

# PLANET STORIES



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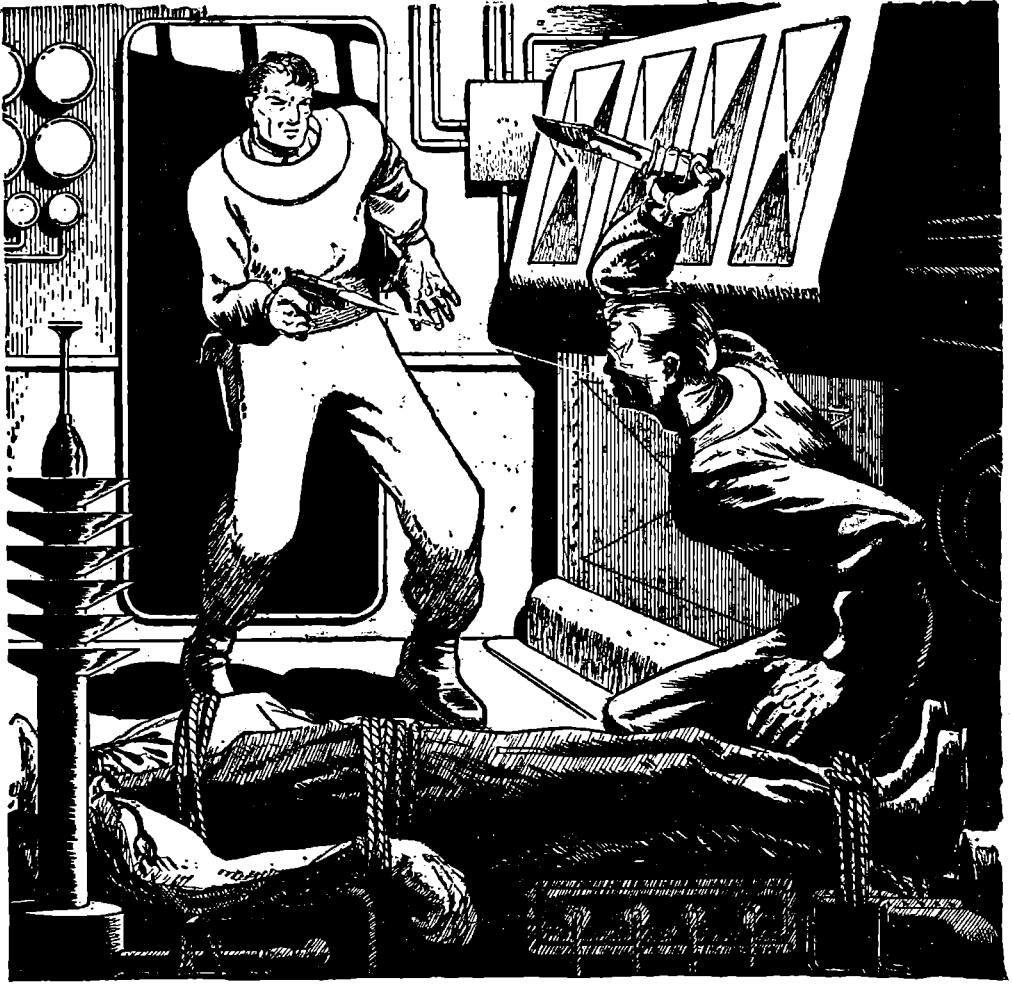
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*"You are the next sacrifice—!"*

# MOON OF MADNESS

By **GEORGE WHITLEY**

**Hurting toward that coldly gleaming disc, they thought in terms of thrust and trajectory, deceleration and orbit. They had no time for an old wives' tale.**

**I**T SEEMS STRANGE, NOW, TO hear all this talk about jet propulsion and rockets. Especially rockets. Why, some of the more daring journalists have even toyed with the idea that we may, one distant day, even reach the Moon! But they probably aren't serious.

But it seems that, at last, I can tell the story of James Taberner, as he told it to

me. People will be more ready to listen—now; perhaps some will even believe. Mind you, I didn't quite believe it myself when I first heard it, but now—I suppose I do.

Yes, this is the story of James Taberner, Extra Master, Navigator of the first rocket ship. And it is the story of Dr. Malcolm Stornsen, the man who discov-

ered how to tap and harness atomic power, the man who did it with only one end in view—to reach the stars. And it is the story of John Bruce, the Engineer, whose dour materialism was merely a veneer over an equally dour Calvinism which, in turn, hid a streak of barbaric superstition.

You may remember the name of Stornsen. It used to crop up now and again in the papers, some years before the War, in connection with his atomic energy experiments. He never hit the headlines till he blew himself up, himself and his two assistants. Their names, you may remember, were Taberner and Bruce. Yes, they *did* blow themselves up, a helluva long way.

**B**UT, as far as I'm concerned, the story really begins one December morning about eight years ago. I was Third Mate of the old *Ballygunge* at the time, and we were wandering round from Calcutta to Bombay with a load of black diamonds. This particular morning we were about off Aleppi, the coast was visible as a line of blue haze to starboard.

I was strolling back and forth on the bridge, mentally calculating how much money I could safely draw in Bombay, when I saw something small and black right ahead. There was no need to speculate as to its identity, the only thing it could be was one of the dugout canoes used by the local fishermen. It did not seem to be moving, so I gave the order to starboard five degrees.

Moved by a spirit of idle curiosity, nothing else, I took the telescope from its rack to look at the boat and its occupant. What I saw made me hasten to the Captain's voice-pipe and blow a hearty blast on its whistle. "Will you come up, sir?" I said. "We're approaching what appears to be a rubber dinghy of the kind they use in aeroplanes, and there's a man in the bottom, either dead or unconscious!"

The biggest surprise came after we had got the occupant of the little collapsible boat aboard. It was either Taberner, or his double. But Taberner, we knew, had left the Company, had left the sea, and had some kind of shore job near London. He was supposed to be acting as assistant to some crackpot Professor called Storn-

sen. Then somebody remembered that he had seen in the paper, before we left Calcutta, that Stornsen had blown himself and his two assistants to glory. Yes, it gave names, and Taberner's name was given. No, he wasn't sure of the date, it was a Home paper, not the *Statesman*.

So it couldn't be Taberner.

I remember the scene well, we were all in the little sick bay arguing the point, when the rescued man opened his eyes. He saw me, first. "Why, hello, Andy!" he whispered. "So *you* picked me up!" His eyes flickered past me, found Captain Morgan. "You here too, sir? Quite a gathering of old shipmates!"

"But I thought you were ashore in London . . ." I began.

"Don't bother the patient, Mr. Dunstan," frowned the Old Man. "Rest he needs, and quiet. Get out of here, all of you!"

Taberner raised an emaciated hand.

"Please, Captain Morgan. I *want* to talk, badly. I've been alone, *alone*, do you understand? Out there in the blackness and emptiness, where there's no sea, no wind, no rain, only the naked, cold stars. I must talk, I must tell the story while there is time. Something might happen to me, and then nobody would know. Nobody would ever know, till the next fools fall into the same trap that snared us.

"And, in any case, I hate to think that all the toil and ingenuity of Stornsen has perished unrecorded. He was the first, we were the first . . ."

His voice tailed off as he muttered something about "we were the first that ever burst into that silent sea . . ."

Then, he regained control of himself, and this is his story.

**T**ABERNER first met Stornsen when he was Second Officer of *Maharanee of Oudh*. The *Maharanee* had called in at Colombo on her homeward passage, a matter of a small parcel of cargo, mostly tea, and a few passengers. Stornsen was one of the passengers. It seems strange, to me, that Stornsen wasn't sitting at the Captain's table, but it is probable that the Colombo agent just didn't know who Stornsen was, and thought that his title denoted

a degree in medicine. 'Anyhow, he was put at Taberner's table.

You just can't keep a man from riding his hobby horse. Stornsen rode his, every mealtime. Not that he looked, said Taberner, like a monomaniac, or even like the conventional, absent-minded Professor of fiction. He suited his name, big, and blond, and Scandinavian. He would have passed as the Mate of a Norwegian whaler. An interesting contrast, it must have been; Stornsen, the scientist, big, blond and hearty, and Taberner, the ship's officer, small, dark and clever looking.

Taberner was the only one at the table who could appreciate Stornsen's conversation. But then, he was always a clever beggar, and had his Extra Master's Ticket; which, of course, implies that he was very well up in math. And his nickname in the Company was always "Professor." So Stornsen and Taberner talked about escape velocities, acceleration, deceleration, electrons, protons, neutrons and positrons, much to the disgust of the other passengers. They were, said Taberner, the usual bunch you get in Colombo, Tea, I. C. S., Army and such, and interested only in bar hours.

A week or so before the *Maharanee* docked at Tilbury, Stornsen had asked Taberner to become his assistant. Taberner agreed, as by this time the scientist had fired his imagination. So he handed in his resignation. The Company, he said, were very decent about it, and told him that he could come back any time he liked without losing any seniority. But he never thought that he'd ever set foot aboard one of their ships again.

Stornsen had another assistant, a Scot called John Bruce. "I never really liked him," said Taberner, "and yet, I was sorry for him. You could tell that one part of him was intensely engrossed in the work he was doing, whilst another part disapproved most intensely. He wasn't happy in his work."

But Bruce, it appears, was a first class engineer, and the three of them toiled like galley slaves in the workshops that Stornsen had installed in the grounds of his house on the Essex coast. They employed outside labour, of course, but this labour

was never allowed to know what it was they were helping to build. Taberner and Bruce, naturally, had been let into the secret. They were building a rocketship.

He must have been an amazing man, Stornsen. He found the key to unlock the limitless power imprisoned with the atom, but he was completely blind to its commercial possibilities. His one dream was the conquest of the planets. A favourite saying of his, said Taberner, was—"Just as the aeroplane had to await the internal combustion engine before it became practicable, so did the rocketship have to await atomic power."

Stornsen and his two assistants put the finishing touches to "*Argonaut*" (for so they had decided to call her) themselves. She was a lovely thing, said Taberner. Stornsen hadn't followed the conventional design of a glorified artillery projectile with four big vanes aft, or at the base. *Argonaut* was shaped more like a huge flatfish, or, better still, like an enormous arrowhead. Yes, an arrowhead is perhaps the better comparison, as one can just imagine her shooting to the stars on her shaft of flame. This shape, said Taberner, made her easy to handle in an atmosphere. With atomic power to play with, there was no need to consider the clumsy expedient of landing stern first, on the main drive.

**A**T LAST came the big night. Stornsen's domestic staff had been given leave, and there were only the three astronauts on the premises. They wheeled *Argonaut* out from her hangar, managed after much jockeying with the little, but enormously powerful, mobile cranes which they themselves had constructed, to get her on to her launching ways.

They entered through the airlock, then went to their stations; Stornsen and Taberner to the Control Room forward, at the point of the arrow, and Bruce to his engines aft.

I don't think that any of them, Stornsen included, quite knew what was going to happen when the main drive was switched on. But she took off as sweetly as a bird, and soared into the air long before she reached the end of the runway. Having power to play with and to spare, there was

no need, Taberner said, to reach escape velocity almost immediately. The take-off was no worse than it would have been in the case of a conventional aeroplane.

Both of them, however, were worried when the buzzer of the engineroom telephone sounded. And both of them were relieved when they discovered that the disaster that Bruce was reporting was, by this time, many miles astern. It appears that a few drums of the very unstable fuel used by *Argonaut* had been left in the hangar. Radiations from the main drive must have set them off; anyhow, Bruce reported having seen from the after viewports the house and workshops going up in one, glorious explosion. But nobody worried much. The ship was sound, was behaving perfectly, and the Moon lay ahead.

Actually, the run to the Moon could have been accomplished in a far shorter space of time, but, as soon as escape velocity was reached, Stornsens cut the main drive. He wanted to test out the orbit worked out for rockets propelled by chemical fuel, and, also, wished to find out the effect of weightlessness on the human body. It was nauseating at first, but, as soon as the effects wore off, was rather pleasant.

The Moon was just past the full when *Argonaut* blasted off.

Rather amusing, that. The three astronauts had been telling themselves that they'd be the first men to see the Other Side of the Moon, and they deliberately went there when that side of our satellite was in darkness. But, in spite of the darkness, they saw that which caused them to throw the power into the braking jets and come down to a landing.

It wasn't easy, that landing, except on paper.

Everything was worked out nicely, the radar was switched on to give them warning of mountain peaks or crater rims. Only one thing had been neglected in their calculations—air resistance. Oh, they finally tumbled to it, and then spiralled down, and down, and down to make a landing close, but not too close, to the lights they had seen.

It was a good landing. The flares and

the searchlights helped, and the place where they finally touched down was as smooth, as the proverbial billiard table, but, still, it was a good landing. You must remember that *Argonaut* was the first of her kind, and that her crew were having to learn things the hard way, as they went along.

John Bruce came along from aft, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. "Well, we made it," he said, but he didn't, said Taberner, look too happy about it.

"What's biting you, John?" asked Stornsens.

"Well, Doctor, this sounds crazy, I know. But I served my time on the Clyde, and we always used to say that if a ship wasn't christened with a bottle of wine she'd . . ."

He paused, and ran his hand through his thinning, sandy hair.

"Well?"

"If she didn't have her drink of wine at the launching, she'd have her drink later. Only it would be blood."

"Rubbish, John!"

"Ay, you may call it rubbish. But this, for a maiden voyage, has been far too easy, too smooth-running. Mark my words, she'll have her drink before this trip is out. I only hope it's not ours."

THIS, naturally, was hardly conducive to the peace of mind of Stornsens and Taberner. They weren't superstitious, but they knew that, as long as there is any believer in any particular superstition around, his beliefs are liable to be justified. Anyhow, they did their best to laugh it off, and Stornsens proposed that the three of them had their drink to celebrate their safe arrival.

Then Taberner busied himself with figures. As near as he could reckon, he told them, the dawn would be in about three hours' time. They had come down near the edge of daylight. Meanwhile, Stornsens had busied himself taking samples of the Lunar atmosphere. It was rather thin, he announced, but quite rich in oxygen. None of them seems to have been foolish enough to propose leaving the ship before light, so they just sat around and smoked and waited, keeping a lookout of sorts

through the control room viewports. They were confident that their ship would withstand anything short of artillery fire, so weren't overly anxious regarding any possible hostile action by the natives. Yes, said Taberner, they were all convinced, somehow, that there *were* natives.

At last came the first, faint streamers of light in the east. Silhouetted against the paling sky was what appeared to be the rim of an enormous crater, along which were black shapes, pylons and low, squat buildings, far too regular in appearance to have been the work of natural forces.

Abruptly, the sun's rim topped the crater wall. A long beam of golden light streamed across the level, grey-green plain, scintillating on the hoar frost crystals that spangled the fronds of the tall, feathery vegetation. To the westward, in the direction in which they had seen the lights before their landing, half seen buildings loomed huge and mysterious through the morning mist.

"This side of the Moon must be one, huge crater," said Stornsen. "Think of it, an atmosphere, vegetation, intelligent life! Get your gear, both of you, and we'll explore!"

He should have known, said Taberner, that this insanely imprudent suggestion from the level-headed Stornsen was the first warning of danger. He began to expostulate, to point out that one man should be left to stand by the ship, and in the middle of his protests found himself buckling on his belt with its forty-five Colt and cartridges, slinging over his shoulder the strap from which hung the little cine-camera. "And I never took a single picture!" he said, bitterly.

"Look!" said Bruce, pointing, "here comes the reception committee!"

**T**HE explorers had been prepared for all kinds of alien monstrosities, but what they saw was far more amazing than any glorified reptile or insect would have been. Advancing over the plain in single file came a long line of what were, indubitably, human beings. As they came on through the last, fast dissipating wreaths of mist it was hard to tell whether they were marching or dancing. The three men

fought for a place at the high-powered, mounted telescope. When, at last, Taberner got his turn, he saw that they were indeed dancing, advancing slowly with some kind of rhythmic shuffle that impressed him, somehow, as having a ritual significance.

The Selenites, he saw, were indeed human, rather taller, perhaps, than the average by Earth standards. Their skin was of a coppery colour, as he could judge with ease, as their only garments appeared to be a very abbreviated apron and an elaborate, feathered headdress. And there was something wrong about them. No, not physically, for all were almost perfectly proportioned. Just something wrong. He took his eye from the eyepiece, thinking that, perhaps, the powerful lenses had induced some subtle distortion. But the sense of wrongness persisted.

In a remarkably short space of time (the shuffling dance couldn't have been as slow as it looked) the Moonmen had surrounded the rocketship. They made no hostile move, but flung themselves prostrate on the ground as though in worship.

"They take us for gods . . ." whispered Stornsen. "They take us for gods . . ."

His face illumined by some inner light, he strode to the airlock door. The engineer's face had the same expression, the expression one would find on the face of a being with the power of a deity and the limitations of human nature. Not a nice expression, said Taberner.

As he followed the other two, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the polished metal of the inner airlock door. A part of his mind realized, with an unpleasant start, that he, too, had been freed from the shackles of normal decency. And then his last mental defences went down before the mounting tide of insanity.

What followed was a nightmare. It was all a nightmare. And the most nightmarish part of it all, in retrospect, is that these three civilized human beings gloried in the obscene and bloody tribute paid them. That was the worst part . . .

It appears that the three explorers emerged from the rocketship and stood for a while drinking in the slavish adulation of the Moonmen, who, by this time,

had begun a low, eerie chant. And there were drums, said Taberner, and some kind of squealing flute. After a while, a native whose head-dress was larger and gaudier than any of the others, dared to approach the three Earthmen. He bowed low before them, and gestured toward the city, the while saying something in a low, harsh voice. Even though they could not understand the language, the implication was obvious. The gods were to be worshipped in their own temple.

So they set off.

**S**TORNSSEN surprisingly, took the lead. He was followed closely by Taberner and Bruce. It never occurred to them, said Taberner, to wait for one of the Selenites to guide them. Were they not gods?

Subconsciously, the three men had fallen into a shuffling gait. This was necessary, else, with the weak Lunar gravitation, every step would have been a leap. The pipes, or flutes, were now silent, but the little drums kept up a continuous, rhythmic, thud and rattle. The Earthmen found themselves stepping in time to the song of the drums, almost dancing. Behind them weaved and swayed the long line of their worshippers.

It seemed, said Taberner, that, before they reached the city, the level plain became rocky and uneven. But there was a road leading them through the distorted rocks, the jagged boulders, until they entered the city itself.

He had a fleeting impression of low, stone houses, of wide streets bordered with strange, exotic plants. Then Stornsen was leading them up flight after flight of stone stairs to the top of what must have been the largest building, a huge, truncated pyramid.

On its flat top was an altar, and three chairs, or thrones.

The scientist took the middle throne, the other two seated themselves, one on either side of him. Taberner was to remember, later, the carvings on these same thrones and on the high sides of the altar itself. They depicted scenes of obscene torture and cruelty. They were sickening, although, at the time, they seemed perfectly right and natural.

The Moonman with the gorgeous head-dress prostrated himself before the three gods from the sky, an example followed by the crowd who thronged the flat top of the pyramid. Then, they rose to their feet and began a low, not unmelodious chanting. The squeal of the pipes rose above the voices of the singers, and, a monotonous, inescapable background to all else was the thud and rattle of the little drums.

From the crowd lesser priests led forth the sacrifices. Old men were there, young girls, and children.

The first victim, a grey bearded patriarch, was seized by the attendant priests and stretched supine over the altar.

A knife glittered briefly in the bright rays of the sun, then plunged downward. The music of the drums rose to a deafening roar. The high priest tossed the first bloody offering at the feet of the gods from the sky, a human heart.

**S**O it went on. It would be nice to be able to say that, at last, the better natures of the three explorers reasserted themselves, and that they fought to put an end to the slaughter.

But Taberner was frank.

"As long as we were exposed to the emanations from the very soil," he said, "we weren't sane. There's something there, probably radioactive, that, when the sun shines upon it, drives men insane. It may account for the fact that, on Earth, lunatics have their worst spells at the time of the full moon.

"But we were mad, and our worshippers were mad.

"Oh, I know you'll say that the Moonmen would have been unaffected, being a race indigenous to their world. We thought of that. But, *men* on the Moon? They must have come from Earth some time in the remote past. And it is indeed strange that the carvings I saw on that pyramid were very similar to pictures I have seen of the decorations of Aztec temples in South America.

"No, what caused the break with our worshippers wasn't an appeal to our better instincts, but a breaking out of our animal ones . . ."

Bruce, it appears, had cast covetous eyes on one of the sacrifices. A young girl, she was, with a skin of gold and the figure of a Venus.

The high priest's knife was about to descend when Bruce jumped down from his throne and cried, "Stop!"

The priest didn't stop.

It is doubtful whether he would have stopped even had he understood.

The engineer stood for a moment, scowling.

Then he suddenly drew his revolver and shot the priest through the head.

When he shot the priest a second time, unnecessarily, the report of the forty-five sounded like the roar of a cannon; for the chanting had stopped, the noise of the pipes had stopped, and the little drums, at last, were silent.

As the priest fell, his keen knife slipped from his hand and flew forward, nicking Bruce's ankle just above his shoe. From the cut flowed blood, mingling with the blood which already covered the top of the pyramid with a slimy, red film.

The surviving priests muttered and whispered among themselves, pointing to the little wound. Evidently, the gods weren't supposed to bleed.

Then, brandishing their knives, they were upon the Earthmen.

Taberner and Stornsen drew their guns and opened fire, just in time to save the dazed and bewildered Bruce from being cut down as he stood.

It was a grim fight, there on the top of the pyramid temple under the blazing sun. The three explorers fired till their guns were empty, then snatched up knives and fought the mob steel to steel. The worst part of it was that the very people from whom they should have expected help, the prospective sacrifices, were their most vicious assailants.

One thing only was to their advantage, the relative muscular weakness of the Selenites. Even so, a razor-sharp blade in the hands of a physical weakling is deadlier than the brute strength of a strong man. Luckily, not all the Selenites were armed.

After what seemed an age of bloody struggle, the three men reached the base of the pyramid.

"To the ship!" shouted Stornsen, leaping far over the heads of the crowd that ringed him in. Then he was off, half striding, half leaping, setting a pace that none of the Moonmen could hope to match.

Taberner and Bruce followed his example, Taberner, at least, hoping (he still retained some shreds of sanity) that the scientist was leading them in the right direction.

**I**T WAS with distinct relief that he saw, when they came to the level plain, the mirror-bright hull of *Argonaut* gleaming in the distance.

The mob of priests, worshippers, and sacrifices was far outdistanced, but Bruce, looking behind, called out to attract the attention of his two companions. Streaming across the plain was a horde of little vehicles. And they were fast.

"We never saw where they were, or how they worked," said Taberner. "Or, if we did see, it wasn't with a sane portion of our minds. All I have is a confused impression of a mob of little, scurrying things, for all the world like cockroaches in a vermin-infested ship that have been suddenly disturbed."

But they reached the ship before their pursuers.

Luckily, no guards had been left, so they were able to board unmolested. There was no time for them to attend to each other's wounds, even had they been sufficiently sane to do so. Their one desire was to blast off from the surface of Luna with the utmost dispatch.

They had shut the airlock doors and were putting all in readiness for their departure when the Selenites arrived. They must have stopped their vehicles somewhere outside the limited radius of vision from the forward ports, for, said Taberner, they came on foot. In their hands they brandished clubs, knives, and even stones, with which they began to batter on *Argonaut's* hull.

It was nerve-wracking, said Taberner, in the Control Room. Through the ports they could see the crazed faces of the Selenites as they hammered on the incredibly tough, transparent plastic. On every face



was the same expression—whether its owner were youth or maiden, man or woman. An expression of literally devilish blood lust.

“Our own faces probably weren’t too pretty, either,” he said. He remembered that he and Stornsen snarled back at the mob like cornered beasts.

The light of the engine room telephone flashed.

“All ready,” came Bruce’s voice.

Then they could hear him singing in a cracked voice, a hymn, it was, but the words were interlarded with vile obscenities and blasphemies.

“What are you waiting for?” howled Bruce. “Surely you aren’t scared of hurting these ————?”

Stornsen laughed, the laughter of a homicidal maniac.

Deliberately, he switched on the main drive.

Those Selenites aft must have been blown into eternity, those forward must have greased the ways with their bodies as *Argonaut* lurched ahead.

She lifted.

A few poor maniacs clung, miraculously, to the smooth hull. Taberner and Stornsen could see some of them through their ports. It was funny, very funny. They found themselves weak with laughter as the last Selenite, his features a mask of terror, dropped off to fall to the rocky surface of his world a mile below.

**T**ABERNER could still remember the events that led to *Argonaut’s* return to Earth.

He was dozing in the living quarters, a heavy, unhealthy sleep, broken by dreadful nightmares. In his dreams, he heard a terrible screaming. He half awoke, then turned over on his other side to sleep again. Suddenly, he jerked awake. In his poor, bemused brain was the certainty that the screams he had heard were not a dream.

He staggered into the engine room.

The shock of what he saw, he said, restored his sanity.

Lashed, supine, over the converter was Stornsen, like a victim stretched out on a sacrificial altar. The converter casing

must have been almost red-hot; anyhow, spirals of smoke rose from his garments and a smell of burning flesh filled the stagnant air. He must have suffered agonies before he died.

Yes, he was dead.

His throat was just a raw, gaping wound.

Like the high priest of some obscene religion Bruce cavorted about his engine-room.

“She didn’t have her drink of wine when she was launched,” he was shouting, “but she’s had it now! Ay, she’s had it now!”

He howled the last four words over and over like the chorus of some insane hymn.

Then—“We have sinned!” howled the engineer. “We have sinned! We have dared to venture beyond the bounds set by an all-wise Providence!”

He turned to face Taberner, his face contorted.

“But *I* am of the elect, *I* am destined to see Far Centaurus. But,” his voice became a confidential whisper, “first they want another sacrifice. This one was for the Moon, it’s not enough to take us to the stars . . .”

He advanced, cat-like, one hand behind his back.

“And do you know who the other sacrifice will be?” he asked. “*You* are the next sacrifice—!”

It is, perhaps, symptomatic of the madness that had seized *Argonaut’s* crew that none of them had changed their clothing since leaving the Moon. Taberner still wore his revolver belt. As Bruce whipped his bloody knife into view, he drew quickly and fired. He must, he said, have reloaded at some time or other, although he had no recollection of doing so.

Then Taberner came to himself, with the smoking gun in his hand, looking at the two corpses.

He dared hardly look at the fuel gauges, but his calculations showed that, with luck, he’d make it back to Earth. A lot depended on how long it took him to get her turned, to get her lined up to his satisfaction before he could begin his deceleration.

SO he juggled with the three flywheels (he said that, in a spaceship falling free, the ship turns in an exactly opposite direction to a wheel turned in its interior) and with his slide rule and tables.

He couldn't remember how much time he spent calculating and recalculating, until all that he could see through his sextant telescope was just a blur and the figures of his tables ran together.

He must have just slumped down over the navigator's desk and passed out.

When he awoke, it was to an unaccustomed feeling of weightlessness. The main drive had cut itself, for lack of fuel, and the ship was falling free. Feeling, to a certain extent, refreshed by his sleep, he rechecked his figures, found that *Argonaut* would make her grazing orbit with Earth. Taberner says that the accuracy of his calculations was due to sheer blind luck, but this I doubt. Whilst at sea he had the reputation of a wizard navigator.

His concern, now, was the amount of power left in the storage cells. These were located aft, in the engineroom. It may seem strange, but, said Taberner, he had completely forgotten about the two bodies he had left there. It came as a great shock when he saw Stornsen, with the gaping wound in his throat, bound across the converter, and the body of Bruce, a hole between his eyes and the back of his head missing, hanging, weightless, in the air.

Attracted by the mass of Taberner's body, the engineer's corpse drifted towards him, as though impelled by some kind of half life. For one horrible moment Taberner prepared himself for a struggle, then came to his senses and realized that Bruce could no longer do him, or anybody else, any harm.

At first he thought of shutting the engineroom door and bringing the bodies of his two shipmates home with him, then decided against it. Surely Stornsen, if the essence of the man still survived, somehow, would appreciate the honour of being the first of Earth's inhabitants to be buried in deep space.

If he put the bodies in the airlock, he reasoned, and then opened the outer door (these doors could be actuated from the

Control Room) the force of the atmosphere puffing out should blow them well clear of the ship.

He dealt with Stornsen first.

When he returned to the Control Room he said, in what he hoped was an impressive voice, as much as he could remember of the Burial Service for use at sea, and he found himself regretting that *Argonaut* carried no flags.

Bruce was next.

Whilst he was pulling the engineer's body along to the airlock, he felt something hard in his jacket pocket. Fighting down his revulsion, he put in his hand and pulled it out. It was a piece of rock, of a peculiar, crystalline formation. In the glow of the lights it glistened evilly, seemed to gleam with a life of its own. A piece of rock from the Moon.

With some hazy idea of bringing back evidence of *Argonaut's* voyage, Taberner kept the specimen. After the engineer's body had been consigned to the deep, he rummaged through various lockers until he found some lead foil. He never knew for what reason Stornsen had included it among the stores, but now, he thought, it was proving its worth. When the fragment of unknown mineral had been wrapped in many layers of the insulating material, Taberner stowed it in the locker in which he had found the foil. Although, he said, he knew, somehow, that now it was no longer exposed to the radiations of either the sun or the atomic power plant it was harmless.

He felt very hungry, went to the little galley and prepared a sketchy meal. Having eaten, he decided to return to Control and check his calculations yet again.

He never did so.

His reason, regained at such a cost, once again tottered on its foundations. Spreading against the hull, his face pressed against one of the ports, was John Bruce.

LATER," said Taberner, "I was able to work things out. It was obvious, really. When I shot Stornsen into Space, there was enough pressure inside the ship, and inside the airlock, to blow him well clear. *But*, when I disposed of his body,

I lowered that pressure, considerably. And there wasn't enough to give Bruce escape velocity relative to our hull. So, he just drifted back.

"But, at the time, I thought he'd come back for me."

Taberner remembered times when he shunned the Control Room as though all the fiends of hell had taken residence there, other times when he talked to Bruce as to an old and trusted friend. He had no eyes for anything else but the corpse that sprawled outside.

Suddenly, he said, there was an appreciable shock. The deceleration flung him forward, as though to meet the man he had killed. A thin, screaming sound was briefly audible. And the body of Bruce had gone.

With the shock of returning sanity, Taberner realized that *Argonaut*, barely grazing Earth's atmospheric envelope, had made her first braking ellipse.

"Lovely she looked," he whispered, "green and blue and gold against the black of the eternal, barren night. A man's a fool who ever leaves her . . ."

But, at last, he had to abandon his vigil of adoration to take his place at the controls. He had decided that his only hope was to land on the sea. Had the ship possessed fuel for the rocket drive, he could have landed anywhere, but she was merely an unpowered glider, and she was coming down fast.

Africa lay astern, and as he swept downward and onward he was seized with a sudden panic lest he miss the sea, so he put *Argonaut* into a steeper dive.

Just before he hit the water, another fear assailed him. This was that he should make his landing many miles from the usual shipping tracks and drift for days, or weeks, in his helpless vessel.

He jerked back on the stick.

*Argonaut* levelled off at the very instant that she made contact with the surface of the sea. She skittered madly over the long, low swell like a flat stone flung across the surface of a pond by an idle boy. She was uncontrollable.

Clinging to the arms of his seat, Taberner could only hope that she would check

her mad career before she hit something. But she must have, for Taberner suddenly blacked out

WHEN he came round, he was still sitting in the pilot's chair, and water was creeping up around his knees. He had to get out, and fast.

The airlock doors were useless as a possible exit, at least half their diameter must now lie beneath the surface. Taberner looked around wildly, then saw that one of the big ports was badly cracked.

There were tools in one of the lockers amidships. He found them, working by touch, and something that his sensitive finger tips told him was the collapsible dinghy.

He splashed forward with his booty, and fell to attacking the cracked port with all his vigour. The water was up to his waist when it finally yielded. He scrambled through, and had barely time to inflate and launch his boat before *Argonaut* sank.

"Well, gentlemen, that's all. You know the rest of the story."

He turned to Captain Morgan.

"Will you have somebody watch me tonight, sir? The Moon is barely past the full, and there are all those square miles of cursed rock up there, sending out their radiations as the Sun's rays strike them. And their influence might reach me, even here. And the devil alone knows what I might do . . ."

The Old Man cleared his throat. "Of course, my boy. Nothing is too much trouble for . . ." He realized that he was about to break his rule, that which ordained that he was never to praise anybody, either to their faces or behind their backs.

"Mr. Blair!" he barked at the Chief Officer. "Have the Cadets put on watches outside Mr. Taberner's room. Give them a whistle that they can blow to summon help." He turned again to Taberner, looking, for him, almost human. "But you're dog-tired," he said. "You mustn't let us keep you awake. Outside, all of you!"

TABERNER slept well that night, although the Cadets reported that, from time to time, they heard him moaning in his sleep. But he insisted that he

was well enough to come along to the saloon for his breakfast.

When I came down (the practice was for the Fourth Officer to have his before relieving me) I heard Taberner saying, "But I *have* got proof. Didn't I tell you? When I got the tools to smash that port, I found the piece of rock that I had taken from Bruce's pocket. If you have an animal of any kind, I can soon demonstrate its effects!"

"Nobody's doubting your story," said the Old Man, throwing a really nasty glance at Gordon, the Chief Engineer.

"But I insist, Captain!" cried Taberner, rather wildly, I thought.

"For the love of Mike, keep that chunk of rock wrapped up in its lead foil," said Morgan.

Blair chipped in, a rather strange smile on his face. "Why not try it on Stinking Sal?"

Gordon was up in arms at once. "You'll not tamper with *my* cat!" he growled.

"But, Chief, surely letting her sniff a harmless piece of stone won't hurt her? If your opinion of Mr. Taberner's story is correct, no harm can possibly come to your unsanitary pet."

So we all went on deck.

Somebody went in search of Stinking Sal, and Taberner went to his room and came back carrying the jacket he had been wearing when picked up. He fished in the pocket, pulled out what appeared to be an object of irregular shape heavily wrapped in lead foil.

Carefully, staying in the shadow of the deckhouse, he removed the metal covering, revealing a piece of stone. Just a lump of ordinary, crystalline rock. We weren't geologists, and it didn't look anything wonderful to us.

He stepped into a patch of sunlight, put the stone on the deck, stepped hastily back.

It may have been imagination, but it seemed to me that, as the direct rays of the sun struck the innocent seeming piece of rock, it seemed to glow with an evil light of its own.

It *may* have been imagination.

Stinking Sal slunk into the patch of

sunlight, stretched out one tentative paw and gingerly patted the little jagged stone. She seemed to be interested. She withdrew her paw, then took three slow steps forward. She sniffed the stone.

I don't know how the others felt, but I was ready to scream.

But it wasn't me that screamed, it was the cat. She was making a noise that no cat should make, that nothing that lives should ever make. It wasn't fear, and it wasn't rage; it was . . . but there just aren't any words to describe it.

Eyes two pools of blood-lust, she launched herself at Gordon, who was standing by the rail. The Old Man was fast. Before Stinking Sal had covered the distance between her and her master his fist sent the Chief Engineer staggering out of the line of flight.

Stinking Sal rocketed over the side.

"There," said Taberner, "you see."

He stepped forward to pick up his specimen, all that remained of *Argonaut* and her voyage beyond the bounds of sanity.

For a moment, he bounced the stone in his right hand.

Then, quite quietly, in such a matter of fact way that nobody, until it was too late, dreamed of stopping him, he went over the side.

**O**H, we stopped the ship, of course, and put out an accident boat. But we never found Taberner. Ironically enough Stinking Sal was saved. They found her still afloat, still swimming strongly but aimlessly. But of Taberner, not a trace.

I wonder. Whilst he was at sea, he always had strong views on the subject of Captains going down with their ships . . . But we'll never know.

Anyhow, I've told the story.

It won't be long, now, before the first rockets follow in *Argonaut's* wake, before Man, once more, lands on the Moon. And perhaps some who read this may be warned against the perils that await them at the end of their voyage.

I hope so.