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MARY GNAEDINGER, *Editor*

Full-Length Feature

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Into the dark and brooding India that must remain forever secret, Blair Warrender knew that evil magic followed him. . . . Indeed, that his long sought friend might be still living in the mysterious world known only to the dead. . . .

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The Eyes of DROMU

By Cedric R. Mentiplay

When Andrew hid the little wounded man from the crashed flying saucer, was he doing an act of kindness—or letting in a menace such as Earth had never faced before?

THE thing thrust itself upon Andrew Dexter. It came in over him like a diving Stuka from the old war, yet faster—faster. As he threw himself to the ground in instinctive reaction, he was conscious of a high, thin sound needling at the base of his brain. Dry heat was in the blasts which struck down at him. A quick glance showed him a blue-green translucence banking crazily.

Dazed and staggering, he climbed to his feet. Here and there, in an irregular pattern which nevertheless pointed the way, were patches of scorched and blackened grass. The first ones were perhaps twenty feet across, but they grew smaller as he plodded onward. They could have been made by a giant blowtorch, a jet blasting straight down from above. . . .

The thing he had seen lay near the edge of a stubbled field beyond the remains of a post-and-rail fence. It was much as reports had described its fellows—a saucer tossed haphazardly from some Olympian tea-party. Leading to it, the burned discs narrowed to the span of a hand, then gave way to a quarter-mile gash plowed in the red soil.

Andrew paused, drawing on past experience to still the beginnings of superstitious dread. He was a trained pilot who had flown jets. He was also a scientist—geology, with more than a smattering of physics. Now his observations were taking him past the first vague panic.

It was a flying wing of some sort, about twenty feet in diameter, and about six feet thick at a point somewhat forward of its center. Its skin was of a delicate greenish hue. At what would be the tail in a conventional aircraft a semicircular section was cut away, and in the opening were the unmistakable orifices of jet pipes. Andrew told himself that here was a machine that could fly, providing it had an efficient power plant. He grasped the thin edge of the machine and heaved. The whole massive-seeming fabric lifted, feather-light at his touch, so that the machine stood horizontally in perfect balance.

The geologist in Andrew Dexter took over. The skin was metallic to the touch, but it was unlike any metal he had seen. Its slim curve bore no marks of the violent landing. This was it, he told himself—the evidence, the missing link between fact and fantasy. That fabulous metal, the very size of the machine in relation to the load it must carry. . . .

Shoring the machine up with rails from the wrecked fence, he explored the underside. A circular plate moved under his hands. As he turned it, the plate swung upward. He held his breath as he worked his wide shoulders through the narrow opening.

Sunlight bathed the interior in a deep-sea glow. Stooping in a space five feet high, he saw before him a column like the old Deper-



Weaving from side to side, he managed to keep going. . . .

dussin control, surmounted by a wheel. On the wheel were a series of studs which he guessed might fire the jet or rocket tubes. A boxed telescope affair like an Aldis sight was built against the forward hull, and beside it was a flat, opaque disc something like a television screen.

Then he glimpsed the body. It could have been a bronze figurine, or the mere mummy of some space-wanderer which had drifted for a thousand years out there in the super-chill between the planets. The flesh was hard and dry, with a metallic coldness. He lifted the body—it weighed about twenty-five pounds, he guessed—and dropped with it through the hatch into the sanity of sunlight.

Cradled in his arms, the tiny figure had an oddly pathetic appearance. It was humanoid, with head, hands and feet of disproportionate size as compared with the puny body. The face had the wizened look of that of a precocious dwarf. The body was dressed in a single closely knit garment, with a kind of heavy necklace. A sort of built-in pack hunched the tiny back. There were trailing wires.

What Andrew did then was akin to the action of a trained mechanic who does not quite know the function of the machine he mends. A wire dangling from the pack seemed to fit a bare place in the necklace, a hose plugged back into position, connecting the two. Then the necklace could be moved upward and clamped about the nose and sensitive, wide-lipped mouth.

The completed job gave Andrew a strange feeling of accomplishment. He could feel a faint vibration in the thin body. Something torn away in the crash was functioning again. He hoped it was some kind of artificial lung, and that it had not been disconnected too long. He picked up the body and made his best time back to his homestead at Deneven Downs.

Old Dan Russell, the handyman, did not seem greatly concerned at the visitor. A relic of the horse age, he had never quite admitted motor cars. Dan made no protests against things he could not understand. Andrew, whom he remembered as a very loud and wet baby, had sat on a synthetic gust of wind and traveled faster than sound. Did that make any more sense than a little green fellow flying around in a saucer?

"Looks kinda cold," he murmured. "Slug o' rum should fix that. Maybe I should pop 'im in the oven, eh?"

"Let him lie for a while," Andrew told him. "Get the truck out. There's a plane down in the south corner of Forty Acre. We'll lug it in."

They stowed the machine in the adjoining barn. Then Andrew went carefully over its

pilot without finding anything which looked like a wound. There was no discernible heart-beat; but then, Andrew reflected, there was no guarantee the fellow had a heart. In desperation, he brought in his metallurgist's kit. He got at once a strong metallic reaction, with overtones which puzzled him.

As a last resort he cut in his Geiger counter and passed the finder over the little man's chest. A strong, even ticking could be heard in the phones. Radioactivity. Well, why not? He tucked the covers about the scrawny neck, grinning.

Then the visitors began to drop in. Neighbors had seen something, they did not know what. A reporter and photographer, saucer-hunting in a jeep, stopped for directions and went on, west instead of north. Andrew and Dan brushed them all off with a brief:

"Sorry. No saucers here. We don't touch the stuff."

EARLY the following day a car drew up outside. A large, thick-set man in a dusty blue suit and narrow-brimmed city hat walked up to where Andrew was checking his latest Geiger counts on the bench outside the barn.

"Your name Dexter?" he demanded.

"That's right," Andrew said shortly.

"They tell me you know a lot more than you say about this flying saucer, or whatever it is."

"Do they, now?" Andrew replied. "And who may they be?"

The man shrugged. "A dozen people have tabulated reports. On your property we found evidence of a crash of some kind. Neighbor saw your track yesterday with some queer junk on it. Better open up that barn, laddie."

Andrew shook his head. He moved automatically, planting his back against the locked door, watching the other two men jump from the car in response to a signal. They were mean-faced men, and, though their hands were hidden in coat pockets, each moved as if he were advancing in hostile terrain.

"Who—who are you?" Andrew asked.

"Security, bub. McKinnon's the name. Want to check? Here are my credentials."

He reached into his breast pocket, stepping closer as he did so. There may have been no significance in this, or in the fact that he passed the papers from his right to his left hand before extending them—but for Andrew, already bending forward, the danger-bells were ringing. Why would a man want his right hand free just then?

Andrew pivoted, left shoulder low. The blow grazed his face. He kept going down, turning slightly so that the knee which drove at his groin crashed solidly into corded muscle

Then he had the man—both hands locked under the raised leg, his own lean strength uncoiling with the full power of his back and shoulders.

McKinnon uttered a short, barking cry as he described a semicircle in the air. The thick dust squirted in all directions when his back hit the ground. He lay there, momentarily paralyzed—and the two others closed in silently.

Andrew watched them, his body tense against expected metal. These were no Security men. Gangsters? Subversives? It didn't matter. In ten seconds nothing would matter any more. He set his back to the door. Before him was a vision of a thin elfin face, with translucent green eyelids which would never open now. It was as well for a man to know what he died for.

"Hold it! Another step an' ye'll 'ave one head between yer!"

Dan Russell had the situation in hand. His whiskers quivered wrathfully as he surveyed the intruders over the scarred barrels of his shotgun. He was ready to shoot, and his intention made itself known over fifty feet of morning air.

"We got nothin' ter sell or give away," Dan went on. "Git now—while yer can walk! Git!"

They went, walking with a controlled steadiness, their eyes like dark holes in paper. The car slewed across the dirt road and went pounding back toward Collinston.

"Thanks, Dan. That might have been bad, if you hadn't—" Andrew let the words drift.

The veteran spat. "They're not beat. They're off fer reinforcements. Don't kid yerself, boy. Yer better do now what yer shoulda done last night—get the law in."

Andrew went into the homestead kitchen, stooped over the couch where the little man lay. The Geiger-count was up again, and there was a warm, living greenness about the indefinable skin which stretched so tightly over that unknown bone structure. But it was not scientific curiosity which prompted Andrew Dexter's words.

"Sorry, Rumpelstiltskin," he said softly. "I thought I could keep this to ourselves—give you a chance to recover, and maybe get off again. You don't look like a desperate character to me—only a sort of shipwrecked mariner, entitled to what help we can give you. But you picked the wrong world to crash on, fella, and the wrong people know about it."

As he straightened up again, Andrew could have sworn that the jade eyelids flickered, momentarily exposing jet-black eyes fixed upon him with feverish intensity. He went hastily through to the telephone.

His conversation with the Federal people

was long and at times baffling. In the course of two hours he met suspicion, incredulity and blank amazement: Finally he managed to punch in his story and his single request, which was for protection. He hung up with two impressions: McKinnon and his friends were not from Security, but the information which had brought them to Deneven Downs may well have been.

THAT afternoon another car came whirling up the road from Collinston. Through his binoculars, Andrew verified that it was the local police car, and Dan regretfully laid aside his shotgun. In the car were Sergeant Munro, an Army major, and two civilians with leather briefcases.

When he met them at the gate, he quickly learned who was in charge. The senior bluesuit was Captain Clelland, a thin, hawk-faced fellow with piercing eyes and an air of command. The other civilian, introduced as Mr. J. B. Frost, and the major, seemed to take their cue from him.

"I might say we checked up on you, Dexter," was Clelland's opening gambit. "Your record wasn't the kind we expected. I mean—your war record was distinguished, and you are well vouched for in scientific circles."

"Not a crackpot, eh?" Andrew suggested.

"Well, we get a lot of these stories, you know. They don't make sense—"

"Somebody made sense of them, in quick time." Andrew told him. "You have a leak there you might get around to plugging some day. I hope you can guarantee us protection."

"Protection?" Clelland looked blank for a moment. "Er—let's look at the evidence, shall we?"

Andrew led them first to the barn, where the machine, impossibly small and fragile, sat poised between two sawhorses. The major touched it, stepped back hastily when the whole fabric stirred.

"You don't mean to say that anything as flimsy as this could actually carry people?" he said incredulously.

Andrew shrugged. "I made it myself, for the publicity. Got tired of my own company here."

He led them inside. They stood for a while before the still form of the saucer pilot, and all that could be heard was the soft "Fer Gawd's sake!" of Sergeant Munro.

The major shook his head. "I don't believe it!" he said.

"Just a bad dream of mine," Andrew told him. "But this is a sickroom, gentlemen. You have your verification, and you can phone it from here. The sooner we have that protective cordon laid on, the happier I'll be."

Captain Clelland appeared vaguely uncomfortable. "Sorry, Dexter," he said. "The major may be right. My orders are to remove man and machine for examination."

Andrew gasped. "Remove them? Where to?"

"The pilot will go to our headquarters for observation and screening, the plane to Air Force Headquarters. It's certainly not one of ours, and if it is really genuine there is a possibility it came from the Other Side, you know."

"If you mean from the Outside, how right you are!"

"I don't mean that!" Clelland snorted. "Surely the cold war, and Korea, haven't escaped your notice! Why, this might be the very thing—"

"Nonsense!" stormed Andrew. "The fellow is in no condition to be moved. It's a miracle he's lived so long. I won't have him separated from his machine!"

"And why not?" The captain's voice was cold.

"Something's holding him in a coma. See here, in his suit. There's a socket, and no wires to fit. Maybe he needs some sort of energy to move on this earth—something supplied from the plane. See?"

"Our instructions are to take him," Clelland said. "Lend a hand, Sergeant. He shouldn't be very heavy."

Andrew put out a restraining arm. "First, I'd like to see your warrant. You've got one, of course."

"Warrant? Certainly not! I have my orders, from the chief himself. Is that official enough?"

But now Sergeant Munro stepped forward, transferring his eyes from the green manikin to the captain, in some perplexity. "They'll do, sir. Just show me the paper."

"But, damn it, man—they were verbal orders!"

There was relief in the sergeant's shrug. "This is private property. We're breakin' the law if we remove anythin' without Andy Dexter's permission, which we haven't got."

"I'll fix this!" grated the captain.

He disappeared into the hallway. They heard the clatter of the telephone, and his clipped accents gradually rising. Silence, and then more clattering. Captain Clelland reappeared, his eyes blazing.

"The line is out!" he snapped. "More of your work?"

"You know it couldn't be," Andrew said. "More likely our friends of this morning."

"And you still refuse?"

Andrew nodded. "What I said still applies."

Captain Clelland beckoned to the other government men and walked with them into

the yard. Within two minutes the car, with the major and Sergeant Munro aboard, was racing back toward Collinston. Clelland and Frost came back into the kitchen, half-smiling.

"We'll have a warrant by morning," he said. "Until then, Frost and I will keep you company—unless you object."

"Not at all," Andrew told him. "I asked for protection, and I've got it. About time for supper, eh?"

But he knew that this was no solution at all. The gangsters, or whatever they were, were outside, and the government men were in, but whatever way the argument went, the little man and his machine would be lost forever by morning.

And why should he worry? Andrew could find no clear reply. Maybe he was sorry for this waif of space. Maybe he wanted for himself the honor of restoring the little man to life. Maybe he wished to test-fly the machine, as he had test-flown jets. He shook his head. It wasn't any one of these, and it was greater than the sum of all of them. There was a concept of freedom here, the freedom not merely of man but of the whole vast swirling universe. . . .

He grasped at the idea unavailingly as the hours ticked by. It was big and blinding and golden—something the Greeks had for a while, perhaps, and lost—something that must be found again. Often he peered across at the thin green face, or awoke, startled, to find Clelland or Frost watching him.

Then, in the moon-brightness before dawn, it came. Dan's shotgun boomed twice from the doorway. He could hear the old man roaring curses, and a single answering cry. He snatched his service rifle from the wall and dashed out, tangling with Clelland and Frost on the way.

The barn door was half open, and near it a man dragged himself toward the darkness. Feet pounded out on the road. Behind him Clelland was shouting, "Come on! Cover the barn! They're after the plane!"

At the corner of the barn he drew a quick bead, then recognized Dan. A bullet slapped the wall above his head. He went down next to Frost, the impeccable government secretary type, who had undergone a bewildering transformation. Now the colorless little man was radiating action, his lips drawn back in a fighting grin as he pumped Browning slugs into the gloom.

Clelland was in the barn doorway. "Beginning to believe you, Dexter," he said cheerfully. "You did need a cordon—about company strength." Dust spurted in his face, and he spat. "Oh, well—they haven't got it yet!"

It came to Andrew that they were all

grouped about the barn, leaving the manikin unguarded. He started back across the yard. At once, bright flashes broke from four separate points in the darkness. One bullet tugged at his sleeve, and another passed close above him with a crack that sent him sprawling back into cover.

"Don't be a fool, man!" Frost snapped. "They're after the plane. They don't know about the pilot."

ANDREW lay there thinking, putting himself in the place of the attackers. Supposing he was determined to get into that barn, balked only by a few men shic'led by darkness. He would need a diversion, and light . . .

Then he saw it. First it was a rosy glow behind the homestead, then a bursting of yellow tongues of flame eating at the dry weather-boards. McKinnon and his men also had initiative. There would be plenty of light soon.

"The pilot! He'll be burned to a crisp!"

Andrew had scarcely gained his feet before a tackle dropped him hard on the ground again. Clelland was holding him, pinning

him down, shouting to him not to be a fool. The firing started again. He could not hear the shots over the roar of the flames, but the bullets came in like driving rain. Clelland, suddenly white-faced, clasped a red-seeping thigh. Frost collapsed slowly on his face.

The homestead was an inferno. As Andrew watched, the roof crashed in and the pale heat-waves danced thirty feet high. He could see clearly now through the gutted walls into what had been the kitchen—

A tiny figure was pushing knee-deep through the embers, shoudering aside the falling beams. It walked unsteadily, as if recovering from a long sickness, but there was purpose in its steady driving progress. Now it had breached the remnants of the wall and was outside. The ruddiness of fire was in the green of its metal.

"Over here!" Andrew shouted. "Over here!"

The strange elfin shape moved out into the yard, shuffling as if the tiny legs carried an immense burden. Midway across the yard, outside the heat of the fire, it stopped. The rifles were firing again. Andrew saw sparks leap from the green shoulder. The little man had been hit. . . .

Andrew was up and running, caring nothing for the lead whining about him. He swept the tiny figure into his arms, then gasped with dismay at the heat of it. The inflexible skin burned his fingers and singed the fabric of his coat. Weaving from side to side, he managed to keep going until he again passed through the door of the barn.

He set his burden down.

The black eyes were open, and the grin was impish, though there was pain in it. "Thank you," said the saucer pilot in a voice that was the rustle of dry leaves. "The heat—passes. Since the landing I have been helpless, my brain efficient, my body paralyzed with cold. On Dromu, we have two thousand of your degrees—"

"Quick. What can I do?" asked Andrew.

The voice strengthened. "Inside the machine, left of the column, a plug and cord. My heat-suit—"

Andrew caught the manikin up. Everything was oddly still. The fire was burning low, but there were bright streaks in the eastern sky. Across the yard men came walking, with weapons in their hands. Near him something stirred, and he recognized Clelland's drawn face.

"Get him away if you can!" grated the Security man. "They're from the Other Side. They mustn't get him!"

"But—how are you? What will happen?"

"I'll get away, and drag poor old Frost clear. You're all right, Dexter. I'll vouch for you. Now—go!"

Andrew boosted the little green man through the hatchway into the machine. A short trip into the gloom brought him what he sought—his old parachute pack and harness, hanging on their accustomed peg. He threw them before him into the plane. Then, scrabbling on the floor beside the column, he found the heat-plug and connected it to the little man's suit. Then he turned his attention to the controls.

Hunched uncomfortably on the tiny seat, he buckled on his parachute harness—a purely reflex action from his test-pilot days. Through the sighting-ports he could see the men come on, McKinnon with a burp-gun, the others with rifles and automatics. Their shots made the machine stir slightly on its tandem wheels.

He studied the buttons under his fingers on the wheel. The connections were plain enough. There were vertical and stern tubes, He sucked in his breath and pressed.

The acceleration crushed him downward, driving his chin almost against his knees. His arms and legs were impossibly heavy, and the sight drained from his eyes. When he could see again the barn was gone from around him.

He moved the column slightly, and sunlight blazed across his wings. He saw the earth still dark below, but up here was a heady brightness.

"Whew!" he gasped. "Ten G's in reverse! Wonder how she'd go in level flight?"

"I'll take over now, friend."

The voice, deep and resonant, came from near his hunched knees. The little man was a glowing emerald jewel, radiating heat. His long fingers brushed Andrew's from the wheel. A gentle pressure, and he had appropriated the seat.

"I was afraid for you," the pilot said. "A life for a life, as you say. These machines are made for us, not you. That big soft body—it would tear to pieces before the rockets developed half thrust, char to ashes with the friction-heat."

Andrew blinked at him. Such a competent little fellow, yet so helpless only a few minutes ago.

"You can stand those things?"

"I am from Dromu," the little man said simply. "You call it Jupiter. Vast bulk, thick, turbulent atmosphere, heat which keeps many things in a gaseous or molten state. We can stand—much. My name, by the way, is Janni."

"And you are an explorer?"

This seemed to amuse Janni very much. He sat awhile, fingering the controls and gazing through the forward sighting-port in an attempt to conceal his grin, before he replied. But when he spoke, his voice was sober and serious.

"We of Dromu are no strangers to this place. We were here when your people wore skins and fought the sabretooth. We have been spectators at most of your false starts, and we shall be sad when you fail again. Many times we have hoped to welcome you as brothers."

"But in all that time you haven't been seen?"

"Think, Andrew," the little man said softly. "What nation of your strange mixture has not its legends of tiny people, of gnomes, pixies, djinns, leprechauns, afreets, and a hundred other names? Why, I have heard that your folks once worshipped the blast-circles of our ships as fairy rings!"

A sudden thought struck Andrew, and he put it clumsily into words, "And you have never thought of invasion? You aren't planning to move in on Earth?"

Janni shrugged his narrow shoulders. "What have you that is worth taking? Your most precious metal is soft, useful only for mending your teeth. Your best metal decays into formless oxide. Neither would stand the fires of

Dromu. And what troublesome neighbors you would make—so arrogant, so narrow, so pugnacious! You can conceive of no other form of life than that which resides in a lump of impure carbon. Your scientists have proved we cannot exist—a pity to contradict them!"

Andrew laughed. "Not interested—and yet you speak English very well. I wonder, Janni!"

The mobile lips compressed into a thin line. "And there is the old Earthan suspicion, my friend. We of Dromu are of the solar system, and we have found out what we could about other forms of life in that system. Our dossier on the human race is quite detailed. The learning of an Earth-tongue is compulsory in our schools, as also is that of Martian—a barbarous language. Our Earth-tongue may, of course, be Russian, or Chinese. I was fortunate in the midst of my misfortune, Andrew, for it might have been much more difficult for me."

This was too much for Andrew. "If all this is true, why didn't your invisible friends rescue you?" he asked.

Janni touched the rocket-buttons gently. "You are a good man, Andrew, so you live. Do you think my people would have allowed your friends or your enemies to examine this ship?"

"Your people? Where are they?" Andrew was openly scornful.

Janni reached for the lens-sight, adjusted it carefully, and gestured to Andrew to look into the finder. He did so, and gasped. The air before them was alive with flashing discs, dipping and swerving in a broad path which stretched like a long green-silver bar across the curve of Earth and outward into space.

"Why can't we see this?" Andrew asked.

"Normally, with the speed of full flight, they are outside the limited range of your vision—below the red, or above the violet. They deflect no light-rays you can see, and so register no color. It is only the slow-flying ones you notice—or the casualties, as I was."

"But why are there so many? What are they doing?"

"We are a nation of traders," Janni said. "Other planets—Mars is one—do business with us. You note that we bypass the Earth."

ANDREW watched the patterns of strange craft forming and reforming as the machine swung in a great arc across the face of a continent at a speed many times that of sound. He was not willing to believe—yet.

"Not all of you," he remarked dryly. "There's a group of discs over that city, another over the desert to the south. What are they—sight-seers?"

Janni did not answer for a long time, during which the machine completed its circle and headed back the way it had come. Andrew wondered whether the little man was having trouble compressing his thoughts into the restrictive syllables of Earth-language. Then Janni spoke, very slowly.

"As I said, we, too, are of the solar system. Just over eight of your years ago, a mushroom-shaped cloud rose out of that very desert you saw a few minutes back. It was a warning to us to prepare to save ourselves. When you divided the atom and made of it a bomb, you reached your greatest height—and plumbed your lowest depth. We sent out patrols—the Eyes of Dromu.

"The Council was prepared to act when the next atom bomb went down in anger on a target. Because of what you people have been in the past, because of what it is in your power to be, that decision has been deferred again and again. But the patience of the Council is near its end. They sent me, one of their number, to study the situation and perhaps give the signal. A mechanic's error in failing to seal the hatch let the icy atmosphere of your planet into the ship, and I lost consciousness—"

In the long pause which followed, Andrew commented lamely. "What you saw wouldn't help us. Suspicion, greed, murder—men fighting over your body and the plane."

Janni's eyes were full of a brooding wonder.

"Helpless, paralyzed, and freezing in the terrestrial cold, I found pity. Pity, Andrew, for us who have never needed it. I found men who would risk their lives and honor to protect a nameless wanderer. I found loyalty—love, if you like—"

"Others would have done the same," Andrew said.

Janni brought the ship down quite low, so that the blue-green blur of Earth resolved itself into fields, and weblike scars of roads, and the lacy indentations of a coastline. Suddenly Andrew recognized the pattern of Deneven Downs, the gutted outline of the homestead, and the exploded wreckage of the barn. Cars were double-parked in the yards and on the road outside, and the place was swarming with people. As the disc hovered, he knew that they were pointing, running.

"I take your word for that, Andrew," said Janni. "for I know you honestly believe it. The Council is not ruthless. It will not destroy while there is hope. Because of what happened down there, my report will be different. Go now, Andrew. The hatch is open, and you have your parachute. Tell them what I say. It is not too much to hope that some of them will believe." ■ ■ ■