

PLANET STORIES



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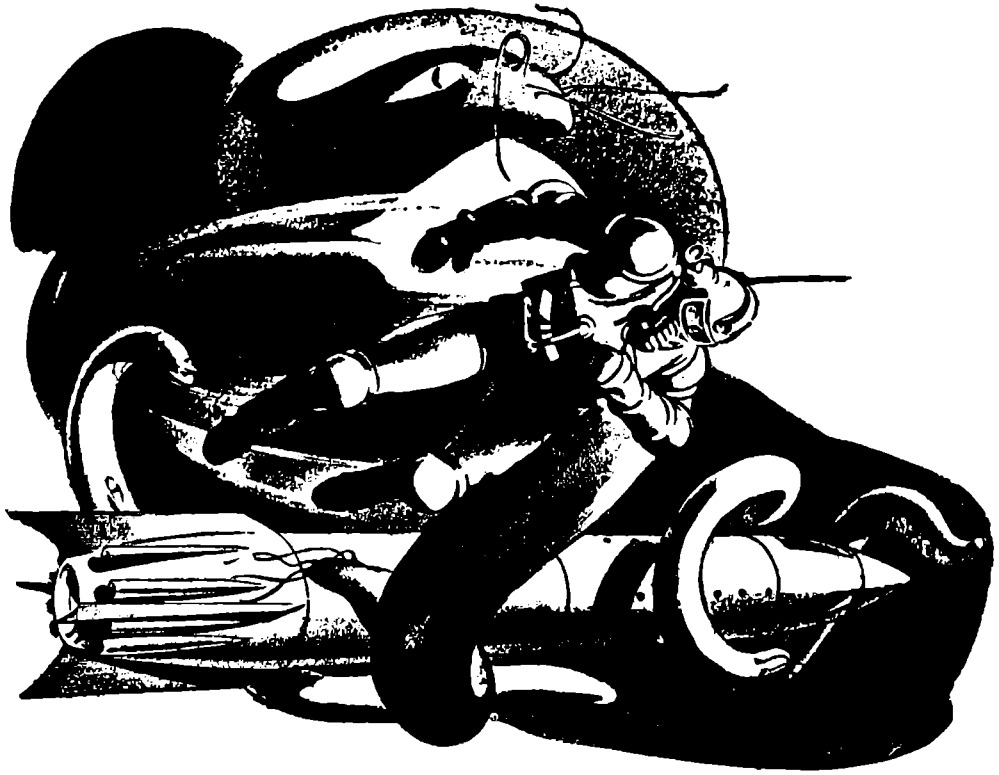
Spring Issue
Dec.-Feb.
1947-1948



Vol. III, No. 10
20c per copy



PLANET STORIES: Published quarterly by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1947, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Entered as second-class matter, October 2, 1944, at the Post Office, at New York 1, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Yearly subscription rate 80¢ in advance. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.



Suddenly Kroner blasted his shoulder jets.

MIND WORMS

By Moses Schere

Glowing softly out there in the black nothingness—writhing evilly—what was their terrible power that could drive a ship's crew gibbering out the airlocks?

THE AMBASSADOR, WHOSE smile had grown fixed, whose thin, broad-domed face was lined and tired, bowed before the screen saying, "Thank you—thank you."

On Earth, 26,000,000 miles away, a billion saw his final bow and cheered him. "Luck! Luck! Luck!" they roared.

His screen in his suite on the space ship *Ceres* finally went blank and the voice of the ship's operator cut in nervously, "I'll j-jibe with the Center Room beam in a moment, sir." The operator, a capable man, was frightened. The Ambassador had more reason to be frightened; he took the moment in which he was unlinked from Earth to wipe one hand nervously down across his face.

"On C-Center Room, Ambass—"

The operator at either end was cut off as the tight official beams met in mid space. A different voice, older and deep bass, said, "Relax, Phil." The Ambassador let his silvery cloak fall from its dramatic sweep about his shoulders and stood naturally, tall, a little stooped, heavy-shouldered, greying in the prime of his life at seventy-five. His screen, which had been flashing to him a montage of the crowds in Times Square, in Trafalgar Square, in the Champ de Mars, in Red Square, filled with a view of Center Room, from which the Earth was governed.

The bass voice, backed by a large and friendly smile, belonged to the President, who sat at the head of the great ivory table

in the huge, soft-lit room. They all were there, the men whom custom deprived of a name when it gave them their titles—the Executive Secretary, the Coordinator for Education, the Coordinator for Energy, the Terrestrial and Astral Coordinators for Commerce and the half-dozen others who possessed the ten-year term. If, privately, they called each other George and Ahmed and Sven, it was for relaxation from the standard of dignity expected of them.

At the foot of the table sat a small group of important guests, and all the white, black, yellow and brown faces were turned to the image of the Ambassador who waited for permission from the Venusians to step upon Venus.

"Take it easy, Phil," the President said.

The Ambassador forced a smile. "Alec, when it's all over, I will."

"It can't fail. The very fact that after fifty years of trying they're finally willing to receive an Earthman and will consider trade—" The President made a large, gathering gesture: *Everything's in the force-field*. "For fifty years," he said with the reassurance the Ambassador so greatly needed, "we've been dropping them capsules of Earth goods and the means to learn our language. Drop, drop, drop, and we've worn away the stone. Can't fail, Phil."

"I know," the Ambassador said. He thought: It isn't that. It was the triple-distilled inferiority complex which gripped him and shook him. The dread of the terrible brains below Venus' mist.

One by one around the table they gave him brief, friendly God-speed. The distinguished guests were properly more formal with, "The Assembled Physicists have asked me to convey to you all our best wishes, Ambassador," and more on that style. He thanked them gravely.

ONE guest, however, distinctly annoyed him. It was Rupert Hoag, the last of the pioneers, that walking fossil from the first days of space travel. "Wide-open, Ambassador," he creaked with an antiquarian reference to atom-jets and a wave of his one hand that was not formal at all. Otherwise crippled from long-ago radiations was Hoag, but at a hundred and forty his one eye was bright. Probably he had not been invited to the gathering but

just had barged in, being one of the half-dozen holders of High Privilege, that peculiar, all-inclusive reward for distinguished service. The trouble with Hoag was that he never would confine himself, like a decent old-timer, to remarking on the progress his years had seen.

This official farewell had a purpose. The men on Earth, secure and sane, were trying to give one last tenuous thread of security to the very sane, very well-adjusted (on Earth) Ambassador who in space was ready for a mental crack-up. No psychiatry or long-distance hypnosis had yet prevailed against the rampant inferiority, the primitive and infantile desire to crawl and hide which came often to Earthmen in the presence of alien, superior races. A foreigner who came to Earth they could respect and that was all; a foreigner met after a trip through space they met with their every fear and complex laid naked perhaps by artificial gravity, by unknown rays—by something.

Lampell, the first to make contact with the first unworldly race—Good Lord, Lampell actually had been a contemporary of leering old Hoag, there!—had met on Mars a cynical bunch of mental wizards who had had, and still had the most unholy good time with the bumbling Earthmen who would dare anything for trade. Of Lampell's crew, twelve out of forty returned sane, half-dead but sane, and the twelve did not include Lampell, first to set foot on Mars. That had been eighty years ago. Two other cultures were discovered in the next thirty years, those on Jupiter and upon Saturn's moon Phoebe. Always, the first few to expose their naked, terrified minds to a cosmic sophistication met the same fate. There was an old saying which the Ambassador now remembered a little too clearly:

Crazy as an ambassador . . .

The Ambassador jerked his hand away from his face. But all in Center Room had seen the desperate gesture, made as though one could wipe away fear.

"Say, Ambassador." That was old Hoag. "Say, Ambassador, I've been saving up something to tell you."

Annoyance ran around the ivory table. But High Privilege was High Privilege. All Hoag had to tell the public was that the Ten-year men hadn't been polite to him—

"Say, Ambassador, you know, I had a funny experience once, my first trip to Phoebe. Was the second trip made there, by the way. Mighty funny experience and it wasn't ever made public, because you know how things were." The old man chuckled rustily. "Nobody wanted to say anything against space travel until all the stock was sold. But I've been saving it up for a time just like this, to tell an Ambassador who's on a spot. Been saving up—" Hoag's mind seemed to skip, and he banged the table, laughing. "Yes sir, that was years before the Phoebean platinum scandal, and what Rupert Hoag ever had to do with that scandal, I'm *not* saying!"

The Ambassador said pointedly, "I understand that you were rather fortunate upon Phoebe, Captain Hoag." His voice was unsteady with anger. The President signalled across space, anxiously, that he should please be patient.

Hoag, still laughing and shaking his bald, scarred head reminiscently, settled back in his chair of little tension-bubbles. "Take a load off your feet, Ambassador, and listen. Wish I could give you a cigar."

The Ambassador took a load off his feet while the old man lit up in great comfort. As well, the Ambassador thought, to bore himself with Hoag while waiting for a Venusian signal as to pace about with jangling nerves. Soothing music, escapist motion pictures he could not listen to or look at, not in the grip of inferiority and fear.

HOAG blew a smoke ring. "Those days, a space ship didn't go much faster than that ring compared to nowadays. You know how we had to do when we headed for an outside planet? Took off in the direction of the Earth's revolution so our speed would be greater than Earth's and we'd tend to spiral away from the Sun, and we'd have to take a gravity-pull off a planet here and a gravity-pull off a planet there to detour us wherever we wanted to go. Many's the ship missed connections, or with the metal of those days she blew her tubes away and she's out there yet in an orbit, just a coffin. Or those that first tried for Venus but went into the Sun . . . a lot of good friends of mine, Ambassador." The old man stared blackly ahead of him for a moment.

"And of course there was just the radar that never could follow you much beyond five million miles. I was the first one to circle the Moon, y'know," he put in with senile pride. "Repaired a jet in mid-course. My hand came off a month later.

"But, as I was saying, this was on the way to Phoebe, and about a month out . . ."

The old man finally dug into his story and as he warmed up to it so did his listeners, although with a kind of self-apology for being interested in one of those gaudy old adventure yarns of the times when the long ships had to stand on their tails to blast off the Earth. They'd wobble up on polymerized liquid fuel, not daring to start the atom-blast till they were well beyond the atmosphere, then jerk away at the heads of their beautiful, wasteful fiery trains. Even the early atom-drive required conservation, so that it was necessary to take those long leap-frog curves from gravity-field to gravity-field, during which, as the ship coasted, its blast-eroded tube liners could be replaced.

The *Lone Star*, Hoag's ship—he was an unregenerate Texan—had to cut her drive on one of these occasions. A number of her crew, in shielded clumsy space suits, were at work at the stern upon those terrifically radio-active liners while they hoped for the best. Her primitive screens picked up some approaching objects and in a little while the great worms, almost as long as the 500-foot ship, faintly glowing, swam into plain view against the backdrop of illimitable stars.

"Worms," Hoag repeated, waving his cigar. "Space-worms."

They were perhaps ten times as long as they were thick, blunt-ended, with a cluster of tentacles at each end and another cluster belting them in the middle, all the tentacles gently moving and apparently propelling them. They were covered, including the tentacles, with a crystalline shell that had no visible opening, but there was an eye that swam under this shell anywhere along the body. What metabolic process they sustained in space could not be said. It probably was similar to that of the solar nautilus which floats in great colonies, paper shelled, on the pressure of light inside the orbit of Mercury, each colony like one vast resentful brain.

There were six of these worms. They

gyrated in peculiar patterns, at one time joining their bodies to form a gigantic hoop around the ship. Different radiation patterns were made evident upon the ship's dials, and it was obvious that these vermiform beings were trying to communicate. Neither Hoag nor his two interpreters could make anything of the radiation patterns, and one of the interpreters, after trying hard, sat blindly in a corner and shivered.

Inferiority complex. Or that for a beginning while alien minds strove impatiently to penetrate the naked and shivering Earth minds. This was space, and worse it was space in the old times before warp-vibrant communication, before rattled Earthmen could scream to a home base for moral support.

The crew was still out there at the tubes when those worms came along, and before they could crawl or jet their way to the airlock, one of the worms plucked up a crew member. It was Able-bodied Space-man Kroner, as capable and steady and fearless a man who ever had boarded the *Lone Star*. Kroner was seen at first to go rigid while the worm held him with two tentacles and looked him over with that submerged, swimming eye.

Suddenly Kroner blasted his oxygen-alcohol shoulder jets. The worm let him go and recoiled.

KRONER slammed away into space, into nothingness. Suddenly, almost at the half-limit of his short supply of fuel, he turned on his own axis. He was expert, this Kroner, and had flipped his jet control so perfectly that he had turned a hundred and eighty degrees and for a couple of seconds he kept going directly backward on momentum against the jets' renewed forward blast. While that happened he jerked his arms and legs in a wild, running motion, running as though forward while still going backward. It was a comic thing to see.

But at the instant of equilibrium between forward motion and backward motion, those in the *Lone Star's* control compartment caught Kroner's face at a high magnification upon the screen.

"He'd been frightened mad," Hoag said. "We didn't need any doctor to tell us. We saw his face. And what he was shrieking

all that time was, 'Ma—Ma—Ma—Ma—'"

He came at *Lone Star* like a meteor, his arms outstretched as though running to the safety of maternal arms, and he hit the space ship so hard that he started a seam in her outer skin. Whether he was killed by the impact or by the rupture of his suit was a rhetorical question. The man's body exploded outward in frozen streamers through the rents in the suit. The space worm plucked him up, examined him, casually tore the broken suit and the corpse into pieces . . .

And, in the control compartment, the Second Officer began to scream and to hide, forcing his way into an impossible recess behind a switchboard.

Inferiority complex. That, the helpless psychologists always said, was at the root of the madness when space travelers' primitive fears and emotions were lashed up by the whip of space. Lampell, long ago, seemed to have brought back a virus from some planet, an endemic disease that took control of all but the most hearty when confronted by new, terrible, intelligent life forms.

"It was the cold knowingness of those worms," Hoag said reflectively. "It was the feeling that you were licked before you started. I felt the complex, and I had a terrible desire to escape my death. The only refuge for my mind, from those merciless minds, was in death. If I hadn't been a captain, with responsibility such an instinct within me, maybe I would have picked up a gun . . . but I didn't."

He forced himself to try to communicate. There was radio and radar and the first model of the beam. They ignored them all. And finally, with an effort of will against the fear which literally sickened him, he put on a suit and went out upon the shell of *Lone Star* with a paint-spray. The worms watched while he painted for them that ancient, universal mathematical proposition, *The sum of the squares of the sides equals the square of the hypotenuse*.

They looked, with their horrible eyes. And finally, all together, they turned away in unmistakable disgust.

They began to build a little solar system.

Of nothingness they fashioned the black spheres—flipped them into shape with complicated motions of their tentacles. Nine they made, and set them in space with an

approximation of the distances between the planetary orbits. It was the same kind of approximation which is necessary in any model of the solar system, for no model in which the planets are of recognizable size can cope, in scale, with inter-orbital distances.

Finally the worms grouped themselves in the center of all, merging their body glow into a fair replica of the sun. And all the eyes watched the space ship while they waited for the stupid little beings within to understand.

"Couldn't reach our poor minds with their vibrations, so they gave us something solid to look at. What did it mean? That they were the architects of the solar system? Some of my crew were screaming we had met God. All I knew was that we had to get out of there while a few of us were sane. Finally I drove a work gang outside to the tubes again, leading them myself, and we got to work on the liners, trying not to look at the worms and their solar system but feeling their eyes and feeling their awful, overpowering intelligence right through our suits . . ."

A buzzer cut in, not upon the tight beam but upon the *Ceres'* communicator.

"Excuse me, Captain Hoag," the Ambassador said acidly. "There is word from Venus: It seems I have *business* to attend to."

The old man, back on Earth, paused, and the President said, "We'll stay on beam, Phil, till you go."

"Say, wait a minute" Hoag said anxiously. "I didn't get to the point of the story."

But the Ambassador had walked out of the room.

He met the *Ceres'* captain hurrying toward him, white-faced. Infected by the man's haste and half-hysterical injunction to waste no time, he almost ran to the special communications compartment.

HERE, in a screen whose outside viewer pointed downward, he saw the smooth, liquid-seeming blanket of Venusian grey clouds, weirdly touched with iridescence by a blinding sun. The clouds, believed to be over a hundred miles thick, blanketed the entire planet. They might contain water and oxygen somewhere below; here, where they touched space, they

were metallic vapor charged so heavily that no beam could ever penetrate them. The Martians, who awesomely never lied, had told Earthmen that Venusians existed; told them contemptuously. It would not be wise to attempt a landing upon Venus without permission, the Martians had said. Not wise for Earthmen, at any rate.

Because of the peculiar vapor there never had been electronic or warp communication with Venus. So far, the only message from below those clouds had come a month before to one of the patiently waiting, patiently capsule-dropping ships—the permission to land one unarmed ambassador. The Ambassador saw now that communication this time had been by the same means. A rocket had come up through the clouds, trailing a wire, and had been caught in the great cable net extended behind the space ship.

"I had the wire plugged immediately," the sweating captain said. "Expected to tell them to wait a minute and I'd put the Ambassador on. But they're not listening to us, just telling us. And there's a time limit. I would have had a line run to your suite if I'd known there was a time limit, but I should have known there'd be a time limit, I should have known how they act, all these races, because we're so feeble and stupid compared—"

The man almost was gibbering. The Ambassador slapped his shoulder heavily and stopped him. The Ambassador wanted a slap himself and his hand missed the first time as he reached for the loud-speaker stud.

The voice came instantly, so mechanical and uninflected that it occurred to him that a machine had spoken into a recording machine. The Venusians must be so unearthly as to be unable to manage Earth sounds, if they made sounds at all.

". . . authority will advise him on the question of trade with Earth. He will be freed one hour thereafter. Your ship must remain in the same position meanwhile. The ambassador from Earth will leave your ship in precisely eighteen minutes proceeding directly downward. He will be picked up by our ship within the clouds. In this ship a representative of fifth authority will advise him on the question of trade with Earth. He will be freed one hour thereafter. Your ship must remain in the same

position meanwhile. The ambassador from Earth will leave your ship in precisely eighteen minutes proceeding directly—"

The Ambassador snapped the stud, his teeth gritted hard against a trembling. He was not even to land upon the alien planet, then. Not even to talk to the head of government but with "a representative of fifth authority." It was so condescending, so contemptuous—and so deserved, of course, he thought, staring at the captain who stared wild-eyed. You wanted to run. You wanted to hide. Already you felt them inside your mind ruthlessly peering, destroying. *As crazy as an ambassador.*

Contemptuous time limit of eighteen minutes! They'd been told that it took a minimum of sixteen minutes to get into a space suit.

"My suit! The dressers!" shouted the Ambassador. Remembering the Ten-year men who waited to reassure him, and badly needing one last contact—"Bring everything to the Earth screen!"

As he fled the room he saw, in the screen which showed Venus, a vast silvery ovoid lift momentarily to the surface of the vapor, then sink slightly and remain in a suggestion of menace neither in sight nor out of sight, waiting to engulf him.

WHEN he faced the Earth screen two expert dressers flung themselves upon him with the pneumatic pads whose donning before the space suit took care and time. In Center Room, all the perfectly sane, shielded men attempted to convey by smiles their confidence in the shuddering creature being lapped in weirdness. The Ambassador strove with all his considerable mental power to hold the impression of those reassuring smiles.

And that doddering fool, Hoag, with his one arm waving unwanted friendliness, said, "Ahoy Ambassador! Now we can get to the point of that story."

A story about superior merciless beings, calculated to break the last weak thread of a man's confidence! "Shut up!" the Ambassador wanted to scream across space. And would have, had not the dressers jammed his mouth closed, at that moment, as they adjusted a throat pad.

On Earth, too, they tried to shut up Hoag but they couldn't. "I'm not the old fool you think I am" he said. "Listen! Am-

bassador—gentlemen, High Privilege!—Ambassador," he said urgently, "I told you I've been saving this story to tell an Ambassador at the last minute when he's in the spot you're in. I've been waiting fifty years. Listen!

"The vermiforms made this little solar system and we didn't understand, couldn't understand. We got our liners replaced finally and no more than half of us were capable of standing a watch when we blasted off. Ambassador, we blasted the hell out of there!

"The vermiforms stayed where they were for a few seconds. Then they began to follow. We were streaming a good train, of course, the old fission train, a couple of miles of very fancy destruction and waste. So the worms came along. They overtook us easy. And they began to dance in and out of our train.

"Yes sir, Ambassador, they weaved and they circled in and out of that awful atom blast. And I knew that the atom blast will kill anything, chop through any armor. But not those worms! *Now* they showed us how superior they were! *Now* they made fun of our power!

"And I wanted to run and hide where my officer was hiding down among the mattresses we rigged for him among the girders along the keel. My mind was scarred by space and by everything that Earthmen were not born to—

"And then it happened."

Adjustments now had been made and the Ambassador could speak while the dressers almost threw him into the inner suit. His hand clawed his face and he said hoarsely, "For God's sake man, spare me!"

"And then it happened!" old Hoag shouted, thrusting away from those in the Center Room who were now trying physically to shut him up. "The worms died! They died in the atom blast!"

The Ambassador stared, and around the ivory table they stared at the last of the pioneers.

"Died! The vermiforms' natural armor was proof against all the rays of space and it held out against the atom blast for a quarter of minute. But then it went. One after the other they went limp and the blast spewed them backward and we could see the spreading holes in them. And then they were out of sight, dead, killed because

they hadn't known any better, by George!

"And we went on to Phoebe and got along better than anyone else with the things that sit inside their crystals, thinking. Got the platinum nobody else could take. Because we knew that the universe can breed morons, incompetents! The crystal people are smarter than Earthmen, sure. But at least we knew we were smarter than somebody else!

"Don't you see, Ambassador," the old man said earnestly, "that only the inferiority complex kept us from knowing right away that those worms were no better than children? They hadn't been trying to send us any message with radiations. No, it had been only the natural radiations of their bodies, changing as they changed their formations around us—as they *played*. One of them picked up poor Kroner. Why not? The thing was curious. Took him apart, later, the way a child will take apart a toy. My business with the square on the hypotenuse? Hell, how could they understand when they'd never learned any mathematics?"

"How could they?" the Ambassador echoed, and he was smiling.

"And that little trick of theirs, making a solar system. Well, don't you see that they had to show off? One of their natural functions is simply gathering and stacking together the scattered atoms of space. I'll bet they can't make anything but black balls of amorphous matter. It's possible they build themselves a little world here and there to lay their eggs on, or something. So, there they were feeling kind of abashed because they had no space ship or anything, so they just had to show us what they could do, and that they actually had gone and counted the planets of this system—on their tentacles, I'll bet, since they had more than nine tentacles. And wasn't it childish, getting together in the middle to show us a nice, glowing sun?"

THEY were locking the thorax section on the Ambassador. He stood straight and silent. Very straight.

"Ambassador," the old man pleaded over thirty million miles, "you don't *know* what you're going to meet on Venus. You don't *know* that they're particularly smart. And they don't know about you. Maybe they're a little afraid of you. Maybe they're a *lot* afraid of you. We don't know one way. But we don't know the other.

"But you know now, the best way and the best minute I can tell you, that some pretty dumb creatures live beyond Earth. Now, the way my grandfather's grandfather used to say, you wouldn't start selling your horse to a stranger by telling him that your horse is no good?"

Silence, then, on the beam from Earth to Venus.

The dressers began to lower the helmet over the Ambassador's head. He stopped them. "Wait a minute."

Still that nakedness in his mind, and the fear ready to pounce again. But that was only an effect of space, not Venusians. Or was it simply Lampell's heritage. A conditioning?

And that contemptuous message, with its almost-impossible time limit and its pointed refusal to allow him to set foot upon Venus and its "representative of the fifth authority." He didn't know one way and he didn't know the other, but it could be a defense mechanism on the Venusians' part.

In Center Room an old, old man had slumped in his chair, exhausted, reduced to crippled flesh that bore one bright, brave Earthman's eye. The Ambassador waved. The old-timer waved back eagerly.

"Gentlemen," said the Ambassador formally, but he spoke to the one adventurer, "I thought I was in a hurry but I've decided I've plenty of time. I think it will be a very good idea to open these negotiations by keeping the other party waiting."



A Fiction House Magazine

