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AMAZING STORIES

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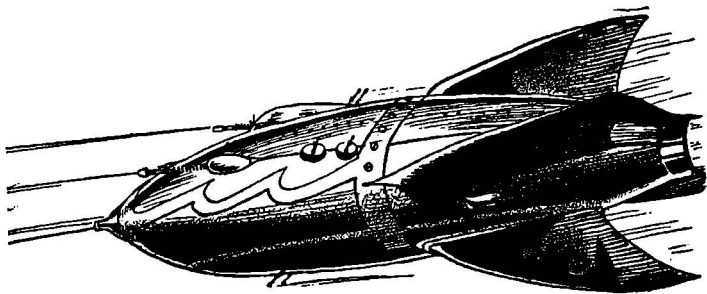
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Volume 16
Number 1



Herrick leaped forward and put all he had behind a surprise blow



Q SHIP of SPACE

by DUNCAN FARNSWORTH

Herrick was proud of his new command, but this innocent freighter took him down a notch or two!

MY OWN ship, at last!" Junior space officer Andrew Herrick breathed the words as he stood on the bridge of his slim, snub-nosed, rocket cruiser, *Astera*, feeling the pride that is the just desert of any man in charge of his first command.

The *Astera* was on patrol, four days out of Space Station Forty, and car-

ried a crew of four officers and a hundred men. To the ordinary eye the *Astera* was just one of a thousand such patrol vessels designated by the Space Command of Earth Federation to keep sharp eyes on constant lookout in the danger zones of the interplanetary chain.

But to young junior space officer Herrick it was much more than that. It was *his* ship, and *his* first taste of complete authority and responsibility in this Sixth World War.

"Coolness and efficiency during interplanetary action around the Martian port of Wereza," was what the citation young Herrick received four months ago from the Space Command had stated. And his meritorious behavior during that engagement had earned him this command. Now he was anxious to carry on his record, to



make a name for himself that would some day be equal to the legendary honor accorded to some eight Herricks of the past and present who served in the space forces of Earth Federation.

Young Herrick considered himself obliged by the glory that was emblazoned on his family record to carry on—at least to the point where he would some day be able to attain the post his father now held, that of admiral of the Fourth Battle Fleet of the Federation Space Forces.*

Herrick felt warm in the pride his father already felt for him. And as he stood on the bridge of the *Astera*, feeling the steady vibration of the rocket motors under the decks below him, his hand sought his right tunic pocket where old Admiral Herrick's recent vizagram rested. It was a short, terse note, typical of his father.

"Congratulations on new command. Good luck. How's Myra getting along? Vizagram as soon as you learn anything."

Young Herrick grinned as he thought of this message. Everyone in the Fourth Battle Fleet, of which the *Astera* was a part, seemed to be waiting for news of Myra. His father, of course, more than anyone else.

A vizagraph officer, a moon-faced youngster named Maloney, approached Herrick and saluted.

"Beg to report message from doctor, sir."

"Yes?" Herrick's voice quickened with interest.

"Nothing known as yet, sir," answered Maloney, and it was plain from his voice that he was as disappointed at the lack of news as his young officer.

Herrick saluted.

"Thank you, Maloney."

THE bridge bulkhead door swung open as Maloney stepped out, then was filled with the white-tunic'd uniform of another young space-bronzed junior officer.

Herrick smiled at his second-in-command, as Jon Roberts took his place beside him.

"Any news about Myra?" Roberts asked.

Herrick shook his head.

"Not yet. But motherhood is certainly causing quite a fuss around the Fleet, I guess."

Roberts showed quick loyalty in his glance, as he replied.

"You're darned right it is, Andy. Everyone's anxious about Myra. You can't blame them."

Herrick patted his second-in-command's arm.

"Of course," he said. He had a great affection for the stocky, wide-shouldered Jon Roberts. They'd been classmates at school together. This command of Herrick's was the first reunion they'd had since graduation. Herrick had asked for Roberts as soon as he knew he'd been given the *Astera*.

Roberts changed the subject.

"This has been a pretty peaceful four days so far, eh, Andy?"

Herrick nodded.

"But each day takes us farther out on our own, Jon. And I've a feeling something should be brewing for us pretty shortly."

The junior officer's words keynoted the spirit of his men aboard the *Astera*. All of them were impatiently eager for a taste of action. For they

* Sixth World War—Began in the year 2300 A.D., and was fought on a vast interplanetary front between the forces of Earth and Mars, over supremacy of trade in the outer Interplanetary Space Zones. Much of the action in this war depended on the destruction of shipping tonnage by both forces. It ended in the year 2310, with a treaty victory for Earth Federation, recognizing the freedom of trade in space.—Ed.

were all aware that these were dangerous space locales, and that frequent skirmishes against Martian space patrols were reported from this district.

For a moment young Herrick was silent. Then he said:

"Well, this inactivity at least means that some of the poor devils running merchant space freighting aren't being blown to hell." He sighed. "Not in our radius of patrol, at any rate."

The bulkhead door banged, then opened, and Maloney, red-faced and breathless entered the bridge tower. He held a vizagram message in his hand.

"I'll bet it's about Myra," Roberts burst forth excitedly. "I'll bet her bab—eh, huummph," he cut off, embarrassed at his outburst in front of Maloney.

Herrick had taken the vizagram, was scanning it, while Roberts impatiently waited to find out what was in it. Herrick's face was grave as he looked up.

"Another ship in distress, a space freighter as I gather it. Our vizagraph picked up the distress signals. We seem to be closest." He crumpled the vizagraph into a ball, hesitating for an instant. Then to Maloney, he barked. "Tell our chief rocketeer to put full speed ahead, relay the distressed space freighter's position to him."

Maloney saluted and was gone.

Herrick turned to Roberts.

"Not so far away from us," he said tersely. "Sounded, from the name of it, as if it were a Junovian tub. We'll see. Maybe it's only a question of a rocket breakdown."

Roberts flushed eagerly.

"At any rate," he observed, "it will be a bit of action."

"Probably," Herrick agreed . . .

HERRICK stood on the bridge of the *Astera*, with Roberts beside him, as they came within vizascreen

distance of the distressed freighting vessel several hours later.

"A big baby," Roberts exclaimed, peering down into the vizascreen.

"Big is right," Herrick answered. "She's at least twice the length of the *Astera*. And I was right about the name sounding Junovian. Look at the pennant she's flying."

Roberts nodded his head in agreement.

"Yeah, Junovian, all right." He shook his head. "Seems to be just drifting in space. Wonder what's the trouble?"

Herrick snapped off the vizascreen, and turned the knob of the panel before him, switching on the intership communications screen.

"Get the space lifecraft in readiness," he barked. "Pick a crew of twenty volunteers to man two of them. We're going to board this craft to have a talk with her captain." Then he flicked off the button.

"You're a volunteer leader for one lifecraft," Roberts said quickly.

"Very well," Herrick answered. "You take the second lifecraft, Jon. I'll skipper the first."

Herrick started toward the door of the bridge. Roberts was just a step behind him. Together they made their way down the companion ladder and onto the glasscade turreted deck of the *Astera*. As he had ordered, Herrick saw twenty of the crew lined alongside two space lifecraft, standing smartly at attention. He smiled to himself. There'd probably been a whale of a battle to get volunteer posts. Each of the men was so keyed up for any kind of action that he'd jump at the chance even to get in on such a mundane rescue job as this.

The steady-roaring rocket tubes of the *Astera* were slowed almost to a stop now as the patrol cruiser drifted

closer to the huge, dirty Junovian space freighter.

Herrick turned to Roberts now. His manner was crisp and devoid of the familiarity he'd had on the bridge.

"Officer Roberts, man the second lifecraft. Follow me. I'm leading in the first."

They exchanged salutes. Then Herrick turned away, and a moment later was taking his place in the stern of the atomic powered lifecraft as ten of his crew took position. His hand was steady on the driving gear as the atomic mechanism of the davits went into action and the small space craft was lifted up from the deck.

Then the glasscade turrets along the rail of the *Astera* dropped away, and the tiny lifecraft was dangling out in space. The davit controls released, and Herrick threw the atomic motor throttle forward, catching power.

He saw the glasscade turrets cover over the deck once more, then turned the nose of his lifecraft away from the *Astera* and pointed it in the direction of the huge, grimy, space freighting Junovian vessel.

Two minutes later and Herrick was boarding the stinking hulk of the Junovian freighter. Roberts was behind him as they stepped on the deck. In each of the lifecraft, the crews waited off from the vessel.

THE captain of the freighter stood waiting to greet them. He was a tall, black-haired, thick-shouldered fellow with a face that bore the leathery black wrinkles of space burn. His teeth were white and even as he saluted and smiled.

Herrick returned his salute.

"I'm Junior Officer Herrick, of Earth Federation, in command of the *Astera*," he said. Then, indicating Roberts: "This is Officer Roberts, my second in

command."

The freighter captain saluted again, still smiling whitely.

Herrick said, feeling strangely uneasy that the freighter captain hadn't spoken as yet.

"You understand Earth language?"

"Certainly," the black-haired captain said easily. "Sorry if I appeared rude. Glad you picked up our signal, Officer Herrick."

"What's your trouble?" Herrick asked, looking around the strangely spotless deck of the big craft.

The freighter captain seemed to be gazing over Herrick's shoulder. He was still smiling. And then, quite suddenly, his hand shot to his tunic pocket and reappeared holding a vicious-looking electric pistol. He had it expertly trained between Herrick and Roberts.

"Don't be so foolish as to show any signs of alarm that might be noticed by the men standing off in your ship's lifecraft, please," he said pleasantly. "Three of my crew are behind you. All of them have you covered. Please follow me to my stateroom."

Roberts was choking in swift rage.

Herrick was calmer, but a sinking sensation was in the pit of his stomach.

"First of all," he said coolly, "you'd better explain what this means, Captain."

"This space craft is not, I am sorry to tell you, a Junovian vessel," the captain said smilingly. "You will learn the unpleasant details swiftly enough. Come." He snapped the last word like one used to being obeyed.

Herrick felt an electric pistol prod him in the back. He turned to Roberts.

"Come on," he instructed. "We'd better stick along for a bit." He was sickly aware that the men standing off in the lifecraft couldn't see any of this. And he was bitterly regretting that he hadn't boarded this freighter

armed. But there was no time for post-mortems now. They were being marched along the deck to a spotless duralloy ladderway that led to what seemed to be the second bridge of the freighter.

Roberts whispered, "What in the hell is this, Andy?"

Herrick didn't answer. He took his time ascending the duralloy ladderway, letting his gaze travel back over his shoulder as often as he dared, scanning the deck of the big freighter with keen eyes.

Then they were on the second bridge. And Herrick saw that there was a vizagram apparatus in operation here. This was the machine over which the distress signal had obviously been sent.

A yellow tuniced operator sat before the vizagram machine. And to Herrick's keen eyes the chap seemed, like the spotless deck and shining duralloy ladder, out of place with the ragged dirty appearance of the freighter when they'd first sighted it.

The three of the freighter's crew who'd followed behind as the captain led the way up to the second bridge were still present, their electric pistols trained on Herrick and Roberts. The captain shoved his own weapon back into his tunic pocket, and now stood beside a short instrument panel.

He pressed one button, wordlessly, and an alarm bell rang somewhere in the bowels of the great vessel.

The captain stepped over to the bridge rail.

"Look," he instructed, pointing down to the big expanse of deck.

HERRICK followed his pointing finger, and his jaw fell open in astonishment. Roberts, who'd also stepped to the rail, couldn't restrain an incredulous gasp. The decks of the freighter were alive with almost two

hundred men!

They moved swiftly, efficiently, as if trained to every motion. Some took their places inconspicuously along the rail, while others stood beside duralloy turrets of deck hatches. Herrick wheeled to face the captain.

"What the hell!" He was angered, astonished, breathless, his voice demanding explanation.

The captain was still smiling.

"This is quite a mystery ship, eh, Officer Herrick?"

"What is this?" Roberts demanded.

"A long, long time ago," the captain said, "there was an ancient device called a 'Q' ship. Its purpose was to serve as a lure, a bait, a decoy, in time of war to gather merchant shipping close to it by faked distress signals. Generally it was an especially well armed craft disguised as a merchantman. This so-called space freighter is exactly that. You are on board an extremely modern counterpart of that ancient weapon of war. This 'freighter' is a fast, well armed space fighter. We have been operating in this interplanetary zone for quite some time, destroying much shipping which would otherwise have been valuable to the Earth Federation."

"That's insane!" Roberts scoffed.

But the captain's eyes were on Herrick.

"I want you to vizagram your ship. Tell the officer in command to surrender, or we'll blow the *Astera* out of the void," he ordered.

Herrick looked once down at the deck. The men who had appeared there were still at their strange stations. He licked his lips. This was hardly a bluff, but—

The captain saw the indecision in his eyes. He turned and pressed another button. And Herrick blinked.

A shell—the faked shell of a merchant freighter—rolled away from the

sides of the vessel, revealing the snouts of gleaming atomic cannons. The hatch covers rolled away, exposing electra-cannons on the deck, with men ready to man them!

But the captain was pointing to the bow of the ship. A red pennant—the flaming, lush banner of Mars—was hauled to the stub mast while the Junovian pennant slid slowly downward.

Herrick swung to the Martian captain.

"You win," he grated.

The big captain nodded.

"Of course I win. Please vizagram your ship to stand by for surrender. Otherwise I'll be forced to blow the *Astera* to bits."

Herrick could picture the confusion, the sickening consternation that was probably rampant on the decks of the *Astera* at this moment. And he felt miserably, hideously ashamed of himself for having been so duped. The men wouldn't open fire on this Martian vessel until he and Roberts were no longer aboard, or until the Martian captain fired first. And he knew that resistance on the part of the *Astera*, which didn't have the guns or the size to compare with this "Q" ship of space, would be futile and tragic.

The Martian captain was right. His vessel could blow the *Astera* out of the void in less than a quarter-hour. Herrick could feel Roberts looking at him, waiting his reply.

HERRICK stepped over to the vizagram panel, and switched it from "message" to "vizascreen." He could see young Maloney's face, white and startled, come onto the screen. He knew that the lad had been standing by, while the *Astera* waited for explanation.

"Maloney," Herrick said huskily. "We've fallen into the hands of the

enemy. Relay my orders to the Third Officer. Tell him to show no resistance."

The Martian captain was right at Herrick's shoulder.

"A boarding party will commandeer the *Astera* inside of another ten minutes," he said.

Herrick hesitated, flushed with shame, choking on the words. But he managed.

"A boarding party, the enemy's, will arrive to take over shortly," he said. Then, lips compressed, he snapped off the screen switch.

"Thank you, Officer Herrick," the Martian captain smiled. "I will permit you to return to your vessel with the men of my boarding party. In fact, I'll accompany the party myself."

Herrick didn't answer. He was thinking: *My first command. This is what happened to my first command. What a fine smear for my record. What a rotten blot on the name of Herrick! Captured—without having been able to fire a shot in our defense!*

The Martian crewmen with the electric pistols were prodding Herrick and Roberts toward the duralloy ladderway that led down from the second bridge to the deck.

The Martian captain walked behind them.

"You can send the crews of your lifecraft back to the *Astera*, Officer Herrick. I'll see to it that our own crews take you safely aboard your vessel."

Herrick flushed. The Martian captain probably realized that he might choose to make a fight of it if he got back to his command unguarded. Roberts must have been contemplating this, too, for the stocky second officer groaned aloud.

"Take it easy, Jon," Herrick said softly. "This isn't all over yet." But in his heart he knew the forced brag-

gadocio behind his words . . .

WHEN Herrick stood on the bridge of the *Astera* some ten minutes later, it was with two Martians behind him, their electric pistols pressed into his back. The Martian captain had accompanied the boarding party aboard the *Astera*, and while Herrick's face burned with shame, the Martians had taken over the ship.

Martians now stood beside each of the nine atomic cannons, having displaced the bewildered gunners of the *Astera's* crew. The vessel was quite completely in enemy hands.

"Fine," said the Martian captain. "This is quite satisfactory, Officer Herrick."

"What do you intend to do with the *Astera*?" Herrick demanded.

The captain favored the young officer with one of his silken smiles.

"I am going to keep the *Astera* just as she is," he announced, "until the rest of my plans are completed."

Herrick frowned.

The captain explained. "When your vizagraph operator picked up our distress signals it was not as we had intended it."

"I still don't get you," Herrick said.

"We had no idea that the *Astera* would be patrolling this particular space area at the time we sent out our decoy distress signal. We had hoped to draw bigger game—game we knew to be in this locality—into our nets," the Martian captain declared.

"You can't mean—" Herrick began.

"Yes," the captain nodded. "We were after the only other Earth Federation battlecraft in this locality. We were after the gigantic battlewagon, F.S.S. *New York*, the flagship of the Fourth Battle Fleet, commanded by your father, Admiral Herrick!"

Herrick grinned mirthlessly.

"You're crazy," he said quietly. "The *New York* could crush you with her forward guns alone."

The Captain smiled again.

"You forget the fact that we are a, ah, freighting vessel. Or so, at least, it will seem to the officers of the *New York* when they come to our aid."

Herrick shook his head.

"Perhaps," he admitted. "But one blast from your atomic cannons would be your undoing. The *New York* isn't as scantily armed, or as small, as the *Astera*. The *New York* is even a damned sight larger than your 'Q' ship."

"Our information sources are always excellent," said the Martian captain. "They tipped us off that the *New York* was going to be in this particular space zone, and they also gave us the exact location of that space battleship's atomic magazine chambers!"

Herrick turned white at the corners of his mouth. He looked at the Martian captain in open horror.

The captain chuckled.

"Now you understand, I see. One shot at their magazine will blast the *New York* into fragments. Even if we only cripple the *New York* badly by that one shot, our 'Q' ship is exceedingly fast, and prepared to run for it."

"And now," Herrick was forcing himself to speak, forcing himself to stall as long as he could, "that the *Astera* botched up your plans by answering the distress signal intended for the *New York*, just how do you intend to get my father's battleship here?"

The Martian captain spread his hands easily.

"It is a simple matter," he stated. "I am going to instruct you to send out a message to the *New York*, directly from the vizagraph room of the *Astera*, asking for additional aid to our, ah, poor, helpless Junovian freighter."

"That's ridiculous!" Herrick blazed.

"What have you to say about it?" the captain smiled. "Our men are in control of the *Astera* completely. Really, Captain Herrick, I don't think you fully appreciate the embarrassment of your position."

"You damned rott—" Herrick began in sudden blazing wrath.

The captain stepped in quickly and caught him an open-handed blow across the face. Then Herrick's rage exploded into a furious flashing ball of flame. He leaped forward, reaching for the Martian's throat. Something crashed into the back of his skull, and a thousand dancing sparks pinwheeled around in his brain as blackness covered him . . .

SOMEONE was jerking Herrick roughly to his feet, slapping his face briskly in an effort to bring him back to consciousness.

Herrick opened his eyes dazedly. He was staring into the face of the Martian captain.

"Sorry I lost my temper, Officer Herrick," the Martian smiled. "One of my stupid crew bashed you on the back of the skull. It was thoughtless of him, I assure you."

Looking down, Herrick saw that Jon Roberts lay in a small pool of blood on the bridge deck in the corner. His white tunic was stained with the crimson that ringed his head.

The Martian captain jerked a thumb toward Roberts. "He's not dead," he remarked. "My men were even rougher with him when he tried to aid you in your stupid attack on me."

Herrick fought back a wild impulse to strike out again, for he knew it would be futile. He licked the blood away from his lips.

"During your, ah, slumbers, Officer Herrick," the captain was saying, "I

took it upon myself to search through your vizagraph log. The messages contained there were exceptionally interesting. The last message, particularly. I believe you are to be congratulated." He held forth a sheet of electrotyped vizagraph message.

Dazedly, Herrick took it. His eyes scanned it, unseeing.

"Evidently you are the father of triplets, Officer Herrick. My congratulations to you and your wife. A pity that you can't be with her."

Herrick could only blink, and he fastened his gaze on the message again. The words jumped on the page, but they were clear enough to read.

"*Communication from doctor to Officer Herrick.* Delivery quite successful. Myra has the honor of being the mother of three babies. Congratulations. Myra doing fine."

Herrick looked up at the Martian captain again, his jaw still agape, his face a picture of turbulent emotional stress.

The captain had another sheet of paper in his hand. Vaguely, Herrick was aware that it was the message of inquiry about Myra which he'd received from his father, Admiral Herrick, earlier in the day.

"Undoubtedly the admiral of the Fourth Battle Fleet will be more than delighted to know that he is the grandfather of triplets," the Martian smiled. "You Earthmen are always vitally concerned with family matters, even when on battle duty."

Herrick was still unable to say a word. He was licking the dried blood on his lips and rubbing his jaw bewilderedly.

Again the same derisive smile was on the Martian captain's face.

"I can understand your shock, Officer Herrick. Coming at a time like this, especially. However, it should be

more incentive for you to stay alive and refrain from, ah, foolish and glamorous gestures. It would be too bad to have those small little tots left fatherless so soon, eh?"

Herrick's jaw was grim, and he glared hotly at the Martian captain.

"You'll regret this," he blazed. "You'll regret this in Hell!"

The Martian captain revealed his white teeth in a mocking grin.

"Perhaps. However, we have work to do, Officer Herrick. I want you to send a vizagraph to your father's ship, the *New York*. I want you to tell him that you are standing by a distressed Junovian freighter, badly in need of aid, and that additional assistance from his ship is absolutely vital."

"Go to hell," Herrick said evenly.

"You forget the situation," the Martian captain said ominously. "It would be wise to do as I say. For the sake of your newly born infants, if not for yourself."

HERRICK seemed to waver for the slightest instant. Then, slowly, he said:

"It won't do you any good. Such a message could come from any ship anywhere in this area of space. The *New York* wouldn't fall into such a lure."

"You will send the message personally," the Martian captain said evenly. "And to add complete authenticity to it, you will mention the fact that your father is now a grandfather. When Admiral Herrick learns that you are the father of triplets he will certainly know the message to be authentic."

Herrick glared indecisively.

"You are in no position to refuse," the Martian captain reminded him.

Herrick's shoulders suddenly slumped.

"Very well," he mumbled. The life

and spirit of the young officer seemed to be crushed completely from him. It was as if he'd surrendered to circumstances that were too great for any one man to overcome.

The Martian captain pointed to the message table on the bridge.

"You can compose your message there," he ordered. "Give your position, explain that additional aid is needed immediately, and add that very personal touch."

Herrick sat down before the message table. He began to write slowly. He tore up one sheet of paper and started again. This time his words were faster, more certain. He stood up, finished, and handed the sheet to the Martian captain.

The Martian captain read the message, nodding.

"Good, position is correct. Appeal for additional help is quite convincing. And that last, 'Myra has had triplets. You are a grandfather! Congratulations,' is quite authentically appealing." He smiled, handing the sheet to one of his men. "Have our vizagraph operator send this on the *Astera's* machine immediately," he ordered.

The Martian orderly was at the door of the bridge when the captain stopped him.

"A moment," he said. "Have the operator signal our 'Q' ship to raise the decoy superstructure again. Tell them not to forget to fly the Junovian ensign."

The orderly was gone, and the Martian captain turned to young Herrick.

"In another few moments your father's vessel will be heading full rockets into our trap, and the 'Q' ship will once again look like a dirty tramp space freighter."

Herrick said nothing. He was slumped against the back bulkhead of the bridge.

"Why, Officer Herrick," the Martian captain mocked, "you look ill."

Which description fitted young Herrick perfectly . . .

AT precisely eleven-eleven, interplanetary time, some six hours after the message had been sent from the *Astera*, the great space battlewagon, F.S.S. *New York* came majestically into view of the vizascreens of both the *Astera* and the ominously waiting "Q" ship.

Junior Officer Herrick stood on the bridge of the *Astera*, beside a bandaged and still somewhat bloody Jon Roberts. The two young officers were wordlessly watching the exultation that flooded the features of the Martian captain who stood before the screen.

"She comes," said the captain, turning from the screen. "And so unsuspecting!"

Herrick looked at Roberts, and there was something unfathomable in the glances they exchanged.

"It is a pity," added the Martian captain regretfully, "that my men weren't experienced enough with the guns on the *Astera* to turn them against the *New York*. That would have been delightful additional irony."

Herrick wet his lips.

"So delightful," he mimicked dryly.

The Martian captain disregarded this.

"Five minutes more and they will be in range for the shot at their magazine," he said eagerly.

Jon Roberts nudged Herrick slightly, pointing with his eyes at the picture of the *New York* in the vizascreen. The great long range atomic guns on that battlewagon were being elevated into firing position. Something which apparently escaped the attention of the excited Martian "Q" ship captain.

"Four minutes," the Martian cap-

tain said.

The guns of the battlewagon *New York* moved slightly right and slightly left, almost imperceptibly. This time Herrick nudged Roberts. His throat felt stuffed with cotton. His heart hammered wildly.

"Three minutes," said the Martian captain.

And then the vizascreen was obliterated by the orange bursts which issued from the vessel pictured on it. Orange bursts puffing from atomic long range cannons.

The atomic bolts were flashing overhead in the next instant. Shooting overhead as a terrific explosion occurred five hundred yards off from the *Astera* and the "Q" ship rocked like a leaf in a gale. The *New York*, firing before the Martian decoy vessel could get range, had scored five direct hits on the target!

And Herrick and Roberts were diving toward the Martian captain and his two orderlies at the same instant.

Herrick got the captain, his shoulder crashing into the bewildered fellow's legs, spilling him back against the solid duralloy surface of the bridge bulkhead. The captain went limp in his arms, out cold.

Then Herrick was on his feet, while more atomic shell bursts plunged into the "Q" ship, jumping into Roberts' battle with the two orderlies. It was short work before those two were quite willing to quit.

Junior Officers Herrick and Roberts had regained mastery of the *Astera's* bridge.

And now, looking out across the intervening distance between the *Astera* and the "Q" ship, Herrick could see that the *New York's* long range cannon had made short work of the Martian decoy craft. The situation was very well in hand, even to the fighting

down on the decks of the *Astera* itself, where the *Astera's* officers and crew—realizing that the *New York* had rescued them—were mopping up on the Martians who'd been left to guard them.

Junior Officer Herrick grinned with honest pride at the spirit of his men. He threw an arm around his second-in-command's plump shoulder and watched the final rout . . .

THE job of questioning the Martian captives fell to young Junior Officer Herrick, after the remnants of the charred "Q" ship were searched and the survivors removed.

Particularly interesting to young Herrick was his conversation in the brig with the Martian captain, whose only wound of the route was a severe bump on the back of his black-headed skull.

And when Herrick had drained what information he could from the enemy captain, that worthy had a few pained questions to put to his inquisitor.

"How," he moaned feebly, "did your father realize that something out of the ordinary was going on in respect to the *Astera*? That message left no cause for doubt on his part. Especially—"

Herrick cut in, grinning widely. This was going to be enjoyable.

"When you discovered the correspondence between my father and I concerning Myra and the fact that she was about to give birth—and when you found the communication from the doctor stating she'd had triplets, you couldn't be blamed for jumping at the conclusions you did. So I let you go right ahead."

"But—" began the Martian captain.

"In the message," Herrick cut in again, "I congratulated my father on being a grandfather, adding that Myra had had triplets."

"But how could your wife's having tr—" the Martian captain began again.

Again Herrick cut him off.

"Although my father was very much concerned over Myra's condition," he said, "that didn't mean that Myra was my wife. As a matter of fact, *everyone* was concerned over Myra's condition. You see, Myra is a Cheshire cat. Myra is, in fact, the beloved mascot of the Fourth Battle Fleet. You couldn't blame any admiral for being suspicious when he's accused in an official dispatch of being the grandfather of three kittens!"

(The End)