

PLANET STORIES



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MARS IS HOME

By BRYAN BERRY

The Peony was a poor despised one-man tug rocket, yet she confounded every great technical mind between Earth and Mars. Haunted? Jinxed? Bedeviled? Ask Professor Henderson—the Peony's last passenger.

THE professor had one more month to live, that was all.

He sat in his apartment with his papers and books all round him in mountainous papery confusions upon the glass table, thinking hard about this solemn fact.

A month, they had told him. Four more weeks or so and then—*fnir*. He pushed his fingers through gray hair. It would not be so bad if they would let him return to Mars to die. But no; space on the rockets was precious. No one could get a passport unless they were in perfect health. Anyway, he didn't have the money for the fare now; he had spent almost his last credit weeks ago when he made this trip from Mars to Earth in the hope that one of the Earth doctors would be able to cure him of his illness.

Sighing he stood up and walked across to the window. I need Mars now, he thought. I don't really need to see Martian scenes or touch the sands or the rocks with my fingers. It's just the knowledge that I'm on Mars again that I want. I don't fear death as much as the thought of dying sixty million miles away from my home; lonely death far from the mutant colony, far from the red hills and the clear pale skies and the cold biting winds of evening and the two moons and the double moonlight.

The old professor shuddered. He was going to die; he hadn't finished his investigations, his work. He was a very long way from home.

Outside the night was deep midnight blue with stars crawling like phosphorescent ants afar off. The fireworks of mail rockets exploded brilliantly from the spaceport to the west of the city. Golden rain, silver

rain and red rain making bright fountains here and there in the night as the rockets rose up, bound perhaps for Venus or Luna Colony, or perhaps for Mars.

From hidden sources within the walls of the professor's apartment soft music throbbled out, sentimental and sad, the sensitive responder picking up the sadness in the old man's thoughts and selecting music to fit the mood.

The professor stared from the window across to where his books and papers lay upon the table. "If I only had a little more time and a little more money I might find out. I might manage to complete the investigations. But my money's gone and my time, too, now," he said very quietly to himself. "Another hundred credits and I could hire a private rocket and go up to the station. Once there I might even . . ."

His words trailed off and a smile crept shyly across his old wrinkled face, looking strangely out of place among the creases and the furrows of age.

He stood for a moment thinking. Then he went quickly to the wall visor set, his smile growing broader on his face.

Jefferson would lend him the money. Would give it, even. He had helped the man long ago and now it was Jefferson's turn to help him. He dialed a number on the visor set and waited for the connection to be made. With the hundred credits or so that Jefferson would give him he'd be able to take a rocket up to the Tub and then . . .

CALLED the Tub because that was what it looked like—this space station circling slowly in the inky splendors up beyond Earth.



And up towards it, streaking, came the rocket.

The rocket braked, slowed, maneuvered, began to circle. Then a metal-jointed snake emerged from the Tub, caught it, held it firmly in its magno-grabs and drew it inside.

"Good evening," said the professor, stepping out.

"Good evening, sir. May I see your pass, please?"

"Private business, my good man. I have no pass."

The man shook his head. "Then I'm afraid I shall have to keep you here until I find out . . ."

"Keep me here? Keep me here?" The professor shook a long finger violently. "You'll do nothing of the sort. Go tell the commander that Professor Gerald Henderson is here and wants to see him." He scowled. "'Where's my pass?' indeed!" he said, muttering.

The man got through to the commander on the visor and returned minutes later to find the professor pacing up and down, up and down. . .

"The commander says he's busy right now and will you wait, please. What do you want to see him about anyway?"

Professor Henderson was indignant. "I've written twenty-two letters to Commander Pearson about this matter, some from Mars and more recently, from Earth. He *knows* what I want to see him about," he said, his aged face twitching violently.

"Well, I don't know anything about that," said the man, his thumbs in his belt, "but the commander's busy so you'll have to wait."

The professor waited.

Twenty minutes later the commander was free and visored through that he could see his visitor now.

"Professor Gerald Henderson," announced the commander's secretary, ushering the old man into the room.

Commander Pearson stood up behind his steel desk. "Good evening, professor. Sorry to have to keep you. Urgent business. Always busy up here on the Tub, you know." He held out a hand stiffly.

"I'll come straight to the point, commander," said the professor. "You know

why I'm here. My letters. . ."

"Ah yes, your letters," said Commander Pearson, looking away.

"My letters will have told you why I have come."

"To see the *Peony*?"

"Naturally."

The commander gathered papers together on his desk, his fingers fluttering. "I'm sorry, professor. As a civilian you can't go into the spacehold without a pass."

"You could give me one."

"COULD but won't. There's been enough nonsense talked already about the *Peony* being haunted and such. We're not using her any more right now because of these same stupid rumors, but spaceships are still scarce and we shall have to put her out again eventually. I don't want you or anyone else stirring up all that gossip again. It's bad for the men's nerves."

Professor Henderson waved his briefcase under the commander's nose. "Within this case are notes, ideas, theories, reports, opinions and descriptions from fifty, sixty, a hundred different sources. All of them about the *Peony*. Thirty-four authenticated statements made by witnesses of her initial accident; twenty-two of the second one; five statements by men who have been in her; four reports from scientists and so on and so forth. All these people can't be wrong, commander. I've been gathering these things together over a large number of years, studying them, learning from them. And now I think I'm onto something. There must be some agency in that rocket that causes. . ."

Commander Pearson slapped his desk. "Professor!" he shouted, his eyes angry red. "I've already had to listen to half a dozen odd cranks who've come up here to pester me about the *Peony*. That's why I didn't answer any of your letters. Please understand that I haven't the slightest intention of letting you start these rumors up all over again. Things have quieted down a bit since the tabloids let go of it last year. I don't want anyone starting trouble all over again."

"But commander. . ."

"There are no 'buts'," said Commander Pearson. "I'm afraid I must ask you to

leave." He pressed a button. In walked his secretary.

The professor waved his briefcase. "Thirty-four witnesses of the first accident, twenty-two of the second, five. . ."

"I know, I know. Goodbye, professor."
The door swung to with a fizz of gas.

"LEAVING so soon, professor?" asked the man behind the reception desk.

Thoughts scampered furiously within the professor's mind. There might still be a chance of getting to the *Peony* if he was careful. He had no intention of giving up the chase so soon, especially as he had reached the Tub and was so near the object of his search.

"Er, well, my official business is over but I'm intrigued by the Tub," he said. "Never been up here before. I wonder if someone could take a few minutes off to show me 'round?" He watched the commander's secretary walk back along the corridor. He had spoken fairly softly so that the man should not hear, but in the silence of the reception chamber his voice might have carried. He held his breath, watching. The man did not turn but walked the length of the corridor and went out.

"Show you 'round?" said the man at the desk. "Well now, I guess we could manage that. Of course, without a pass you'll only be allowed in the administration and recreation levels."

"Naturally, naturally," agreed the professor.

The man clicked a visor on his desk. "Mason? Is Logan down there? There's a Professor Henderson here who says he's never been in the Tub before and can we find someone to show him around. He's completed his official business and I thought. . . Yes, that's right, Professor Gerald Henderson. Right." He switched off the visor, turning to the professor. "Logan's coming up. He just loves showing folk over the Tub. A youngster. Very enthusiastic."

Logan came up, all pinkness and youth. "Professor Henderson?"

"That's right."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, sir. I've read some of your books. Never thought I'd meet you, though."

They walked down the corridor together with the young man saying: "Now about that piece in your last book about alien life forms. . ."

They walked and they talked and at last they came into a large rest room, deserted at this hour of the evening. The professor caught hold of Logan's arm. "There's something I'd like to ask you. Can we sit down for a moment?"

"Why surely, professor," said Logan.

They sat down together on a cloud-rubber couch. Restful music hummed from the walls. The professor turned to his companion. "I'd better start by telling you that your commander has just given me instructions to leave the Tub. I came up here to try and look at the *Peony* and he told me he didn't want anyone starting the rumors all over again." There. It was out. And if he had judged Logan correctly the youngster would be interested.

The youngster was.

"The haunted spaceship? I thought everyone had forgotten about it."

"Not me. I've studied the business from the beginning. A bee in my bonnet, if you like. An obsession, even." He waved his briefcase. "Here are a good many reports and statements about it all. Interesting but not, I fear, conclusive. To reach a conclusion I must see the *Peony*. I was hoping you might be able to help me."

Logan shook his head. "Sorry, professor. I've no pass for the spacehold since I'm not on duty and even if I did have one it would be pretty risky getting you down there."

The professor's fingers made small drumming sounds as they tapped upon his leather briefcase. His face twitched. "But there must be someone who could take me down there officially. Look, do you know anyone who's been out in the *Peony* and who might be able to take me down to the spacehold legally?"

"Sure I do. If you'd got official permission to go down any of the boys with duty passes could take you."

"Well then, couldn't you find one and tell him I'm here on official business. So far as you know I've got the commander's permission to visit the spacehold and take a look at the *Peony*."

Logan looked doubtful for a moment, then nodded. "I guess I could find someone."

"That's the spirit," said Professor Gerald Henderson.

Logan went away and returned minutes later with a short fat man. "This is Felton, sir," said Logan. "He'll take you down to the spacehold."

The fat man held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, sir. I understand this is the official investigation of the *Peony*."

Professor Henderson smiled. "Well, in a way you're right. But Commander Pearson doesn't want too much notice taken of me while I'm here. He'd rather the *Peony* didn't get any more publicity, you understand. So if we meet anyone I'd just better be looking 'round."

LIGHTS were pink blisters along the walls.

In the dark cradles the spaceships snored their fitful sleeps while men ran over them like swift-moving spiders, repairing, welding, lubricating, loading.

"So this is the spacehold," said Professor Henderson, standing at the foot of the anti-grav shaft, wiping perspiration from his face and gazing about him.

"Uh-huh, and there's the *Peony*," replied Felton.

They walked across to the small one-man rocket.

"The *Peony*," said the professor softly, to himself. "The haunted rocket."

It gave off no aura of chill, no ghostly effluvia, no psychic emanations, but sat silently just like any other ordinary tug rocket, its nose pointing along the ramp towards the air lock.

"You've been up in her, haven't you Felton?"

"Yes, sir. Twice."

"Did you—did you feel anything strange?"

Felton did not look at the professor as he replied. Instead he stared at the rocket beside him, his eyes travelling over its gleaming length. "Sure I felt something strange. Everybody does when they're in her. It's as though you're not alone."

He made a faint gesture with his hand as though to explain this remark. "In the

other ships it's the loneliness that strikes you. But in the *Peony* you're never alone. Whatever it is in there won't let you feel alone. When you're in the others you feel there can't be anything anywhere except you; the stars are just things that someone's painted on the sky to fool you; the Tub is a barrel-shaped illusion; Earth's a dream you dreamed when you were a kid. That's the way you feel in the others."

"And in the *Peony*?" asked the professor.

"In the *Peony* you know that there's someone or something in there with you."

"And what about the accidents? How would you account for them?"

Felton scraped his foot about on the metal flooring. "I don't know. There are plenty of theories. Some guys talk about the ghost engineering them itself; others say it made the pilot so nervous he didn't know what he was doing. But I talked to Saunders who was piloting when the second accident took place. You knew that he went to the hospital? Well, I managed to get a few words with him before he died."

"Yes, yes. What did he say?"

"Funny thing. He said, 'It made me do it, it made me do it.'"

The professor nodded, writing furiously in a small notebook. "This second accident occurred not far from the Tub itself, didn't it?"

"That's right. Why the old *Peony* wasn't blown up altogether I can't guess. Just one of those things, I suppose. Three tubes blown but no major damage. A miracle. The pilot got cooked when he tried to repair the tubes—or that's the official story anyway."

"Hum," said Professor Henderson, finishing his writing.

Activity banged and hammered and whistled in the spacehold all about them.

"Just what is the official view on the *Peony*, professor?"

"The official view? There isn't one yet. That's more or less why I'm here. Tell me, Felton, have you any idea what makes the *Peony* different from any other rocket—besides the haunting business, I mean?"

Felton shook his head.

The professor smiled. "Well, the drive tubes are reinforced with melliium-bronze alloy. It was the only time melliium was

used. After this one experiment they discovered it was too costly a process and not really worth while. And the mellium, naturally, came from Mars. Does that suggest anything to you?"

Felton's forehead became a maze of thought wrinkles. "No," he said at last, "no, I don't think it does."

"Ah," said Professor Henderson, "I think that's where the answer lies nevertheless."

"You do?" He gazed at the shimmering bulk of the *Peony*.

"I do."

"Can you explain, sir?"

The professor shook his head slowly. "Not yet. It's just an idea I have. Just a theory. Just a thought. Nothing certain. And before I tell anyone about it I must be certain that I'm right. I *must* be certain." He banged the metal hull plates of the *Peony* with his fist. "Let's take a look inside, shall we?" he said.

COMMANDER PEARSON snapped the visor switch. "Well?" he said.

"That professor hasn't left yet, sir," reported his secretary, eyes wide. "Lemmington down here at reception just told me that Logan has started to show the old guy round the Tub."

"A trick!" shouted Commander Pearson, biting at a finger-nail.

"That's what I thought, sir. Shall I put out a warning on the intercom?"

"Yes, do that. Warn everybody, but above all warn the men down in the spacehold. That's where Henderson's trying to get to."

"A man is bringing Logan up now, sir. Apparently he thought the professor was here in an official capacity and he handed him over to one of the men who had a pass for the spacehold."

"Never mind all that!" said Commander Pearson, thumping on his desk. "Get that warning through right now."

The commander stood up and crossed from the visor to the far wall of his office on the first lap of a pacing up and down.

The visor light blinked and the buzzer buzzed.

"Well? Have you got him yet?"

The secretary's face was puckered in agitation. "Sir, this Professor Henderson's

been too quick for us. I got the alarm call through to spacehold too late. He's left."

"What do you mean, 'left'?"

"In the *Peony*, sir. The *Peony* was fuelled up and ready for space. Henderson took her out!"

Commander Pearson grew purple. His fingers clenched and unclenched. "The idiot! Get some tugs out after him and contact him on the radio. Put the radio contact through to me here. I want a word or two with that madman." He broke the visor connection and walked across to a vast vision plate let into the wall of his office. He pressed three studs and the plate lit up to show an arrow of light moving across the innumerable grid lines. It showed the *Peony's* path through space.

"The fool. The crank!" rasped Commander Pearson.

AND they were right. I'm not alone in here, thought Professor Gerald Henderson. Whatever it is is in here with me, watching me, feeling my mind, digging at my thoughts and examining them.

The *Peony* cut its tunnel in space; a golden grasshopper in a giant leap through the black purples of space. And to anyone who might happen to glance at it from some other rocket it was just another tug rocket speeding in the midnight darkness. But to the man inside. . .

There is only one way to find out, thought the professor. And even then I may never be sure. I can spend a year out here in space without ever being found, without ever being seen, even, but it might not do me the slightest good.

He laughed aloud. A year! That was a laugh. He'd forgotten, for the moment, just how long he had left.

He slammed the auxiliary drives into motion.

Supposing I am wrong? Supposing it is all imagination, this haunting business? What then? I shall die a useless old man and in doing so I shall destroy a valuable rocket. Well, what of that? I haven't more than a month to go, at most, and if I plot out my trajectory correctly I shall at any rate die on Mars, I shall die at home. Besides, they can always build another rocket. And the moment of impact should tell me

whether I am right or not about the *Peony*; if I don't learn before, that is. It will be worth while crashing just to find out.

Professor Gerald Henderson continued with his thinking.

Alien life forms. Life forms so alien that no thoroughbred scientist could help but pass them over, not being able to even contemplate the possibility of life existing in such a guise. They said that Mars was a dead planet, these scientists, but they were thinking of life as they knew it and understood it—vegetable and animal life, as on Earth. They couldn't conceive of a life form that might be linked to a non-living substance such as mellium; an intelligence living in its own metal home deep within the Martian mountains. Mellium, to the Earthmen, was simply a precious metal. The engineers had taken it, pounded it, heated it, wrenched at it, twisted it, alloyed it with another metal and converted the whole, red hot, blistering, into rocket drive tubes for one special rocket—the *Peony*.

And suddenly, there within the speeding rocket, it was not a theory any longer, but a fact.

"I'm right," said Professor Henderson, aloud, as though speaking calmly to a companion, unseen, who travelled with him. There was no question about it, somehow. No doubt at all. It was as though a voice had spoken words into his ear, very softly, affirming everything that he had been thinking.

The professor's hands trembled over the controls.

"I *am* right!" he repeated. "And it knows what I'm trying to do. It can get inside me and understand that I know it's here with me. It won't make any accidents this time. It won't make me swing the ship the way it did before when the others were inside. There isn't any need. There isn't any need at all."

"HENDERSON — is that you?" Commander Pearson shouted furiously into the radio.

"Yes, commander. I'm afraid I beat you to the punch."

"Return to the Tub immediately."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry!" the commander snorted.

"What do you mean, 'sorry'? I'm ordering you to return."

The *Peony* sped on, its progress registering on the commander's wall map.

"Have you read any of my books?" asked Professor Henderson.

"No, and I don't intend to."

"You should read them, commander, especially the last one. There's a chapter in it on alien life forms and the possibilities of such life forms on the different planets. This business gave me the first idea for that chapter."

"What business?"

"The *Peony*, of course. I found out that this ship was different structurally from every other rocket in one particular respect. Its drive tubes were reinforced with mellium-bronze alloy. The mellium came from Mars and, I believed, contained part of the sentient life of Mars that nobody believed ever existed."

"Nonsense. You're talking nonsense, Henderson."

"Am I? I don't think so."

"You're mad."

"Perhaps," chuckled the professor into the radio. "If I am then you're wasting your time, commander. If I'm mad I shouldn't be likely to respond to your orders, should I?"

The commander's face had reached its maximum shade of purple. "*Henderson!* Get a grip on yourself!"

"Ah, but I have got a grip on myself. Let me go on talking; I want to tell you about it."

"You're crazy."

"Quite. Now listen: I believed that the Martians might be linked to the mellium as soon as I learned that the drive tubes were the only mechanisms in which mellium had been used. And the *Peony* itself, as you will know, is reputed to be haunted. The two things linked up in my mind but I couldn't visualize the link itself for a long time. But I can now. Martian life is linked, almost symbiotically, to the mellium, commander. When the mellium is destroyed then a certain part of the intelligent life is destroyed also. But mellium is almost indestructible, which is why it was used in these drive tubes out here. But how would you feel if you were ripped up and carted

away to be burned and pounded and twisted into rocket tubes while you still retained your consciousness? You'd hate it, wouldn't you? You'd want to go back home to the cool mountains, to the peace and the quietness of home which is, in this case, Mars, wouldn't you?"

"Henderson!"

"That's right, commander. Map out my trajectory path on your vision plate. See where I'm heading?"

"Mars!"

"Exactly. Remember the accidents? Why did they occur? Because the Martians made the pilot change course suddenly, by some telepathic means. The sudden swerving was too much for the rocket. All the witnesses told of seeing the rocket lurch just prior to the explosions. The Martian wants to get back home, commander, but if I land the *Peony* on Mars what good will that do? The colonists would imprison me when they caught me and they'd return the rocket—and the Martian—to you again. And what about me? The doctors tell me that I've got a month to live at the most. I've lived all my life on Mars and I want to get back there to die. They wouldn't let me make the journey officially, since I'm a sick man and space is scarce on the transport rockets. I want to die on Mars, commander. On Mars. And does it matter whether I die in a month or in a day?"

The commander's eyes swivelled to the vision plate, to the darting arrow that registered the ship's frantic flight. "You're going to crash her on Mars," he said, strangely without emotion.

"You're quite correct," said the professor, "but that isn't the important thing to me, you know. What I'm really doing is simply taking two Martians back to their home. Goodbye, commander."

Plunk went the radio, the connection breaking.

On Mars, in the bright sunlight of a clear day, near the red mountains, upon the golden sandy beaches, men stood, craning their heads to watch.

"A rocket, isn't it?"

"Guess so."

"She'll never land at that speed."

"What's up over there?" cut in a third voice, roughly. "You men gone to sleep? We've got to get this ore shipped into the gyro by 1700 hours and if you just stand there gawking at the sky. . ."

The speaker stopped, looking upwards. "Holy Moses, she's travelling!"

"Can't be a mail rocket, and the relief ain't due for three more days. What . . . ?"

"Maybe it's a Martian," someone said.

The others laughed just as Professor Henderson crashed the *Peony*.