

# **SECOND MONSTER ISSUE**

# **SUPER-SCIENCE**

JUNE • 35c IND.

# **FICTION**

## **CREATURES OF GREEN SLIME**

by JAMES ROSENQUEST

## **THE DAY THE MONSTERS BROKE LOOSE**

by ROBERT SILVERBERG



## **TERROR OF THE UNDEAD CORPSES**

by RUSSELL THOMPSON





# SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 3 — No. 4

June, 1959

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W. W. Scott — Editor

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SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION is published bi-monthly by Headline Publications Inc., at 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial office at 1790 Broadway, New York 19, N. Y. Second class postage paid at the post office at Holyoke, Mass. Single copy 35c. Subscription rates, \$4.00 for 12 issues. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts, and all such materials must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All stories printed in the magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is coincidental. Copyright 1959 by Headline Publications Inc. All rights, including translation, reserved under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in the U.S.A.

# TERROR OF THE UNDEAD CORPSES

by RUSSELL THOMPSON

*illustrated by EMSH*

It was a ghastly thing that happened, inconceivably horrible. Death on a far planet is bad enough, but this thing was much worse than death, and beyond it

THE rustling in the thick foliage stopped, and Cadet I-C Davies let his right hand relax and drop from the holster, where his .45 automatic lay, heavy and reassuring, against his right thigh. He resumed his patrol around the sleeping bulk of the space ship.

The night air of Venus was warm and humid, and he wiped the sweat repeatedly from his brow with the back of one sticky hand. His light cotton uniform clung to his dripping torso. He would have dearly loved to shuck it off, but for

the blood-thirsty flying insects that were waiting to swoop down and plunge their stingers into his skin and drink the thick, salty blood of this strange two-legged alien. As it was, he had to bat from time to time at the tiny, gnat-like bugs that dived at his face.

Aside from the pale, comforting light that streamed out into the oppressive night air from the central porthole of the ship, it was quite dark. The ever-present, unbroken cloud layer that surrounded the second planet from the sun shut

out even the friendly twinkle of stars that helped to lighten earthly nights even when there was no moon.

But tomorrow there would be light aplenty, as the rotation of the planet carried them into the glare of a sun that was some thirty-five million miles nearer than it was to earth. Without that high, protective barrier to filter out the infra-red and ultra-violet rays to the extent of some fifty percent, MSV #3—Manned Space Vehicle Number Three—could never have disgorged its crew onto the steaming surface of Venus.

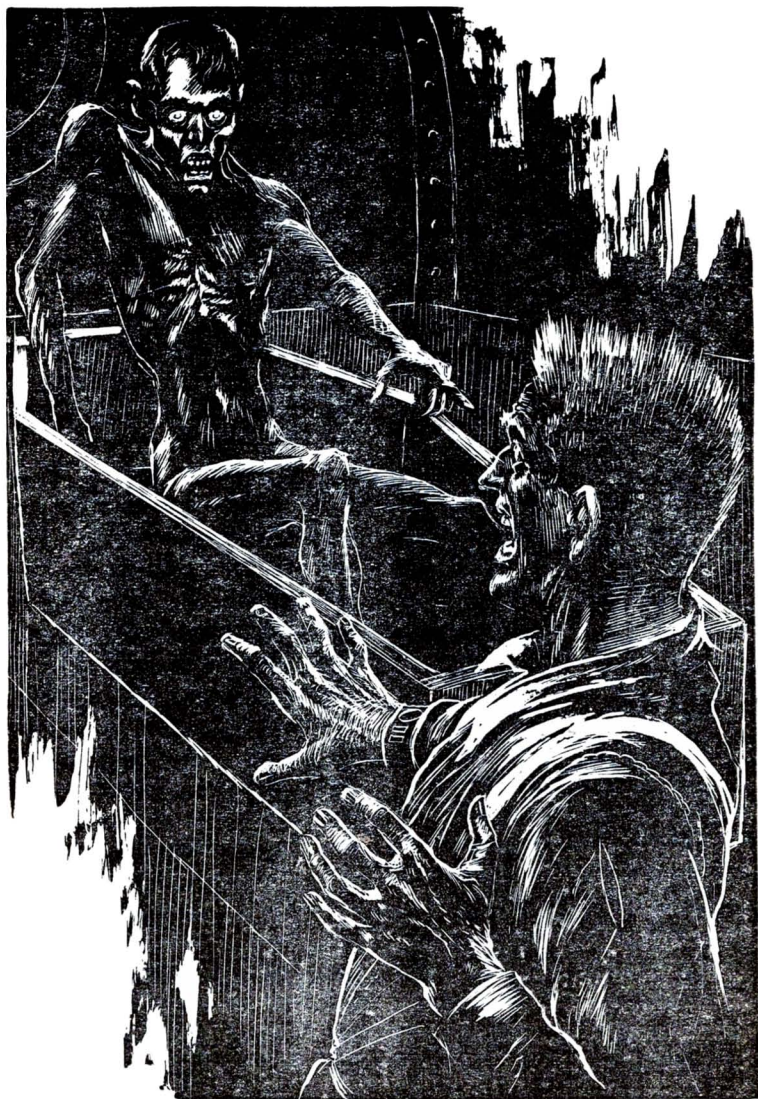
Cadet Davies completed his fifteenth or sixteenth round of the ship—he had lost track in the little game he played with himself to ease the monotony—and stopped in the shadows just beyond the shaft of light emanating from the silent ship, hoping that the light would lure some of the persistent flying insects away from him.

They were phototropic, just as on earth, and Davies leaned for a few minutes against the reassuring wall of the MSV, watching the six- and eight-

legged insects with their garish, multi-colored wings weaving in a rainbow dance in the cold, fluorescent light. The heavy, cloying silence was broken only by the faint humming of the ship's central power-package.

Then he heard the rustling again, and jerked from his slumped, relaxed stance against the steel alloy hull into rigid, upright attention. The sound came from the dense growth that ringed the little clearing at a distance of some thirty yards.

Staying just beyond the range of the light-shaft, so as to present no target, he moved forward one cautious step at a time, his spine tingling and the hairs bristling at the nape of his neck. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't, he thought to himself, and hoped for a quick showdown with the nuisance that lurked just out of sight. Of course, he reassured himself, it was just the fear of the unknown that raised his hackles and counted his vertebrae with an icy finger despite the humid warmth. The preliminary, daytime exploration some ten hours





ago, when the ship had first set down, had failed to reveal any animal life larger than a dog, and even that specimen, somewhat resembling a boar with six legs and two horns, had dashed off fearfully at the approach of the exploring party.

He removed the pistol from its holster and held it cocked and ready, bolstered up by the thought that one well-placed slug from it could stop anything they had so far encountered.

Beside which, one shout from him would bring almost instant aid from the ship, where his relief dozed lightly just inside the doorway on a cot draped with mosquito netting.

He stopped a few feet from the edge of the foliage and squinted tensely into the almost tangible blackness. But the sound had stopped at his approach, and all that he could hear was the sound of his own heavy breathing, punctuated by the monotonous *drip-drip* of moisture condensing on the fleshy leaves of exotic plants and falling to the damp black earth.

He yawned and turned his back deliberately, in a conscious gesture designed more to reassure himself that he was not really afraid, and began to walk back toward the space ship—but he still kept his gun ready in his right hand.

He was just a few feet away from his assigned circular patrol route when a rare gust of wind blew toward him out of the lush vegetation, carrying a rank odor, a completely alien scent that caused his skin to prickle. He whirled around, his gun levelled, and his startled eyes caught a swift flash coming at him, barely illuminated by the light from the vessel.

Then it was upon him, covering his nose and mouth with a slimy, tenacious, smothering grip that caused him to drop the pistol and rip at the thing that was cutting off his wind. He tried to cry out for help, but the clammy, leathery thing that was stifling him also prevented the call for help from passing his lips.

He rolled on the ground, his chest heaving futilely and his eyes bulging, and the veins standing out on his forehead.

An eternity seemed to pass while he struggled vainly for breath, and then a red mist formed behind his staring eyes. His clawing hands fell limply away from the creature that had now wrapped itself completely around his head, and the red mist deepened into a blackness that would never lift.

**W**HEN relief sentry Durkheim had awakened with a start of alarm and a deep sense of guilt, the incandescent dawn of Venus was already pouring over the landscape in a tidal wave of heat and light. He had brushed aside the netting hastily and donned his boots and pith helmet, muttering under his breath at what he thought was Davies' generosity in not waking him up for relief.

Then he had stepped outside the ship, saw the limp form lying on the ground some fifteen yards from the ship's lock, and ran toward it. He turned Davies over on his back to look for signs of life, and jerked upright as if he had been struck in the face.

His stomach turned over with nausea and panic, and he

pressed both hands to his mouth to muffle the involuntary scream. Then he staggered into the ship on legs that had turned to water.

Captain Langdon and ship's physician Sutton stood over the body with grim faces in which pity mingled with horror.

"Good Lord!" the Captain gasped. "What could have done that to him?"

The physician did not answer, but stood wiping his hands repeatedly against his trousers, as if they had handled something unclean or contaminated.

Davies was hardly recognizable. The flesh of his face had shrunk and tightened until the cheek bones almost showed through the transparent skin, and the lips were drawn back from the teeth in a malignant expression that was half grin and half snarl.

The filmed eyeballs glared up from the sockets that seemed to have become lidless. The whole body had the curious appearance of a limp dummy or a rag doll, or a scarecrow that had lost most of its straw stuffing.



"I don't know," the medic muttered finally. "It looks as though something had drained the blood from him—all six or seven quarts of it." He shook his head dubiously. "And yet there is still good color in the cheeks, as you can see for yourself."

Captain Langdon continued to look at the pitiful remains with a sick expression. Then he pulled himself together with a distinct effort and snapped a command to two other crew members standing at a respectful distance. They trotted forward and lifted the limp form, one taking the arms and the other the legs.

"Take him to the lab," he added hoarsely, then to the medic: "I assume you'll want to make some kind of examination before we put him in the hold in cold storage?"

"Yes, of course," the doctor confirmed, and the two fell in behind the crew members and their gruesome burden. The body was carried into the lab and placed on the white porcelain table.

As the two enlisted men left the lab, one of them turned

and paused in the doorway, hesitantly.

"Sir," he said, through pale lips.

The Captain looked up. "Yes, Sergeant?"

"Well, sir," the man said nervously, "there's something awfully peculiar about the—the body."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, sir, it's awfully heavy—for the *condition* it's in, if you know what I mean. Well, what I mean is, even though it's all sort of shrunken like, it seems to be just as heavy as a normal, live man—not light, like you'd expect."

"I see," the Captain said heavily. "All right, you may go about your assignments now."

"Yes, *sir*," the Sergeant responded with relief, and vanished into the corridor, his face as white as a sheet.

Captain Langdon turned to Doctor Sutton. "What do you suppose he means?"

"We'll soon find out," the medic grunted, and made some adjustments just below the table top. The porcelain slab sank slightly, and a dial at one end indicated one hundred and

seventy pounds. The physician let out a small sigh of surprise.

"Do you know off hand what this man weighed on takeoff from Earth?"

"Yes. Every man's weight had to be known for fuel computations. He weighed exactly one sixty-five."

"Then," murmured the medic with a curious expression on his thin face, "this man has actually *gained five pounds.*"

Langdon stared unbelievably at the shrunken thing in front of them, then looked quizzically at the physician.

"There's only one way to find out," the other said grimly, answered the unspoken question. "Help me get it ready for an autopsy."

Together they stripped the now baggy clothing from the withered limbs and torso until the shrivelled thing that had been a man lay naked on the laboratory table. The Captain washed his hands thoroughly in disinfectant, then stood off to one side, studiously inspecting a star map and smoking a cigarette with trembling fingers. Sutton donned a rubber apron and rubber gloves and

procured a tray of scalpels and saws from a cabinet.

Soon the ship's skipper began humming loudly to himself to shut out the slight tearing and ripping sounds that came from the table behind him. After some ten minutes or so, he heard a startled gasp and whirled around. The medic's complexion was a mottled patchwork of pink and gray.

"Come here and look at this!"

The Captain approached the table and stared down at the doctor's handiwork. The cigarette dropped from his fingers.

The entire abdominal cavity had been laid open from the breastbone to the pelvis, and the internal organs dissected. But Langdon had been in the Fourth World War, and it was not the sight of human viscera that disturbed him.

It was the matter that filled the cavities of the body—a translucent substance resembling gelatin...

The medic pointed with a long finger.

"That's what took care of the body weight that should have been missing," he com-

mented grimly. "Something caused the blood plasma and lymph to exude into the internal body cavities, and turned it into this jelly."

Then he reached for a knife and a saw and attacked the chest area feverishly. Langdon turned away and hummed until the sawing and ripping noises ceased. Sutton's voice broke in.

"See here. The lungs are also filled with the same junk!"

The skipper kept his face averted. "I'll take your word for it," he said weakly.

"Well now," the physician proclaimed, "I'll just have to take a sample of this jelly and prepare a slide for microscopic examination." And he began to whistle softly, professional curiosity and enthusiasm overcoming his initial distaste.

Fifteen minutes later he approached the chair where the Captain sat holding his head between his hands, as though suffering from an intolerable headache.

"John," he said in a strained tone of voice, "we had better put the cadaver in cold storage right away and quarantine it. There's something I don't like

at all about this. Instead of being a uniform, smooth jelly, the stuff seems to have a crude cellular structure of its own.

"Furthermore," he added, his voice sinking almost to a whisper, "the cadaver itself bothers and puzzles me. In spite of lying out in the heat and dampness of this godforsaken planet for at least eight hours, it still shows no signs of rigor mortis or decomposition!"

"Very well," the skipper assented wearily. "You'll have time to patch him up later before we return him to Earth for a hero's funeral. The first man to die on Venus!"

The daytime furnace waned on into the afternoon, and then cooled off into the banked oven of night. The remaining five crew members—Captain, physician, engineer-navigator, sergeant and corporal—ate the evening meal in a silent messroom. After a showing of an old 3-D movie in which nobody showed any real interest, they retired for the night.

CORPORAL Riley made the rounds of the ship on

stockinged feet—on the interior. The Captain decreed that there would be no outside sentries. The portal was locked securely and the ventilation system turned on inside, despite the drain on the power plant. They would have to do without fresh air, at least during the night. Nobody had any objections.

The corporal made a complete circle of the ship—all the living quarters were laid out in a band around the ship's centrally located power plant and engine room—and stopped for a minute to light one of the precious, rationed cigarettes.

The tiny light of the match was reflected from an aluminum nameplate at his eye level, bearing the single word: "HOLD." He looked at the closed door with a suppressed shudder, realizing that he had lost his bearings in the endless, dizzying circuit of the ship. He expelled a hasty gust of tobacco smoke, and started to make another round, when he heard the sound.

Half sigh. Half groan.

He dropped the partly consumed cigarette to the metallic

floor and ground it absently underfoot, oblivious to his burned heel. Then he dashed on silent feet to the Captain's room and stood over the sleeping figure, timidity wrestling with fear. He reached out one hand and shook his skipper by the shoulder. When the Captain had rubbed the sleep from his dark-rimmed eyes and sat on the edge of the cot, Riley related what he had heard.

Langdon rubbed his blue-stubbed chin with a heavy hand. "Maybe we ought to—. No," he contradicted himself then, "let the medic sleep. I'll tell him in the morning." He looked up at the enlisted man keenly. "You're not superstitious, Riley, are you?"

"No, sir, of course not." the corporal denied, squaring his shoulders.

"Good man. I saw cases like this before in a field morgue. Occasionally gases form in a cadaver and escape through the mouth, sounding like gasps and groans. Sometimes a corpse will even sit up partially, due to gas pressure and contraction of the muscles in the abdominal wall. So that takes care of the



sounds you heard. Everything o. k. now?"

The corporal nodded silently, and withdrew. The skipper sighed wearily and turned over on one side and tried to sleep.

Silence and darkness. The dim, recessed lights in the walls of the passageways only accentuated the pools of shadow in the unlighted curves and corners, and the almost inaudible hum of the power plant seemed only to make the silence throb.

Corporal Riley continued gingerly on his round, stopping now and then to peer vainly through the thick glass window of the ship's portal, or outside someone's room to drink in the reassuring sound of human breathing. He glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist watch: 2300 hours, ship's time. Another hour and it would be time to wake up Sergeant Durkheim for relief.

He completed a circuit once again, and knew without looking that he was only a few feet from the door to the dreaded cargo hold. He whistled softly to himself under his breath, then smiled when he remem-

bered the incident years ago, when he was a boy of thirteen, and had been challenged by playmates to climb the fence of an old cemetery and walk across it to the other side. Then he had whistled, too, as small boys will, to keep up his courage.

Half groan, half sigh? Creak and rustle?

Then he realized that the sounds, like a furtive animal on padded feet, had crept past the guard of his tuneless, soft whistling, and lurked crouching in the background of his thoughts.

He stopped whistling and held his breath. Yes, there it was again. His head felt suddenly like a rubber baloon that had been inflated near to the bursting point, while his arms and legs had turned to wax.

Then he thought of what the skipper had told him, and he recalled also the boyhood incident long ago. Crossing the old graveyard, he had come upon a mausoleum. On his own initiative (it was not in the dare) he had walked up to the little stone building, stood on tip-toes, and peered through the

little window for a full minute.

But he saw nothing, and nothing happened, and he went on his way with a new-found courage. He knew that he would have to open the door to the hold and look inside, ever so briefly, to convince himself and to bolster his own morale. Once the unknown was faced, and became the known, it lost all its terror.

He moved forward silently, drew a deep breath, and pushed the door open slowly.

He was met by a frigid breath of air from the refrigerating system that had been turned on full force to inhibit the process of decay. In the far wall, one small, dim light burned, like a vigil candle. His eyes wandered toward the roughly assembled coffin lying in the remote corner. Only the top edges were visible, and below them, a pool of inky darkness.

He was sighing with relief at the uneventful accomplishment of his self-imposed discipline and was turning to leave, when something stirred in the pool of darkness lurking in the wooden box.

Time stood still, and his heart with it, while the head emerged first into the dim light, followed by the scalpel-mangled torso. The blank eyes gleamed and glared at him in the reflected light, and from the gaping slash of a mouth came the sound of groaning and sighing.

Riley held his ground, remembering that this was a natural phenomenon, and there was nothing to be afraid of. He would observe, calm and detached, and then when the cadaver settled back again, he would go on his way. Then when time came to wake up Sergeant Durkheim for his relief, he would report the event to him and warn him not to be alarmed by strange noises.

He stood rigid, watching the corpse as it sat up to a full sitting position, accompanied by a whistling exhalation of air and gases. Yes, soon it should be over, the pressure released, and the poor remains would settle back once more to their rest.

His jaw dropped limply and his eyes bulged as if they would extrude from their sockets.

The corpse continued its upward and outward motion. And then it was outside the wooden box, staggering on shrunken legs, the entire belly split open and bulging out like rotten fruit.

Riley turned abruptly to flee from the hold, and realized with an electric shock of paralyzing terror that he had let go of the door unconsciously and it had closed behind him—and locked. And it could be unlocked only from the outside.

He heard a sudden thump and whirled around. The thing had fallen to the floor, the legs having become useless. As the corporal watched in frozen, speechless terror, it scabbled across the floor like a giant crab.

He turned and pounded on the door.

"Help! Some one let me out for God's sake! Help!"

He heard a rustle just behind him, and knew the thing was close.

He closed his eyes and prayed.

"Oh, no, Davies," he pleaded. "You're dead, you're dead!"

He heard a coughing grunt, then felt a tickling sensation on his right ankle that turned into a feeble grip of clutching fingers. Then a grip on his other ankle, and he knew the thing was pulling itself up.

He whirled around and flung up his hands against the face that peered up into his...glaring, sightless eyes and snarling gash of a mouth. He had time to scream twice before the rotten clamminess pressed itself over his nose and mouth and shut off all breathing.

**SERGEANT** Durkheim, whose room was closest to the cargo hold, rolled over on his cot and sat bolt upright on the edge. The nightmare that the screams had created in his subconscious mind merged with reality, and he came fully awake in time to hear the echo reverberating in the steel corridor.

He glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist watch: it was fifteen minutes past midnight—fifteen minutes past the time he should have been aroused by Riley for relief duty.

"Oh Lord!" he gasped to

himself, and stumbled out into the passage way in his bare feet. He ran into the forms of the Captain, the medic, and the engineer.

"Did you hear that, sir?"

"Yes," replied the skipper grimly. He looked at his own watch. "Aren't you supposed to be on duty now?"

"Yes sir," Durkheim mumbled, "but Riley didn't wake me up."

They exchanged frightened glances all around.

"Then I'm afraid that was the corporal," the skipper whispered, ashen-faced. He cocked the forty-five he held in one hand, and gestured to the others. "Follow me—to the hold."

They reached the locked door to the improvised mortuary.

The Captain called out: "Corporal Riley, are you in there? Answer me!"

Silence, except for the heavy breathing of the three men.

The Captain waved the other two men back. "Stand aside, but be ready to come to my aid if I need you."

He turned the lever on the door and pushed. The door

opened a foot, then met resistance. He poked his head through the crack. "Oh my God!" they heard him mutter over and over, "oh my God!"

Then he pulled his head out again, his lips compressed to a hair-line and his eyes sick. "Give me a hand with this door," he demanded.

The three men leaned their weight against the door and pushed it wide. The skipper thrust through into the frigid room.

Riley lay on the floor, his eyes wide in death, his face purpled. The desiccated corpse of Davies lay across him in a necrophiliac embrace. Durkheim and Engineer Burke remained outside while the physician joined the Captain in the hold. They stood looking down silently, their breath congealing in the cold air into wraith-like forms.

At last the ship's physician spoke. "I'd like to have the corpse of Davies brought into the lab again. I have an idea. I think there is no more danger from it, but for the time being we had better leave Riley in here."



Captain Langdon issued the necessary orders, and Burke and Durkheim keeping their eyes fixed rigidly ahead, carried the now lightweight cadaver of the cadet into the lab. They turned to leave, but the skipper stopped them with a gesture.

"You two men had better stay here," he suggested. "You might as well know the nature of the menace that we face."

A few minutes later, the medic had finished wielding his trepanning saw, and the skull of Davies lay opened before them.

There was no brain.

Furthermore, the jelly that had filled the internal cavities had either shrunk or disappeared, leaving only a thin slime clinging to the desiccated organs.

The physician gestured wearily. "My fault," he confessed. "The autopsy was not complete. I should have looked into the skull the first time."

Captain Langdon looked at him with wide eyes. "Yes, but what does it mean? You said you had some kind of an idea, back there in the hold?"

The doctor pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Ye-e-ess," he drawled doubtfully. "Of course, it's only tentative, since we are faced with an entirely unknown form of life. But to put it concisely, some form of internal parasite is responsible for the two deaths. Of that I'm fairly certain." He gestured to the empty cranium and the abandoned thoracic and abdominal cavities.

"It must be something on the order of a giant leech, such as we know them on earth. But instead of fastening itself to the outside of the victim and draining its blood, it evidently kills the prey by suffocation—by fastening itself over the breathing apparatus. Then it crawls or oozes into the body cavities of the victim and drains the body fluids internally.

"You will remember," he continued, looking at the Captain, "that I mentioned how the tissues of the cadet seemed not to have decayed. I think now that the cadet was not entirely dead when we performed the first autopsy."

Captain Langdon and the other two men looked ill.

"Oh, he wasn't at all conscious," the medic hastened to reassure them. "This—creature—insinuated itself into the organs and took over the life processes until it felt satisfied. It evidently also infiltrated the brain, spinal cord, and nervous system, thus controlling the body, and enabling it to manipulate the muscles and move the body until it was in a position to attack Riley and transfer itself to him."

The Captain mopped his forehead of the huge beads of sweat that broke out suddenly.

"Then—then," he whispered, "the body of Riley should go through the same stages!"

The doctor nodded. "Yes, if I'm right."

"But he was lying on the floor, absolutely motionless," Langdon protested.

"Incubation period," the physician muttered briefly. "The creature needs time to take over the nervous system and the musculature of the newest victim. With a modification, perhaps."

"A modification?"

"Yes. Having already absorbed and used the brain and nervous system of one human, the autonomous stage may be much closer than it was in the case of Cadet Davies."

THERE was stunned silence in the lab. And then, as if to verify the last statement of the physician, the sound of pounding and muffled cries came to their shocked, unbelieving ears.

"Mother of God!" the engineer gasped, "it's—it's the corporal! He's come back to life!"

Doctor Sutton thrust out a restraining hand. "Take it easy," he warned. "I was afraid of this. Don't be deceived. The thing has taken over his body already. That wasn't Riley, but something operating through him! It's learning fast—very fast. And it's not working under the handicap of having its latest host-body crippled by dissection."

"But what are we going to do?" somebody cried out.

"Destroy it," the Captain interposed grimly. "But we've

got to be careful. We can't confront it directly yet, since we don't know how strong it may be in its new body."

He whirled to the engineer. "Burke! How about the refrigerating system in the hold. Is it on full force?"

"No, sir. The temperature is at zero degrees centigrade—the freezing point. It can be sent much lower, but it will impose a considerable strain on the electric supply of the ship."

The skipper turned to the medic. "I understand that the lower the temperature, the slower is the metabolism of all living things, even cold-blooded organisms. Think it will work on this thing?"

Sutton nodded slowly. "It might, in spite of the fact that the zero temperature in the hold has so far not prevented it from acting. Yes, a sudden and pronounced drop might slow it down."

"Good enough," the Captain replied with grim satisfaction, and turned again to the engineer. "Burke, I want the refrigeration system in the hold turned on full force at once."

The engineer nodded in a

frightened way and left the lab for the engine room. Two minutes later the lights dimmed and almost went out, and the whine of the generator became more clearly audible.

Burke returned. "That ought to do it," he reported. "The refrigeration is on full force now. In about thirty minutes it ought to be down to minus twenty centigrade."

The Captain nodded silently in approbation. "Now we just wait," he announced, grim-faced. "I suggest, gentlemen, that we all stay here in the lab in full sight of each other, instead of going to our respective rooms. In half an hour, we go again in a body to the hold, and dispose of whatever is in there."

They waited in the ghostly dimness, dripping with sweat as the temperature rose in the lab while the ship's generating system fought with the overpowering heat on the outside in an effort to lower the temperature in the cargo hold. Even in the so-called absolute zero of outer space it had been no problem for the air conditioning system to maintain a com-

fortable atmosphere inside, for there was nothing to carry the heat away from the ship, other than radiation.

But maintaining sub-zero temperatures, even in a part of the ship, was rendered enormously difficult by the heavy, humid, tropical air of the planet.

The engineer vanished for a minute or so into the engine room, then came back with a worried expression.

"It's just barely holding at minus five degrees," he reported, wringing his hands. "I don't think it's going any lower from here on."

The skipper looked at his watch. "Half an hour gone already," he informed the others, gnawing at his lower lip. He stood up suddenly. "I think it's time for action, all the same." He inspected the clip of his gun, then hefted the weapon thoughtfully. "Need something better than this," he murmured, half to himself, half to the others.

"Sergeant Durkheim," he commanded abruptly, "go to the weapons cabinet and get me the sub-machine gun. Six

ordinary forty-five caliber bullets may not be enough to stop that thing."

The Sergeant complied, returning in less than a minute with the requisitioned weapon. The Captain inspected it and found it to his satisfaction.

"Gentlemen," he announced, "I'm going in after this thing alone." He waved aside their protests, "No use risking all of us. If this won't work, I don't know what will. The rest of you will have to carry on if I don't make it." Looking toward the medic: "It will be up to you, Doctor, to think of something else—poisons, gas, fire—whatever you think will work."

Sutton nodded. "Be careful, sir," he pleaded. "We don't know how much that creature will act like a normal human being, now that it has the resources of two brains at its disposal, and an un mutilated body. Assuming that it has survived the sub-freezing temperature. It may have become less—less thing-like and more man-like. You follow me?"

Captain Langdon nodded in understanding. "Zero hour," he said with an attempt at humor.



Then, more seriously: "Listen for the sound of the sub-machine gun. I will try to cut it in two. That should cramp its activities. If I don't return within five minutes after you hear the barrage, you'll know that I failed. Sutton, you'll then be in command.

"But my final order to you would be to remain on Venus until you've disposed of that monster in the hold, whether it is occupying my body or any one else's. Under no circumstances must you return to Earth with that creature on board."

He shuddered. "I hate to think of it loose on Earth, looking like a human being, and proceeding unchecked from victim to victim." He looked at the engineer next. "Burke, as a double check, I also order you to implement my instructions by refusing to take off from Venus until the monster has been disposed of."

He threw his shoulders back and drew a deep breath. "O.K., men, wish me luck." He turned and left the lab, and the three remaining men watched him vanish through the doorway

and down the corridor toward the hold, listened to his footsteps echoing in the metallic corridor, and held their breaths.

The sounds of pounding from the interior of the hold, and the muffled cries, had long since ceased, and every one in the lab felt more relieved—felt that the Captain's chances were good. Then they heard a creaking and rasping as the intrepid skipper, far down the curved corridor and out of sight, threw open the door to the hold.

*THE Captain stood in the doorway, and the chill that struck to the marrow of his bones did not come entirely from the frigid air within the room. He stared with bulging eyes at the figure leaning against the far wall, a vague, shadowy menace in the dim light.*

*Then it moved forward, smiling, and he almost forgot his purpose as it moved forward into the shaft of light from the corridor, looking for all the world like the old Corporal Riley he had come to know and to love like his own son.*

*But then he saw, just in time, that there was no cloud of moisture issuing from the smiling lips. It was not breathing... He raised the sub-machine gun and held down the trigger, waving the muzzle from left to right.*

*The hellishly re-animated body of the corporal fell heavily to the floor, cut in two. From the abdominal cavity a thickish slime or jelly oozed out onto the floor, pulsing, thin bands of luminous material running through the viscous mass like a primitive nervous system, while it heaved and swelled and ballooned into a congeries of iridescent bubbles, shining with all the colors of the rainbow and with other colors that it hurt his eyes to look at so near were they to the ultra-violet end of the visible spectrum. Then it grew still, and the Captain heaved a sigh of enormous relief. The battle was over.*

The three men in the lab stiffened in every muscle as they heard the ripping and chattering noise of the sub-machine gun, magnified to an ear-splitting assault as the

sound echoed and re-echoed in the vault of the cargo hold and rebounded along the steel walls of the corridor.

A few minutes passed, in which the ensuing silence was almost as deafening as the sound that preceded it. Then they heard the sound of firm footsteps coming nearer in the corridor, and all three stood up as one man, peering fearfully at the doorway.

Captain Langdon appeared, carrying the sub-machine gun limply in one hand. "Everything's all right now," he reported wearily. He looked at Sergeant Durkheim and commanded crisply: "Durkheim, flood that hold with gasoline and light it. I want everything remaining in that accursed room burned to ashes."

He turned to the engineer next. "Burke, we take off from this planet at exactly 0600 hours. I think we could all use a little sleep"—he grinned—"if any one is in the mood to sleep!"

As the incandescent dawn of Venus flooded over the landscape in a tidal wave of heat and light, MSV #3 rose from

the steaming ground, up through the cloud-wrapped atmosphere, and plunged back to the greenstar of Earth in an arc of acceleration.

THE first Venus expedition was only a partial success, for it returned to Earth with a cargo of five cindered corpses, and only one survivor: Engineer Burke. They listened to his story of a disease that had struck down the other members of the crew with pity and sympathy. Of course, he was put in quarantine for several weeks, and subjected to periodic and thorough physical examinations. He was feted as a hero then, for several weeks after his release from observation, and then after that he was given leave from the space service for a fulough of indefinite duration.

*But Engineer Burke had not*

*been feeling really well since his return. The food did not agree with him. He found the pale, watery sunshine of Earth not entirely to his satisfaction, and the thin, cool atmosphere was definitely uncomfortable. He had strange periods in which his mind seemed to be slipping out of his control. He thought often of his former crew buddies, Captain Langdon, the medic, the sergeant, the corporal, and Cadet Davies with—what was it?—a sort of delicious hunger, an appetite that pervaded every cell of his being.*

*No. This crude, boiled and burned food did not satisfy him at all. Some time very soon, after night had fallen, he would have to lurk in some dark alley, and wait for more suitable nourishment.*

THE END

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