

STARTLING STORIES

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An Amazing Complete Novel



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By **POLTON CROSS**

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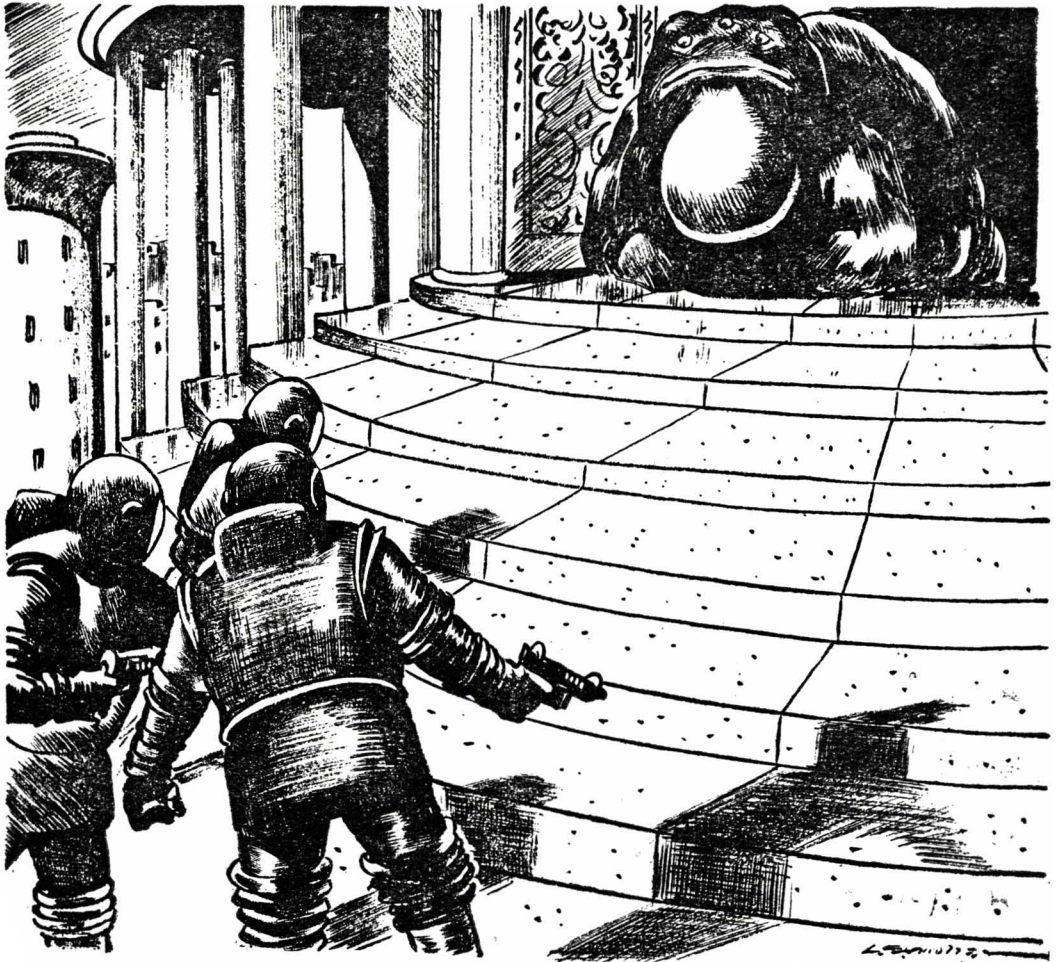
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"That never came from any part of our own galaxy!" Dril cried

THE DEAD PLANET

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Star travelers from a distant galaxy crash on a lost world to confront horror and wonder—and a shocking surprise!

IT DIDN'T look like such a forbidding little world at first. It looked dark, icy and lifeless, but there was no hint of what brooded there. The only question in our minds then was whether we would die when our crippled ship crashed on it.

Tharn was at the controls. All three of us had put on our pressure suits in the hope that they might save us if the crash was bad. In the massive metal suits we looked

like three queer, fat robots, like three metal globes with jointed mechanical arms and legs.

"If it hadn't happened here!" came Dril's hopeless voice through the inter-com. "Here in the most desolate and unknown part of the whole galaxy!"

"We're lucky we were within reaching distance of a star system when the generators let go, I murmured.

"Lucky, Oroc?" repeated Dril bitterly. "Lucky, to postpone our end by a few days of agony? It's all we can look forward to on that."

The system ahead did look discouraging for wrecked star explorers. Here in a thin region at the very edge of the galaxy, it centered around a sun that was somber dark red, ancient, dying.

Six worlds circled that smoldering star. We were dropping toward the innermost of the six planets, as the most possibly habitable. But now, we could clearly see that life could not exist on it. It was an airless sphere, sheathed in eternal snow and ice.

The other five planets were even more hopeless. And we could not change course now, anyway. It was a question of whether the two strained generators that still functioned would be able to furnish enough power to slow down our landing speed and save us from total destruction.

Death was close, and we knew it, yet we remained unshaken. Not that we were heroes. But we belonged to the Star Service, and while the Star Service yields glory, its members always have the shadow of death over them and so grow accustomed to it.

Many in the Star Service had died in the vast, endless task of mapping the galaxy. Of the little exploring ships that went out like ours to chart the farther reaches of stars, only two-thirds or less ever came back. Accidents accounted for the rest—accidents like the blowing of our generators from overload in attempting to claw our way quickly out of a mass of interstellar debris.

Tharn's voice came to us calmly.

"We'll soon hit it. I'll try to crabtail in, but the chances are poor. Better strap in."

Using the metal arms of our suits clumsily, we hooked into the resilient harnesses that might give us a chance of survival.

Dril peered at the largening white globe below.

"There look to be deep snows at places. It would be a little softer there."

"Yes," Tharn replied quietly. "But our ship would remain buried in the snow. On the ice, even if wrecked it could be seen. When another ship comes, they'll find us, and our charts won't be lost."

Well, for a moment that made me so proud of the Star Service that I was almost contemptuous of the danger rushing upon us.

It is that wonderful spirit that has made the Service what it is, that has enabled our race to push out from our little world to the farthest parts of the galaxy. Individual explorers might die, but the Service's conquest of the universe would go on.

"Here we go," muttered Dril, still peering downward.

The icy white face of the desolate world

was rushing up at us with nightmare speed. I waited tensely for Tharn to act.

He delayed until the last moment. Then he moved the power bar, and the two remaining generators came on with a roar of power.

They could not stand that overload for more than a few moments before they too blew out. But it was enough for Tharn to swing the falling ship around and use the blast of propulsive vibrations as a brake.

Making a crabtail landing is more a matter of luck than skill. The mind isn't capable of estimating the infinitesimal differences that mean disaster or survival. Use a shade too much power, and you're bounced away from your goal. A shade too little, and you smash to bits.

Tharn was lucky. Or maybe it wasn't luck as much as pilot's instinct. Anyway, it was all over in a moment. The ship fell, the generators screamed, there was a bumping crash, then silence.

The ship lay on its side on the ice. Its stern had crumpled and split open at one place, and its air had puffed out, though in our suits we didn't mind that. Also the last two generators had blown out, as expected, from the overload in cushioning our fall.

"We made it!" Dril bounded from despair to hope. "I never thought we had a real chance. Tharn, you're the ace of all pilots."

But Tharn himself seemed to suffer reaction from tension. He unstrapped like ourselves and stood, a bulky figure in his globular suit, looking out through the quartz portholes.

"We've saved our necks for the time being," he muttered. "But we're in a bad fix."

The truth of that sank in as we looked out with him. This little planet out on the edge of the galaxy was one of the most desolate I had ever seen. There was nothing but ice and darkness and cold.

THE ice stretched in all directions, a rolling white plain. There was no air—the deep snows we had seen were frozen air, no doubt. Over the gelid plain brooded a dark sky, two-thirds of which was black emptiness. Across the lower third glittered the great drift of the galaxy stars, of which this system was a borderland outpost.

"Our generators are shot, and we haven't enough power to wind new coils for all of them," Tharn pointed out. "We can't call a tenth the distance home with our little communicator. And our air will eventually run out."

"Our only chance," he continued decisively, "is to find on this planet enough tantalum and terbium and the other metals we need, to make powerloy and wind new coils. Dril,

get out the radio sonde."

The radio sonde was the instrument used in our star mapping to explore the metallic resources of unknown planets. It worked by projecting broad beams of vibrations that could be tuned to reflect from any desired elements, the ingenious device detecting and computing position thus.

Dril got out the compact instrument and tuned its frequencies to the half dozen rare metals we needed. Then we waited while he swung the projector tubes along their quadrants, closely watching the indicators.

"This is incredible luck!" he exclaimed finally. "The sonde shows terbium, tantalum and the other metals we need all together in appreciable quantities. They're just under the ice and not far from here!"

"It's almost too good to be true," I said wonderingly. "Those metals are never found all together."

Tharn planned quickly.

"We'll fit a rough sledge and on it we can haul an auxiliary power unit and the big dis-beam, to cut through the ice. We'll also have to take cables and tackle for a hoist."

We soon had everything ready and started across the ice, hauling our improvised sledge and its heavy load of equipment.

The frozen world, brooding beneath the sky that looked out into the emptiness of extra-galactic space, was oppressive. We had hit queer worlds before, but this was the most gloomy I had ever encountered.

The drift of stars that was our galaxy sank behind the horizon as we went on, and it grew even darker. Our krypton lamps cut a white path through the somber gloom as we stumbled on, the metal feet of our heavy suits slipping frequently on the ice.

Dril stopped frequently to make further checks with the radio sonde. Finally, after several hours of toilsome progress, he looked up from the instrument and made a quick signal.

"This is the position," he declared. "There should be deposits of the metals we need only a hundred feet or so beneath us."

It didn't look encouraging. We were standing on the crest of a low hill of the ice, and it was not the sort of topography where you would expect to find a deposit of those metals.

But we did not argue with Dril's findings. We hauled the auxiliary power unit off the sledge, got its little ato-turbine going, and hooked its leads to the big dis-beam projector which we had dismantled from the bows of our ship.

Tharn played the dis-beam on the ice with expert skill. Rapidly it cut a ten-foot shaft down through the solid ice. It went down for a hundred feet like a knife through cheese and then there was a sudden backlash

of sparks and flame. He quickly cut the power.

"That must be the metal-bearing rock we just hit," he said.

Dril's voice was puzzled.

"It should be seventy or eighty feet lower to the metal deposits, by the sonde readings."

"We'll go down and see," Tharn declared. "Help me set up the winch."

We had brought heavy girders and soon had them forming a massive tripod over the shaft. Strong cables ran through pulleys suspended from that tripod and were fastened to a big metal bucket in which we could descend by paying out cable through the tackle.

Only two of us should have gone down, really. But somehow, none of us wanted to wait alone up on the dark ice, nor did any of us want to go down alone into the shaft. So we all three crowded into the big bucket.

"Acting like children instead of veteran star explorers," grunted Tharn. "I shall make a note for our psychos on the upsetting effect of conditions on these worlds at the galaxy edge."

"Did you bring your beam guns?" Dril asked suddenly.

We had, all of us. Yet we didn't know quite why. Some obscure apprehension had made us arm ourselves when there was no conceivable need of it.

"Let's go," said Tharn. "Hang onto the cable and help me pay it out, Oroc."

I did as he bade, and we started dropping smoothly down into the shaft in the ice. The only light was the krypton whose rays Dril directed downward.

We went down a hundred feet, and then we all cried out. For we saw now the nature of the resistance which the dis-beam had met. Here under the ice there was a thick stratum of transparent metal, and the dis-beam had had to burn its way through that.

UNDERNEATH the burned-out hole in that metal stratum there was—nothing. Just empty space, a great hollow of some kind here beneath the ice.

Tharn's voice throbbed with excitement.

"I'd already begun to suspect it. Look down there!"

The krypton beam, angling downward into the emptiness below us, revealed a spectacle which stunned us.

Here, beneath the ice, was a city. It was a great metropolis of white cement structures, dimly revealed by our little light. And this whole city was shielded by an immense dome of transparent metal which withstood the weight of the ice that ages had piled upon it.

"Our dis-beam cut down through the ice

and then through the dome itself," Tharn was saying excitedly. "This dead city may have been lying hidden here for ages."

Dead city? Yes, it was dead. We could see no trace of movement in the dim streets as we dropped toward it.

The white avenues, the vague facades and galleries and spires of the metropolis, were silent and empty. There was no air here. There could be no inhabitants.

Our bucket bumped down onto the street. We fastened the cables and climbed out, stood staring numbly about us. Then we uttered simultaneous cries of astonishment.

An incredible thing was happening. Light was beginning to grow around us. Like the first rosy flush of dawn it came at first, burgeoning into a soft glow that bathed all the farflung city.

"This place can't be dead!" exclaimed Dril. "That light—"

"Automatic trips could start the light going," said Tharn. "These people had a great science, great enough for that."

"I don't like it," Dril murmured. "I feel that the place is haunted."

I had that feeling, too. I am not ordinarily sensitive to alien influences. If you are, you don't get accepted by the Star Service.

But a dark, oppressive premonition such as I had never felt before now weighed upon my spirits. Deep in my consciousness stirred vague awareness of horror brooding in this silent city beneath the ice.

"We came here for metal, and we're going to get it," Tharn said determinedly. "The light won't hurt us, it will help us."

Dril set up the radio sonde and took bearings again. They showed strongest indications of the presence of the metals we needed at a point some halfway across the city from us.

There was a towering building there, an enormous pile whose spire almost touched the dome. We took it as our goal and started.

The metal soles of our pressure suits clanked on the smooth cement paving as we walked. We must have made a strange picture—we three in our grotesque metal armor tramping through that eerily illuminated metropolis of silence and death.

"This city is old indeed," Tharn said in a low voice. "You notice that the buildings have roofs? That means they're older than—"

"Tharn! Oroc!" yelled Dril suddenly, swerving around and grabbing for his beam pistol.

We saw it at the same moment. It was rushing toward us from a side street we had just passed.

I can't describe it. It was like no normal form of life. It was a gibbering monstrosity of black flesh that changed from one hideous

shape to another with protean rapidity as it flowed toward us.

The horror and hatred that assaulted our minds were not needed to tell us that this thing was inimical. We fired our beams at it simultaneously.

The creature sucked back with unbelievable rapidity and disappeared in a flashing movement between two buildings. We ran forward. But it was gone.

"By all the devils of space!" swore Dril, his voice badly shaken. "What was that?"

Tharn seemed as stunned as we.

"I don't know. It was living, you saw that. And its swift retreat when we fired argues intelligence and volition."

"Ordinary flesh couldn't exist in this cold vacuum—" I began.

"There are perhaps more forms of life and flesh than we know," muttered Tharn. "Yet such things surely wouldn't build a city like this—"

"There's another!" I interrupted, pointing wildly.

The second of the black horrors advanced like a huge, unrealed worm. But even as we raised our pistols, it darted away.

"We've got to go on," Tharn declared, though his own voice was a little unsteady. "The metals we need are in or near that big tower, and unless we get them we'll simply perish on the ice above."

"There may be worse deaths than freezing to death up there on the ice," said Dril huskily. But he came on with us.

OUR progress through the shining streets of that magically beautiful white city was one of increasing horror.

The black monstrosities seemed to be swarming in the dead metropolis. We glimpsed and fired at dozens of them. Then we stopped beaming them, for we didn't seem able to hit them.

They didn't come to close quarters to attack us. They seemed rather to follow us and watch us, and their numbers and menacing appearance became more pronounced with every step we took toward the tower.

More daunting than the inexplicable creatures were the waves of horror and foreboding that were now crushing our spirits. I have spoken of the oppression we had felt since entering the city. It was becoming worse by the minute.

"We are definitely being subjected to psychological attack from some hostile source," muttered Tharn. "All this seems to be because we are approaching that tower."

"This system is on the edge of the galaxy," I reminded. "Some undreamed-of creature or creatures from the black outside could have come from there and laired up on this dead world."

I believe we would at that point have turned and retreated had not Tharn steadied us with a reminder.

"Whatever is here that is going to such lengths to force us to retreat is doing so because it's afraid of us! That argues that we can at least meet it on equal terms."

We were approaching the wide flight of steps that led up to the vaulted entrance of the great tower. We moved by now in a kind of daze, crushed as we were by the terrific psychic attack that was rapidly conquering our courage.

Then came the climax. The lofty doors of the tower swung slowly open. And from within the building there lurched and shambled out a thing, the sight of which froze us where we stood.

"That never came from any part of our own galaxy!" Dril cried hoarsely.

It was black, mountainous in bulk and of a shape that tore the brain with horror. It was something like a monstrous, squatting toad, its flesh a heaving black slime from which protruded sticky black limbs that were not quite either tentacles or arms.

Its triangle of eyes were three slits of cold green fire that watched us with hypnotic intensity. Beneath that hideous chinless face, its breathing pouch swelled in and out painfully as it lurched, slobbering, down the steps toward us.

Our beams lashed frantically at that looming horror. And they had not the slightest effect on it. It continued to lurch down the steps. And, most ghastly of all, there was in its outlines a subtly hideous suggestion that it was parent, somehow, to the smaller horrors that swarmed in the city behind us.

Dril uttered a cry and turned to flee, and I stumbled around to join him. But from Tharn came a sharp exclamation.

"Wait! Look at the thing! It's *breathing!*"

For a moment, we couldn't understand. And then dimly, I did. The thing was obviously breathing. Yet there was no air here!

Tharn suddenly stepped forward. It was the bravest thing I have ever seen done by a member of the Star Service. He strode right toward the towering, slobbering horror.

And abruptly, as he reached it, the mountainous black obscenity vanished. It disappeared like a clicked-off television scene. And the black swarm in the city behind us disappeared at the same moment.

"Then it wasn't real?" Dril exclaimed.

"It was only a projected hypnotic illusion," Tharn declared. "Like the others we saw back there. The fact that it was breathing here where there is no air, gave me the clue to its unreality."

"But then," I said slowly, "whatever projected those hypnotic attacks is inside this building?"

"Yes, and so are the metals we want," Tharn said grimly. "We're going in."

The ceaseless waves of horror-charged thought beat upon us even more strongly as we went up the steps. Gibbering madness seemed to shriek in my brain as we opened the high doors.

And then, as we stepped into the vast, gleaming white nave of the building, all that oppressive mental assault suddenly ceased.

Our reeling minds were free of horror for the first time since we had entered this dead city. It was like bursting out of one of the great darkness clouds of the galaxy into clear space again.

"Listen!" said Tharn in a whisper. "I hear—"

I heard, too. We didn't really hear, of course. It was not sound, but mental waves that brought the sensation of sound to our brains.

It was music we heard. Faint and distant at first, but swelling in a great crescendo of singing instruments and voices.

The music was alien, like none we had ever heard before. But it gripped our minds as its triumphant strains rose and rose.

There was in those thunderous chords the titanic struggles and hopes and despairs of a race. It held us rigid and breathless as we listened to that supernal symphony of glory and defeat.

"They are coming," said Tharn in a low voice, looking across the white immensity of the great nave.

I saw them. Yet oddly, I was not afraid now, though this was by far the strangest thing that had yet befallen us.

Out into the nave toward us was filing a long procession of moving figures. They were the people of this long-dead world, the people of the past.

They were not like ourselves, though they were bipedal, erect figures with a general resemblance to us in bodily structure. I cannot particularize them, they were so alien to our eyes.

AS THE music swelled to its final crescendo and then died away, the marching figures stopped a little away from us and looked at us. The foremost, apparently their leader, spoke, and his voice reached our minds.

"Whoever you are, you have nothing more to fear," he said. "There is no life in this city. All the creatures you have seen, all the horror that has attacked you, yes, even we ourselves who speak to you, are but phantoms of the mind projected from telepathic records that are set to start functioning automatically when anyone enters this city."

"I thought so," whispered Tharn. "They

could be nothing else."

The leader of the aliens spoke on.

"We are a people who perished long ago, by your reckoning. We originated on this planet"—he called it by an almost unpronounceable alien name—"far back in your past. We rose to power and wisdom and then to glory. Our science bore us out to other worlds, to other stars, finally to exploration and colonization of most of the galaxy.

"But finally came disaster. From the abyss of extra-galactic space came invaders so alien that they could never live in amity with us. It was inevitable war between us and them, we to hold our galaxy, they to conquer it.

"They were not creatures of matter. They were creatures made up of photons, particles of force—shifting clouds capable of unimaginable cooperation between themselves and of almost unlimited activities. They swept us from star after star, they destroyed us on a thousand worlds.

"We were finally hemmed in on this star system of our origin, our last citadel. Had there been hope for the future in the photon race, had they been creatures capable of creating a future civilization, we would have accepted defeat and destruction and would have abdicated thus in their favor. But their limitations of intelligence made that impossible. They would never rise to civilization themselves nor allow any other race in the galaxy to do so.

"So we determined that, before we perished, we would destroy them. They were creatures of force who could only be destroyed by force. We converted our sun into a gigantic generator, hurling some of our planets and moons into it to cause the cataclysm we desired. From our sun generator sprang a colossal wave of force that swept out and annihilated the photon race in one cosmic surge of energy.

"It annihilated the last of us also. But we had already prepared this buried city, and in it had gathered all that we knew of science and wisdom to be garnered by future ages. Some day new forms of life will rise to civilization in the galaxy, some day explorers from other stars will come here.

"If they are not intelligent enough to make benign use of the powers we have gathered here, our telepathic attacks should frighten them away. But if they are intelligent enough to discern the clues we leave for them, they will understand that all is but hypnotic illusion and will press forward into this tower of our secrets.

"You, who listen to me, have done this. To you, whoever and of whatever future race you may be, we bequeath our wisdom and our power. In this building, and in others throughout the city, you will find all that we have left. Use it wisely for the good of the galaxy and all of its races. And now, from we of the past to you of the future—farewell."

The figures that stood before us vanished. And we three remained standing alone in the silent, shimmering white building.

"Space, what a race they must have been!" breathed Tharn. "To do all that, to die destroying a menace that would have blighted the galaxy forever, and still to contrive to leave all that they had gained to the future!"

"Let's see if we can find the metals," begged Dril, his voice shaky. "All I want now is to get out of here and take a long drink of *sanqua*."

We found more than the metals we needed. In that wonderful storehouse of alien science, we found whole wave generators of a type far superior to ours, which could easily be installed in our crippled ship.

I shall not tell of all else we found. The Star Service is already carefully exploring that great treasury of ancient science, and in time its findings will be known to all the galaxy.

It took labor to get the generators back up to our ship, but when that was done, it was not hard to install them. And when we had fused a patch on our punctured hull, we were ready to depart.

As our ship arrowed up through the eternal dusk of that ice clad world and darted past its smoldering dying sun on our homeward voyage, Dril took down the bottle of *sanqua*.

"Let's get these cursed suits off, and then I'm going to have the longest drink I ever took!" he vowed.

We divested ourselves of the heavy suits at last. It was a wonderful relief to step out of them, to unfold our cramped wings and smooth our ruffled feathers.

We looked at each other, we three tall bird-men of Rigel, as Dril handed us the glasses of pink *sanqua*. On Tharn's beaked face, in his green eyes, was an expression that told me we all were thinking of the same thing.

He raised the glass that he held in his talons.

"To that great dead race to whom our galaxy owes all," he said. "We will drink to their world by their own name for it. We will drink to Earth."