keen interest in his narrowed eyes, I knew there was some thing there he was itching to investigate. Following the direction of his glance, I saw that there was a gaping hole, which looked as though it had been punched through the rocky wall by a rocket shell. Whatever had done it had struck with irresistible force. I could see that our mutiny plan was not going to hold Ercolani's attention much longer.

"We are all agreed then," said Craig,

thin-lipped, "that Savold has got to die."

"It is only justice," said Triart grimly. "Your brother was only doing his duty. It was cold-blooded murder!"

"Yeah," said Snorke, the engineer, "but who is going to believe that back on Earth? We'll be tried for mutiny and murder."

HIS words were a cold douche, for they were true enough. Earth seemed a long way away, but it was the only place where life was worth living. It was better to endure anything Savold cared to hand out to us than to forfeit our right to live on Earth.

"What's the answer to that one, Erc?" asked Triart.

But Ercolani took no notice and continued to gaze at that hole in the rock. Craig took him by the arm and shook him, but he disengaged himself without looking round. His preoccupation was irritating to all of us; but the blazing curiosity in his face made me look again to see the cause of it.

Something was coming out of the hole in the rocks.

It was a black sphere about a foot in diameter. The bald statement conveys nothing of its peculiar impact upon the senses. It was black, intensely black, blacker than the darkest shadow or the remotest depths of space. It was the negation of light. "A three-dimensional hole in the Universe," is the best description I can give of it. It hung suspended in a curious way.

Craig was speaking. "Wake up, Erc, we've got to thresh this thing out."

But Ercolani's attention was gone. He ignored Craig, disconnected the flex from his space helmet, and went over to the face of the rock.

I now saw that *it* was moving. It was coming out of the hole, moving steadily and slowly, at no more than a yard a minute.

"We'll have to get on without him," said Snorke. "He's much too interested in that derved football, whatever it is. Come on, folks, we've got to talk business."

But nobody was able to concentrate on what he was saying, for we were all watching *it*, with a growing uneasiness.

By now *it* had moved right away from the cliff face, and was sailing at the same slow pace, a dozen yards above our heads. By the time Ercolani reached the hole in the rocks, *it* was out of his reach. He returned to the hollow, got under *it*, and made a sudden leap. Leaping is a dangerous matter on an asteroid, for you drift away from it and just so on drifting, if you leap too high. But Ercolani's leap ended abruptly when he reached *it*. He clasped *it* to him, and we expected him to go soaring upwards with his prize. Nothing of the sort happened, he was brought up as though he had flung himself against a brick wall. *It* did not deviate by as much as a millimeter from its course.

He tried various maneuvers, pushing *it* away from him and pulling *it* towards him; but he only succeeded in pushing himself away from *it* or pulling himself towards *it*. The thing went on its inexorable way as though Ercolani's mass had been no more than that of a fly. Snorke was so amused by Ercolani's antics that he roared with laughter and nearly deafened us all.

Ercolani was soon convinced that he could make no impression on *it*. He pushed himself back to the ground, with such force that he landed heavily. He stood watching it, thinking hard. Triart offered him the end of a length of flex, and he absent-mindedly connected it to his helmet.

"What do you make of it?" asked Triart.

"I think," he replied, "that it is moving in an orbit round the asteroid."

"But it ought to move much faster than

that, even in this weak field of gravity.”

“This asteroid is rotating in the same direction. The thing’s moving a lot faster than it seems to be, because we are keeping up with it.”

“I get you. But why didn’t you knock it right out of its orbit when you jumped up at it just now. Something must have happened to the kinetic energy you lost on impact, or the mechanics I learnt at school were all baloney.”

“It is a bit heavier than you think it is, that’s all. It just absorbed the lot without shifting an inch. You can see it takes a mighty lot of stopping.”

He pointed to the hole in the rocks.

“*You think it made that?*” I exclaimed.

“There can be no doubt about that.”

It was then that the hair prickled on my scalp, for I was suddenly scared of that mysterious thing, moving onward as relentlessly as fate.

When it had passed over the hollow, *it* moved along some four feet above the ground. Ercolani suggested that we should all try to stop it, and we climbed out of the hollow and stood directly in its path. Snorke linked arms with Triart and Craig, while the rest of us got our shoulders against their backs. Craig took it on the chest and we dug in our toes and shoved with all we had got. But we might as well have tried to stop the Mars’ express. Inch by inch we were forced backwards until Snorke could stand the pressure against his chest no more.

After that we let it go. Not that we could do anything else. We were all shaken, excepting Ercolani, who was stimulated and excited by it. He had already worked out the answer, whereas to the rest of us that little lump of matter, which was so completely undivertible from its predestined path, was beginning to seem supernatural.

We went back to our hollow, where we wrangled for a long while. At length we hammered out a plan, but, as it was never

put into operation, I will say no more about it here than that the first step was to return quietly to the ship. Before we did so, we waited some hours so that Savold should have had plenty of his own and Stoep’s company. While we waited, we were twice swung through the darkness of the asteroid’s night.

Before we set off, we disconnected the flex and reconnected our radio transmitters. The ship lay in the direction that *it* had taken, and I wondered whether we should overtake it. I felt reluctant to do so.

The horizon was only a few hundred yards away, and the ship did not become visible until we were nearly there. We saw nothing of *it*, and I thought I must have been wrong about its direction.

SAVOLD came out of the ship as we sighted *it*, and he had his ray gun with him. He stood with his back against the ship’s side and covered us with his gun.

“Stand together in a group,” he said, “or I’ll blast Craig off the face of creation.”

We had no choice but to obey if we wished to save Craig’s life.

“Now listen, you mutinous swine,” he went on. “You will come forward one at a time as I call your names out. You will go into the saloon, where Stoep is waiting with a hyperdermic to give you each an injection of G.B. 498. If any one of you misbehaves while he is in there, I’ll shoot one or two of his friends outside. Get me?”

We did. G.B. 498 was that notorious drug beloved of dictators. One shot of it, and a man became submissive and incapable of acting on his own initiative. It seemed that we had set our heads into a noose, like a pack of suckers—but who would have thought that he had that drug on board?

“Ercolani,” Savold went on, indulging

in his detestable sarcasm, "will you do me the honour of stepping forward. It is going to be very pleasant for all of us to have you docile and cooperative. But don't forget—one squeal from Snoep while you are in there and one or two of your ship-mates will be dead men. I am sure you wouldn't imperil their lives for anything on earth."

It was then that I saw *it*. It was between us and the ship and moving toward her in the same slow way. Ercolani had been right about its orbit, for it was still some four feet above the ground and it must have been following the curvature of the asteroid's surface very closely. He also had seen it, for I saw him give it a quick glance as he walked slowly toward the ship. Like a fool, I almost warned Savold that the ship was in danger, but it occurred to me in time that Ercolani knew what he was about.

Though he walked as slowly as he could, he moved much faster than *it* did. Before he entered the air lock he held out something for Savold's inspection.

"Take a look at this," he said.

I thought he was distracting Savold's attention so that we could rush him. For all Savold knew, the sample of rock Ercolani was holding out might contain precious metal or even uranium ore. His greed and curiosity were aroused, and he moved a few steps toward Ercolani before he remembered that he was covering a dangerous group of men. He swung round and faced us again, just as we were about to leap forward.

"Get along in, Erc," he said. "We'll see about that later. Don't forget to behave yourself while you are in there, or it will be just too bad for your friends outside."

Ercolani went on into the ship. And then, suddenly, I saw the point of his stratagem. Savold was now standing right in *its* path.

He had not seen it. He was standing

on a slab of rock, and *it* was well below his line of vision. In any case, it was not easily seen. When there is no atmosphere, there are no values, shadows in the distance are as black as those close to. From where Savold stood, it must have been against a background of shadow.

He still had not seen it, when it began to press against his body. Without taking his eyes off us, he raised a hand and tried to force it away, thereby wasting precious moments when he could still have wriggled free. A moment later he was pinched between it and the hull of the ship.

It caught him in the region of the diaphragm, and we could hear in our headphones the air being driven out of his body. He dropped his gun, and as one man we sprang forward.

I and two others forgot, as one does in moments of excitement, and jumped too high. We soared to two hundred feet and had to wait, cursing our folly, for the feeble gravity of the asteroid to draw us down again.

Savold was choking and gasping and trying to scream. We, who were forced to be spectators, switched off our headphones to cut out the horrible sounds coming through his mike. *It* crushed in his stomach and chest and burrowed through the mess. He looked afterwards as though he had been hit by a rocket shell. But it was all done in slow motion.

Snorke and Triart had no thought of rescuing him, for they knew the attempt would be futile, even if they had wished to make it. It was the danger to the ship that was their concern. They tore into her in an attempt to get her out of the way. But you cannot get a ship's motors running in a matter of seconds, and, by the time flames were issuing from the reaction tubes, Savold's body had subsided to the ground, and *it*, having torn a great hole in the ship's side, was well inside her hull.

THE ship was held by four anchors embedded in the rocks, and they slipped the cables. Then Triart opened up. The ship leaped forward for a few yards only to be brought up sharply, shuddering from bow to stern.

Triart saw at once what had happened. *It* was inside the ship and, as she moved forward, had crashed through everything until it had come up against the great bulkhead which took the thrust of the main drive. Fearing to damage the ship further, he closed the throttles.

By now we had reached the ground and we went hurriedly aboard. The bulkhead formed one of the walls of the saloon, and as we came in we saw that *it* was hard up against this wall. Before, it had been a frightening but interesting phenomena, now it was horrible. It was leaving a long smear of blood as it scraped its way along the wall.

The wretched Snoep was in the last throes of suffocation, for the air was pouring out through the hole in the side.

Snorke was also in there directing Triart, over the intercom, in some intricate maneuvers. The object of these soon became obvious. By means of the braking and steerage jets, they backed the ship until *it* was in the middle of the saloon, then they swivelled her right round and made some further adjustments until the hole that *it* had made lay right in its path.

Before they had finished, Ercolani came in carrying the gravimeter.

"What do you make it?" I asked.

"Forty-five million tons," he replied in an awed voice.

I stared at him blankly. I never seriously doubted his figure! but even if it was out by a factor of ten, it was something outside my experience.

"Completely collapsed matter, of course," Ercolani was saying, "like you find in white dwarfs. Nuclei stripped of their planetary electrons and packed as tight as can be."

By now *it* had passed out of the ship, and we stood and watched it for a while out of one of the ports. Ahead of it the ground rose sharply and we could see the long groove it had ploughed through the rocks on its numerous previous passages round the asteroid.

There was work to be done, and by common consent we buried the horrible remains of Savold before we did anything else. Then we set to and welded fresh plates over the hole in our hull, for our ship could offer us little comfort until that was done.

While we were working, Ercolani suddenly remarked, "Hullo! *It* has changed its course."

I was sufficiently interested to look out of the porthole. *It* had missed the entrance to its old groove and was ploughing out a new one, a foot or two to the right. The rock was cracking and splintering in front of it, while slithers and dust were being thrown upward to form an ever-thickening, glistening cloud.

"There's a source of power for you," said Ercolani, "if you can think of a way of harnessing all that kinetic energy." Then he went on, "So our motors did shift it a bit, perhaps as much as a millimeter or so."

"Where did it come from?" I asked.

"You have got to go back to the birth of the Solar System to explain its origin. When the sun's giant, primeval companion exploded and shot out the matter which subsequently became the planets, it probably shot out some completely collapsed matter as well. Such matter is only likely to be found at the centers of the planets."

I was beginning to understand.

"I get you," I said. "That thing was once at the heart of a planet, the planet whose debris forms the asteroid belt."

"You're right there. I have no doubt that it was once the planet's heart."

But Craig was shouting at us to get on with the work.