

10c
ASTONISHING
STORIES
10 STORIES 10c

VOL. 3

SEPTEMBER, 1941

NO. 1

★ ★ NOVELETTES ★ ★

- MARS-TUBE**.....by S. D. Gottesman 10
 The war which had wiped out the civilization of Mars had been caused by a tragic mistake—but a justified one!
- RADIATION TRAP**.....by Harry Walton 90
 Toroga, the planet of Sirius, was crude and harsh—but a strong, determined man could make of it what he wished!

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ STORIES ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- FAREWELL TO FUZZIES**.....by Henry Hasse 29
 The lives of the alien creatures meant more to Wilson than his own!
- SUPER-NEUTRON**.....by Isaac Asimov 36
 The chief liar of the Ananias Society was a man who told the truth!
- THE TREE OF LIFE**.....by Paul Edmonds 44
 The Tree was a man-eater—but not an eater of flesh!
- INVENT OR DIE!**.....by R. R. Winterbotham 55
 Inventors were well rewarded on Venus—with the gift of death!
- PIN THE MEDALS ON POE**.....by Anton Reeds 61
 A long-dead writer solved the most puzzling crime of the 21st Century.
- FACTORY IN THE SKY**.....by Basil E. Wells 68
 Tomorrow's wars will be fought with production, not guns—to the death!
- THE PLAGUE FROM TOMORROW**...by Frank Belknap Long 75
 The malaria was not the ordinary type—it was much farther evolved!
- SOLAR PLEXUS**.....by James Blish 84
 No one save a helpless prisoner was in the strange ship—yet it flew!

SPECIAL FEATURES

- FANTASY REVIEWS**..... 6
- TALES TO COME**..... 67
- EDITORAMBLINGS**..... 83
- VIEWPOINTS**..... 106

ALL STORIES NEW—NEXT ISSUE ON SALE SEPT. 25

Published bi-monthly by Fictionera, Inc., 2250 Gruse Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 210 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Entered as second class matter January 11, 1940, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright 1941 by Fictionera, Inc. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. All rights reserved under Pan American copyright convention. Bi-monthly price per copy 10c; 6 issues, \$6.00. Printed in the U.S.A.

Solar Plexus

By James Blish



There was no one aboard the strange ship save a helpless prisoner, yet it flew a straight course and could fight off a cruiser. Nor was it robot-controlled. . . .

BRANT KITTINGER did not hear the alarm ringing. Indeed, it was only when a soft blow jarred his free-floating ship that he looked up in sudden awareness from the interferometer. Then the sound of the warning bell reached his consciousness, and he knew

that another ship had penetrated his meteor screens. That meant it was close.

A second dull jolt told him how close. The rasp of metal which followed, as the other ship slid along the sides of his own, drove the fog of mathematics from his brain. He dropped his pencil and stood up. Outlaws? Ridiculous— what would a pirate be doing this far beyond Pluto? An IP cruiser investigating his presence? No. All the IP men in the system knew the Science Institute's wandering little research-boats. And, while they might curse the liberties the Institute's men took with the standard course-orbits, they certainly wouldn't molest them.

He settled his glasses more firmly on his nose and bounded awkwardly down the corridor to the control room. A quick sweeping glance over the boards brought him other facts to assimilate. A strange ship making magnetic contact; obviously old-style. But big.

Too big. The only ship of that period and size was the *Astrid*. And it couldn't be that. Murray Bennett had destroyed himself and the *Astrid* both, ten years ago, to escape the consequences of his illegal robot experiments.

But who then?

Kittinger had no radio. He had used most of the parts from the one supplied by the Institute months before in setting up a makeshift Geiger counter. The photophones were useless when the other ship was so close.

He was spared further worry over communication. There was a delicate, rhythmic tapping on the hull of his own vessel. Somebody wanted to get in. Should he open, taking a chance on the stranger's being friendly? Or should he apply full power abruptly and try to tear loose? As if to spur him to a quick decision, the gentle tapping was repeated.

The dials that indicated magnetic field intensity were jammed in resolute fury against their lower pegs. The little rock-

et jets he used for maneuvering couldn't pull him away from such a field, and he didn't know how to operate the geotrons. A licensed astronaut of the Institute did that by radio whenever he returned to his base.

"All right," he said irritably to the tapping, and opened the outer door of the airlock. The tapping stopped. After a moment he closed it, filled the chamber with air through a valve, and opened the inner door.

There was nobody in the lock. Outside, something tapped persistently on the hull.

ABSENTLY he polished his glasses on his sleeve. If they didn't want to come in, they must want him to come out. But he had no descent space-suit, only a helmet for use in extreme emergencies—in which case it probably wouldn't have been any good anyhow, of course, being capable of supporting life for about a quarter of an hour. The Institute had not expected him to make any landings. And why should he have?

Nosey people, can't even let a man alone when he's out beyond Pluto. He clapped his glasses back on his nose. Be damned to them.

He grabbed for the inner door of the lock to slide it shut. But he stood rigid, still reaching for it vacantly, as he saw to his horror that the outer door was in motion, slowly inching open. He grabbed for a stanchion to brace himself against the rush of air into the vacuum—none came. What—?

A tube! A flexible, airtight tube. Like those used for freight transfer in space. It connected the airlock of his ship with that of the stranger. Lights at the other end of it, within an open lock, gleamed yellowly. Incandescents! It was an old ship, all right.

"Be damned to you," he repeated, and sullenly strode across the tube.

He was barely inside the intruder when

the doors rolled shut with a satisfied slam and the first bulb over his head blinked out. Then the second. Then the third, progressing down the corridor. After a moment they all went on again and the procession was repeated. This time the fourth bulb went off too. Quite obviously, he was supposed to follow the line of darkening bulbs down the corridor.

The trail led to the control-room of the vessel. It was totally empty of life.

He became aware of an oppressive lack of human noises aboard this eerie visitor. The soft hum of generators, yes; but no voices from the crew, no pad of rubber soles on metal, no chattering of communications systems. Who had operated the airlocks and steered the ship?

He glanced around the bare metal compartment, noting the apparent age of the equipment, and glumly thought: A ghost ship for true.

"All right," he suddenly barked. His voice sounded flat and unnaturally loud in the close, still confines of the room. "Stop hiding, whoever you are."

"Ah," the answer came immediately, in a quiet tone of recognition. "That sounds like Brant Kittinger."

"Certainly," he replied, jerking around to locate the source of the voice. "Who did you think it was? Come out. I've no time to play games. You spoiled my observations."

"Oh, so?" said the voice silkily. "I'm sorry. You see. I had to hear you speak before I knew who you were. I can't see you, you know."

"I don't know. Where are you?"

The voice laughed. "Does living alone in space make you so abrupt, Brant? It hasn't affected me that way. No, I can't see inside the ship. Only outside. Just space, space, space." The tones were edged for a moment with a repressed hysteria. "Where am I? Why, right here, all around you."

Kittinger looked all around himself. "What kind of nonsense is this?" he snorted.

"You still don't see me? You're standing on me. Or rather, in me. I'm the ship."

KITTINGER'S jaw swung open by itself. He stared around him again. "Then this ship," he said as things began to add up, "must be one of Murray Bennett's robots."

"No," returned the voice softly. "This ship is Murray Bennett."

It waited expectantly. After a short silence it began again. "Don't you understand me, Brant? Don't you remember? Why were my robots illegal? The planets are swarming with robots, humanoid and otherwise, doing all kinds of work. The making of them is legal. And very lucrative. But mine—"

The shocking truth came back to Brant suddenly with full force. "My God! Human brains!"

"Yes, of course. Transplanted human brains. That brought me within the scope of the laws prohibiting experimentation with living humans. I was quite proud of myself, Brant. Nobody else ever solved the secret of transferring living brains to machinery. Nobody else ever had the surgical skill to make the hundreds and hundreds of nerve connections necessary. But I did. And after a while I was outlawed for it."

"You're mad," said Kittinger, but he knew it wasn't so. Bennett's mind hadn't been the type to crack under ridicule and threat of punishment.

The voice laughed. "You're a brave man, Brant," it hinted smoothly. Then it went on without allowing the implied threat to sink in. "You thought the *Astrid* was destroyed, didn't you. As did everyone else, since that was what I wanted them to think. Actually, I am the *Astrid*—or the *Astrid* is I. However you look

at it. My brain was transferred into it by a drugged assistant under direct telepathic control. It took a genius to do that, Brant."

"Granted," Kittinger said grudgingly. "One with loose wheels."

"But there was method, as they say, in my madness. I am a living space-ship. I'm as immune to a *dead* space-ship—an IP cruiser, for instance—as you would be to a remote-controlled robot. My reflexes are twice as fast. I feel things directly, not through instruments. And gradually I am building up my robot personnel, on a base not far from here, so that I may some day show—"

"Never mind," said Brant, shuddering and sitting down in the pilot's chair. "Don't tell me why. I can guess. Where are you getting the brains?"

"A silly question, Brant," said the ghost-ship with a hint of a chuckle. "Where did I get you?"

BRANT forced his body to relax from its sudden rigidity. He forced his reeling thoughts into coherence. "Then you think I'm going to become one of your damned machines?"

"Yes. I think you are. And a very good one you'll make, too. You've a fine mind, Brant."

"Thanks," he said drily. "What's to prevent me from stationing myself at your controls and flying you to the nearest IP station, Mr. *Astrid*-Bennett?" He could think of one reason, off-hand. But he silently hoped that Bennett would not know that he couldn't operate geotrons.

"What's to prevent me from making you cut your throat? The same thing. You're in control of your body; I'm in control of mine. My body is the *Astrid*. The controls are useless unless I actuate them. The nerves which do so are sheathed in excellent steel. The only way in which you could destroy my control would be to break something necessary to the

running of the ship. That, in a sense, would kill me, as destroying your heart or lungs would kill you. But that would be pointless, for then you could no more navigate the ship than I. And if you made repairs, I would be—well, resurrected." The voice chuckled. "Also, I have certain other means." There was no attempt to veil the threat in the voice this time.

Brant made no reply, but his eyes narrowed in silent calculation as Bennett went on. "I never sleep," the voice said, "but occasionally I allow the automatic pilot to take over, to permit me to concentrate on other matters. But it is only an old Nelson autopilot, so that I must be careful. If you touch the controls while the autopilot is on it turns itself off, and I resume mastery." He seemed to wait for a comment from Brant. "Your lack of appreciation bores me," he said at last. "You are not the conversationalist I remembered you to be, Brant. Doubtless you will be less sullen in a metal body, after I make certain adjustments. In the meantime, you will please follow the lights to your quarters." And the voice ceased.

As Bennett entered the indicated cabin a disheveled figure arose from one of the two cots. He started back in alarm. The figure chuckled without humor and displayed a frayed bit of gold braid on its sleeve.

"I'm not as terrifying as I look," he said. "Lieutenant Powell of the IP scout *Iapetus*, at your service."

"Brant Kittinger, Science Institute astrophysicist. You're just the faintest bit battered, all right. Fight with Bennett?"

"Is that his name?" The IP pilot nodded glumly. "Yes. There's some whoppers of guns mounted on this old tub. Cut my little boat to pieces before I could fire a shot. Barely got out myself—though I almost wish I hadn't."

"I don't blame you. You know about

his plans for our future, I judge."
 "Yes," the pilot agreed. "He takes pleasure in gloating over his achievements. They're amazing enough, God knows. I've been trying to figure a way out—"

Brant raised one hand sharply and with the other he felt in a pocket for an extra pencil. "If you've got any ideas, write 'em. I think he can hear us."

Laughter resounded about them, vibrating the walls. "Clever, Brant," Bennett's voice said. "But so futile." Then there was silence again. Powell, grim as death, scribbled on a tattered IP report card.

Doesn't matter. Can't think of a thing.

Where's the Brain? "Bennett's," Brant amplified aloud.

Down below. Not a chance without a blaster. Must be eight inches of steel around it. Control nerves too.

They sat hopelessly on the cots, churning the problem. "How far is his home base from here?" Brant asked at length.

"He hasn't touched it since I've been aboard, but it can't be more than three days. He can't have any more fuel than that. I know this type of ship well enough. And from what I've seen of the generators, they haven't been altered."

"Umm," said Brant. "That checks. Astronautical engineering wasn't in his line." It was easier to ignore the presence of the listener while talking—anything else led to shattered nerves. "Three days to get out, then. Or less." For twenty minutes Brant said nothing more, and the IP pilot squirmed and watched his face hopefully. Finally the scientist picked up the pad again.

Can you pilot this job?

The pilot nodded, and scribbled: *Anything with geotrons—I'm IP. Why?*

Brant lay back on the bunk without replying, swiveled around so that his head was toward the center of the cabin, doubled up his knees, and let fly with both

feet. They crashed hard against the wall, his hobnailed shoes leaving bright scars on the metal.

"What was that for?" Bennett and the IP pilot asked simultaneously. Their captor's tone was curious, but not alarmed.

Brant's thoughts boiled furiously. "Am I allowed a few questions, Bennett?" he asked.

"You can ask them."

"Well,—what did I do then?"

"Why, I can't say specifically. As I told you, I can't see inside the ship. But I get a tactual jar from the nerves of the controls, the lights, and the floors; and also a ringing sound from the Audios. That tells me that you either stamped on the floor or pounded on the wall. From the intensity of both impressions, I should say you stamped."

"You hear and you feel, eh?"

"That's right," Bennett replied in tolerant amusement. "Anything else?"

"No," said Brant. Then, very quietly, he picked up the pad again and wrote: *Follow me.*

HE GOT off the bunk and tip-toed down the corridor toward the control room, the pilot at his heels. Bennett was silent only for a moment.

"I can still feel you, you know," he said at length. "You needn't be so quiet. Go back to your room."

Brant walked a little faster. Could Bennett enforce his orders?

"I said, go back to your room," the voice ordered, harsh and alarmed.

Brant gritted his teeth and marched forward.

"I should hate to have to spoil good material," Bennett said in a deadly tone. "For the last time—"

The next instant several things happened, almost simultaneously. Brant received a powerful blow in the small of his back, which sent him sprawling. A

bare fraction of a second later there was a hiss and a flash, and the air was hot and choking with the sharp odor of ozone.

"Close," commented Powell's voice calmly. "There's heat-needles set in the walls. To control the prisoners. Crawl, and make it snappy."

With grim determination they squirmed to the control room. "He doesn't know what I'm up to," Brant said aloud, and there was a tinge of ironic humor in his voice. "Do you, Bennett?"

"If you get up off your belly I'll burn you to a cinder," the living ship snarled, in a tone almost unrecognizable with fury.

"Hmm," said Brant, automatically setting his glasses. Here was a problem. He wrote on the pad and shoved it across the floor to Powell.

How can we reach the autopilot?

"What for?" Powell asked aloud.

Tell you later. Got to smash it.

They lay on the floor. Weird situation! Just over their heads, the keystone of their release—provided Brant's hastily-formed theory was right, of course. Yet if they arose to reach it, the deadly little heat needles would blast them.

Powell pushed the pad back. On it were the words: *Throw something at it.*

"Ah," said Brant. He drew off one of his heavy shoes and looked at it critically. It would do. With a lightning-quick motion he flung it.

As Bennet grasped the meaning of the sudden sensed stir of movement the heat-rays hissed in a frantic attempt to catch the flying object in mid-air. It was too late. The shoe plowed heel-foremost into the autopilot with a rending smash.

THERE was a short, bubbling scream and the Astrid gave one wild roll. Then there was silence.

"All right," said Kittinger, getting to his knees. "Try the controls, Powell."

The IP pilot rose cautiously, but there was no flash of rays. The ship responded to his skilled fingers with an instant surge of power.

"Now, how the hell did you know what to do?" he asked, baffled.

"It was simple," Brant explained complacently, putting on his shoe. He walked over to the wall and stared at the now-harmless heat-pencils imbedded. "He told me that he had connected the artificial nerves of the ship, the control nerves, to nerve-ends of his brain. And he said he'd made only hundreds of connections. . . ." His voice tapered off as he saw what he wanted on the control panel: a sharp-pointed metal rod. He seized it and commenced to dig out the heat-pencil. It came out almost immediately, intact. He sprang out of the control-room with it and ran down the corridor.

A couple of minutes later he returned more leisurely to the sputtering Powell. "I've cut all the connections I could find to the brain. Even if he does come to, I don't think he can do anything now," he explained, flinging down the heat-pencil. "I was saying?"

"Oh, yes. Well, if he had separated the pain nerves from the control nerves, he would have had to make thousands of connections, not hundreds. I didn't think he could have done that, especially working telepathically through a proxy. He had just made general connections, and let his brain sort out the impulses as they came in, as any human brain could do automatically under like circumstances. When I kicked the wall I wanted to make sure he could feel the jar because, if so, he hadn't separated out the sensory nerves. Which, in turn, meant that pain axons were bound to be present."

"But how—"

"So when I smashed the autopilot, it was like ramming a fist into a man's stomach. It hurt. He fainted."

THE END