

PLANET STORIES



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THE FATAL THIRD

By THEODORE L. THOMAS

Peace had had its fling in the 21st century. Now was the time for violence . . . and rugged Third Officer Webster . . . and the miserable Uranians who knew not what they unloosed.

HANFORD WEBSTER, third officer of the space ship *Polaris*, was afflicted with what would have been known in the twentieth century as a first class jinx. However, more about the jinx later. He wasn't thinking about that right now where he was on duty standing his trick in the astrogation chamber. The fleet was nearing its destination—Uranus. And then it happened.

One instant the ten-ship Earth fleet was streaking through space. The next moment nine of the ships broke up into small pieces, actually disintegrating there in his visi-plate before the bulging eyes of Mr. Webster. Twisted fragments of metal formed a cloud in space and began to fall in a gentle arc toward the planet Uranus some fifty thousand miles away. It was a hideous cloud, liberally sprinkled with frozen bits of human beings who had been the pride of the space fleet only a split second before.

The tenth ship almost didn't get away. It was flying lookout position four hundred miles behind and above the main fleet. Even so, it got a severe jolt—like smashing into a solid wall. If anybody except Third Officer Hanford Webster had been at the controls God only knew what would have happened.

Third Webster saw the whole thing in the visi-plate just as his own ship gave a mighty lurch. A lesser man might have blacked out under the shock. But Webster kept his faculties. Almost automatically he kicked the *Polaris* in a wide circle away from the tiny ship that had put out from Uranus. And at the same time he started to check the damage.

"First," he called over the intercom. "First."

No answer.

"Second," he called,

"Here," came a weak answer. "What happened?"

"I don't know yet, but we're the only ship left. Find the First and come up."

"Okay."

One after another Webster checked the crew. No one dead or even seriously hurt. Fourteen men had been knocked out. There were a few sprains and pulled tendons and at least one bruised soul. Even disaster seems to have a sense of humor. The Chief Machinist had been sitting in the head when the blow struck. They found him there helpless, thrust deep into the toilet, wildly cursing.

The First arrived at the Control Room. The *Polaris* by this time was heading swiftly back to Earth.

"Have you warned Earth?" asked the First.

"Not yet," said the Third, "I've just finished checking. We're in good shape."

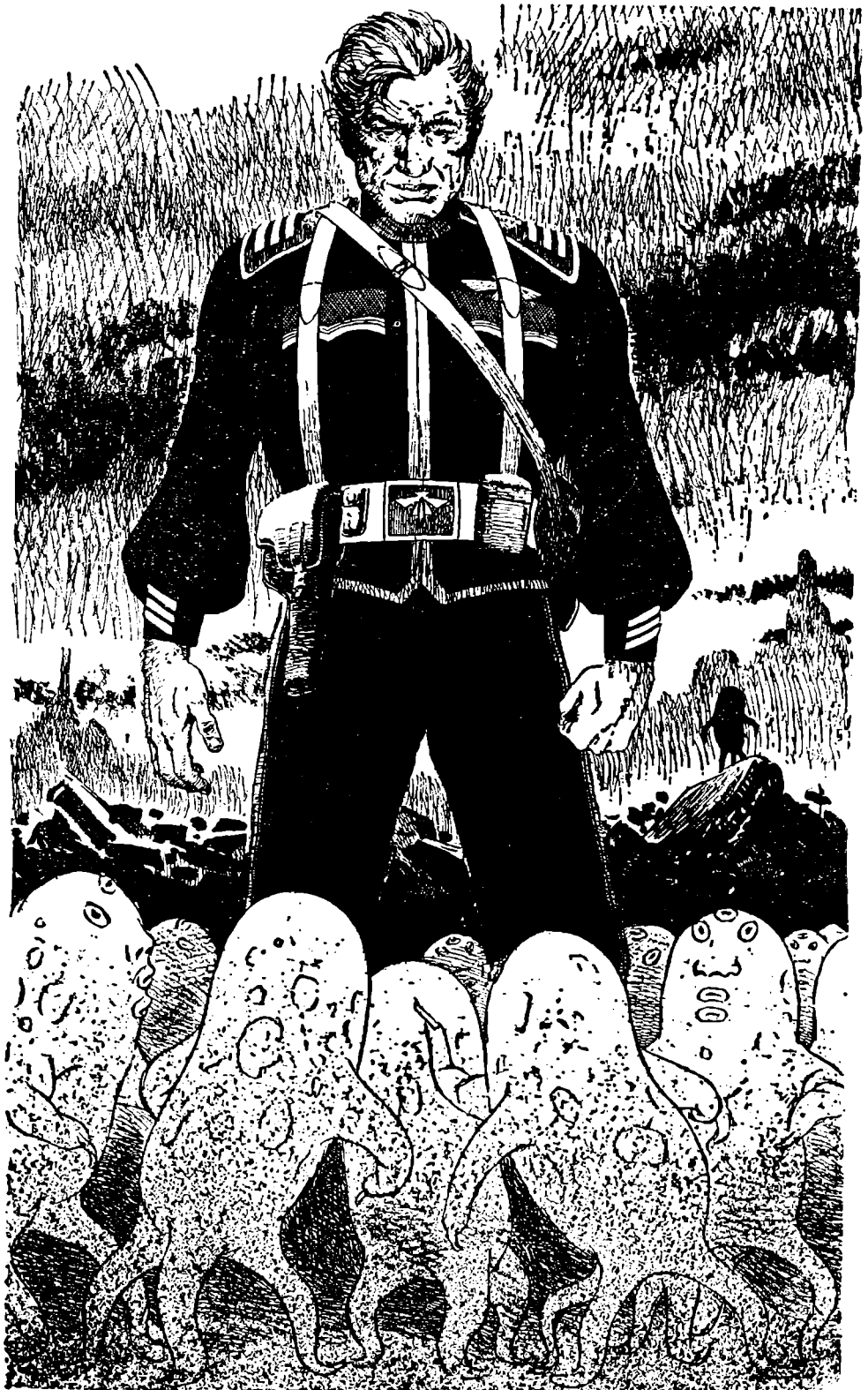
"I'll tell them then," said the First. "What a surprise this is going to be. It will upset everything."

And so the call went out to Earth. The Uranians had destroyed an Earth Fleet at 0622 Greenwich on April 13, 2072.

Right after the *Polaris* grounded, its officers were summoned to appear before the World Court. All the officials were there. Every branch of science was well-represented.

Third Officer Webster led off. He minutely described what he had seen. He explained how the *Polaris* had acted. But it had happened so fast that his description was sketchy. No one was able to figure out how the Uranians had done it. Webster's best guess was:

"It looked like the ships were yanked off their course and just broke up under the



strain—like a strong magnetic field suddenly appeared in the middle of them. But that couldn't be."

The others agreed. Scientists long ago had found that things like death rays and peculiar beams could never exist. It was impossible to get enough energy in an extended beam to have any effect on anything.

Several hypotheses were proposed and rapidly shattered. The question of what had done it reached a blank wall.

But even more puzzling was the question of *why*. The Uranians were utterly incapable of bearing the malice necessary to start a war. They were as detached and unemotional as a rock.

Again the Court got nowhere.

Doctor Trant stood up.

"I don't think we can separate the two questions, *how* and *why*. So I recommend that we play back all the tapes we've made since we first contacted Uranus. Most of us know the whole story already, but with all of us listening together we might pick up something we've missed."

IT WAS a good idea. The Court decided to start the recital the following day in the Great Auditorium; it would take until then to get everything organized. In the meantime the scanners continued to watch Uranus for signs of any hostile move.

That night the Spacemen's Bar was unusually crowded. It was mostly due to the Uranus situation, but not entirely. Third Officer Hanford Webster had been a Third Officer for six months now. He was due to pop again anytime and get busted. And when he did the Spacemen didn't want to miss it.

Han Webster was a monster of a man, huge and ugly. He had a face like a bottle of warts topped with a great shock of brown hair. He stood six feet seven, barefoot, and weighed in at two-hundred and sixty-three pounds, plus or minus five. Yet there wasn't an ounce of fat on him. He had hands like two bales of hay and legs that were as big as most men's waist. Despite his bulk he moved like a cat; he was beautifully coordinated.

None of those that knew him ever realized he was ugly. His quick laugh and ready friendliness seemed to change his warty complexion into one of peaches and cream. He

was probably the most popular man in the whole select group of Spacemen. There was only one thing wrong with him; he never took the trouble to avoid trouble.

Webster rose quickly through the ranks once he got out of Space School. His mind was as alert as his body so he outdistanced all his peers; the seniority system of promotion had long since been outmoded. A man rose on his own merits.

Webster had been a Third Officer only three months when he ran into his first little difficulty. He was strolling down the center of the street when a parade headed by a band started coming the other way. A burly Spacc Patrolman kept just ahead of the band clearing the way. When he saw Webster he called out:

"Out of the way, Third."

Somehow that didn't set right with Webster, so he just stopped and looked at the Patrolman. The Patrolman got annoyed and made a fatal mistake. He laid his hands on Webster. The next instant he sailed through the air and landed at the feet of the crowd that was beginning to form at the curb.

Webster started to leave but by that time the Drum Major was up to him. The Drum Major didn't think Webster was moving fast enough so he gave him a little shove. Then things began to happen.

An assessment of the damages later showed that in the battle of Webster versus the Band, Webster was the victor. It took a hack saw to get the trombone player out of the wrappings of his trombone. Several other players were wearing their instruments too. And Third Officer Webster became Sixth Officer Webster.

But you can't keep a good man down. In three months he was up again.

The second incident wasn't his fault, at all. He was leaving the Post Delicatessen one night after buying cold cuts. As he approached his runabout he saw someone fiddling with the controls, apparently about to drive off in it. With a roar he heaved his package at the dimly-seen figure. The package burst open from the jet-like power of his huge hand and various objects sped toward the intruder like a charge of buckshot. One of them found its mark. But Webster wasn't so proud of his aim a moment later when he pounced on the man. Webster

had conked himself an Admiral. The Admiral struggled groggily to his feet. He had been hit squarely in the mouth with three feet of whistling liverwurst. It took the medics two days to make the Admiral a new set of teeth. But it only took the Board fifteen minutes to make Webster a Fifth.

It was along about then that Webster's friends began kidding him about never getting beyond Third. He didn't mind—not too much. And the next time he got up to Third he kept an eye on himself. So did half the Fleet. But it didn't do any good.

He was standing at the bar one night chatting with a few friends. He'd had a couple of drinks, but nothing much. None of the Spacemen drank much. Anyhow a group of eleven men gathered behind him and began needling him. He good-naturedly parried their remarks for awhile. Then one of them called him a cave man.

Webster's great hands were resting on the bar. His muscles tightened. He spun around and charged right through his tormentors. Since he happened to be carrying the top of the bar at the time, the fight ended right there. But the Board took a dim view of a man that destroyed property. So Webster was reduced to Seventh.

There was no doubt about it. There was a jinx riding on the Third Officership as far as Webster was concerned. He couldn't overcome it. Everytime he got there those two drag-buckets he used for hands would push him back. And there was no way to overcome it. He was living in the wrong kind of world.

WEBSTER was a man built for violent action. If he could have joined Count Raymond IV on the First Crusade the other eight probably wouldn't have been necessary. Or if he could have stood with the Housecarles at Hastings that October day in 1066, Harold would have been king of England, not William. Webster should have lived in the days when a brilliant man with a powerful body could carve himself out an empire if he wanted to.

But he didn't. Instead he lived in a world that hadn't seen a war in over a hundred years. Violence was dead. Even sports calling for physical contact had vanished. Weapons

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were unknown except in museums. The only competition to be found anywhere was in such sports as track or swimming or tumbling. Webster excelled in those but it wasn't enough. Something deep in his nature called for more. And unfortunately the call always seemed to come when Webster's superiors were considering moving him from a Third to a Second. But after surveying the wreckage they always changed their minds and moved him the other way. Webster was a man born a thousand years too late. And the only place he could even begin to use his talents was with the Space Fleet. He was almost happy there.

The whole Fleet was rooting for him when he got his Third for the fourth time. The seventeen-hundred men that manned Earth's seventeen space ships were all behind Webster to help him over the fatal barrier. Even those that bore the scars of his violence were all for him. He was too good a man to dislike.

But Webster's problem shrank to almost nothing after the disaster that destroyed over half the Space Fleet and killed nine hundred of the world's finest men. The Spacemen were in a murderous mood. All of them had lost good friends. They were a closely-knit body and there wasn't a man left among them that wasn't ready to blast Uranus right out of the system.

But with what? There was no such thing as a war weapon any more. Of course it would be possible to assemble one of the old lithium-hydride bombs, but there didn't seem to be any chance of getting close enough to Uranus to do any good—not with the new weapon the Uranians had. There was nothing to do but wait and see what turned up at the Court tomorrow. So the Spacemen milled around the Spacemen's Bar that night, grumbling and restless and keeping half an eye on Webster.

THE recital started early. The auditorium was packed. Many of those there had been on Uranus and knew what the Uranians were like. The recital was old stuff to them. They heard how the rocket ships had successively explored Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn and found them all lifeless, even sporeless. They heard how the ships approached Uranus with no lively hope of

finding anything worth while—of everyone's surprise to discover an advanced civilization flourishing there. They heard the transcribed voice describe what the Uranians looked like:

"... about a hundred and fifty centimeters tall. They have three legs and three arms each composed of three segments of massive bone surrounded by a heavy layer of fat and leatherlike skin. Each limb terminates in a small prehensile finger. The body measures forty-five centimeters in diameter on the average. The top portion of the body has three eyes, three nostrils, and two mouths. One mouth is used for water, the other for food. In appearance, the Uranians seem outlandish to Earthly eyes. They walk . . ."

The experienced men smiled. Outlandish, he says. They looked like a three-armed watermelon sitting upright on a three-legged stool. A man could drive himself nuts trying to keep track of how they walked. Two feet were always on the ground, the third one moving forward. Each foot took its own turn. The end result was that each Uranian seemed to have dozens of feet when he was in motion. And he could change direction with the startling suddenness of an ant. His body wouldn't turn at all; he'd just suddenly begin moving off at a tangent.

"... no language as we know it. They communicate with one another in short bursts of sound which verge on the supersonic. We understand their speech only by means of instruments which graph the duration and pitch of the sounds they make. As a consequence our intercourse with them is limited. We have been able . . ."

Frank Wadden smiled to himself, remembering the endless hours on Uranus trying to make sense out of the shrill bleats of the Uranians. Wadden's Group Leader had been the man that finally found the key. Like all keys, it had been simple. The shrill bleats were a code. Each bleat of a certain pitch and duration conveyed a concept, a word picture, in much the same way that the Chinese language did. But the human voice couldn't reach the high range where the Uranians conversed, so sound machines had to be used. And they were far from satisfactory.

"... disease among them for fifty thousand years. They now do very little medical

research since, in the absence of disease, none is required. Those suffering from organic malfunctions are either cured by surgery or exterminated. There is no question but that their medical skill is of a very high order. They have arrived at a point which we will probably never be . . ."

Doctor Trask snorted. Yeah, they were great doctors all right. No wonder. With no animals to experiment on they simply used each other. When a Uranian doctor needed a guinea pig he merely stepped outside his laboratory and snagged the first passerby. And many of their diseases in the old days had been wiped out by killing off all the victims. Medical students learned anatomy by cutting open their fellow-citizens alive. New foods and liquids were tested by observing the reactions of those who swallowed them. Yes, sir. Their medical skill was of a very high order.

"... only possible because their nervous system does not register pain. In fact, their nervous system is such that they are completely emotionless. There is no possibility for a Uranian to feel any of the Earthly emotions such as love, hate, rage, or pride. They approach the status of vegetation in that respect. They . . ."

That was something that had always puzzled Johnson. He couldn't understand how it was possible for a reasoning creature to be such a cold fish. He remembered the day he had landed the *Vaga*. Just before the ship settled to the surface three Uranians had blithely strolled into the rocket's blast and fried themselves. Johnson had been horror-struck. But it didn't bother the other Uranians in the vicinity. They calmly disposed of their countrymen's cinders as though they were throwing away a burned-out match. They were completely disinterested in the whole incident.

BOLTON, too, had faced that disinterestedness, but from a different angle. Bolton had been with the Group that tried to find out if the Uranians had wanted anything that the Earth could supply. He had tried to show the Uranians something about Earth foods and Earth science. But the Uranians weren't interested. Often right in the middle of a difficult conversation the Uranian would just up and walk off.

It wasn't that he was annoyed. He wasn't capable of being annoyed. It was just that he'd thought of something better to do. It was frustrating as hell.

"... science as advanced as our own along a few narrow channels. Their rocket fuel is very similar to our Ozonile but they have never used it to explore anything outside their planet. Their IR scanners too are strikingly similar to ours. In the discovery of the Kant Alloy though they have surpassed us. A pellet made out of this alloy will attain a high velocity when it is immersed in a magnetic field. The velocity has been known to reach the same velocity as our space ships, namely one-ninth the speed of light. Unfortunately only a very small pellet can be accelerated in this manner.

"Temperature plays a very important role here. The Kant Alloy will not accelerate except under the extremely frigid conditions as they exist on Uranus or in space. Our latest information shows that the Uranians have been making attempts to increase the velocity of the pellets. Our magnetic shields will still protect our men and ships, however, no matter how fast the pellets travel. We need not worry about future carelessness from the way the Uranians use the Kant Alloy. They . . ."

Grizzled, gray-haired, Don Hedge closed his eyes. He had been aboard the *Altair* the time the Uranians got careless with the Kant pellet. He'd never forget it. He had been standing by the fuel pumps as the *Altair* prepared to land on Uranus. Suddenly the whole ship reeled from a tremendous blow. Concussion stretched out half the crew. The scream of escaping air filled the ship. Only the quick action of two crew members saved them from asphyxiation. Everybody aboard thought they'd been hit with a tiny meteor. But as soon as they got down to Uranus several Uranians came over and began taking measurements of the two holes in the *Altair*. It was so unusual for them to take an interest in Earth ships that the crew got suspicious. A few laborious questions brought it out. Oh, sure. The Uranians were conducting a little experiment—had to find out what the little pellet did to an Earth ship. There was a stunned moment's hesitation; then the Earth crew jumped them.

That fight brought two factors to light. One; a Uranian would fight when he was personally attacked by a foreigner. Two; a Uranian was just about the equal of an Earthmen encased in a space suit. Don Hedge remembered that fight proudly. He'd done well for a young fellow in spite of the difficulty of coping with three arms. He would really have fixed his Uranian if Jones hadn't stepped in with that spanner wrench.

The Uranians forgot about the fight as soon as it was over. They didn't hold a grudge; they felt no malice. But every Earth ship and every space suit was modified to carry a gentle magnetic field over its entire surface. And there was never any more trouble with the Uranians and their scientific experiments.

The recital droned on.

THIRD WEBSTER stirred restlessly, not listening. Somewhere here lay the answer. Somewhere mixed up in the Kant Alloy and magnetic fields lay the solution they were all looking for. It couldn't be a ray; science had shown that to be impossible. Or had it? The Uranians were good along certain lines. It would be just like them to pop up with the impossible.

The recital ended toward evening. Immediately Ashdown's clean deep voice cut in:

"Gentlemen. One thing seems obvious. Whatever it is they've discovered, they are only testing it out. They are not trying to destroy us. If that's the case we need only wait until they get enough data, then it will be safe to go near them. It might be safe now. We could send a remote-controlled gig from one of our ships to see if they down it."

The argument started. Some wanted to send bombs. Others wanted to wait and see what happened. But a majority wanted to follow Ashdown's suggestion even though it might mean the loss of one of the eight remaining ships. A vote was taken. Ashdown won.

At reveille the next morning volunteers were called for from among the Spacemen. Every man was ready. So the Board sat down to pick the crew.

Admiral Cantwell was to go as First Officer. There was some discussion about the

Second but he was soon picked. When it came to Third the Board didn't even have to think. Webster. But as his name was being written down one of the Board remembered something. He leaned forward and hesitantly asked Admiral Cantwell:

"Is Webster all right with you, Admiral?"

"Of course. Why not? He's the best we've got."

"I know, but—well. You and he had a run-in so . . ."

"That's done with," said the Admiral. "I shouldn't have been handling his runabout anyhow." He stopped a moment, then went on. "You know. We could clean up this whole situation if we could only get Webster down on Uranian soil, say right in the middle of Central City. Damn. Can you imagine what would happen?" He fingered his mouth reminiscently.

The others tried to imagine it, and couldn't. So they got back to work listing the crew.

At dawn the *Sirius* took off. A hundred thousand miles short of Uranus she swung into an orbit around the planet. That was close enough.

Two hours later the remote-controlled gig was ready. All hands watched it flash away from the mother ship, gathering speed every millisecond, set on a course that would carry it within fifty miles of the rim of Uranus.

Webster sat tensely at a visi-scope in the *Sirius*. Maybe he'd see something that would crystalize the formless thought within him. More than ever he felt he had the answer right at his fingertips. But he couldn't drag it out.

He saw a Uranian ship rise to meet the gig. The two drew closer together. And when they were about ten-thousand miles apart the gig suddenly crumbled. There was no explosion, no sign of a ray, nothing. The gig just broke into little pieces.

An audible gasp went up from the crew of the *Sirius*.

Webster heard the Admiral and the Second talking behind him.

"I didn't see a thing. Did you?"

"No, sir."

"How about you, Webster?"

"No, sir," said Webster, turning around.

"But they're getting something across.

There's got to be something there."

"Yes, but even our spectroscopes didn't show anything. I don't know. This beats me." He shook his head. "Radio Earth and tell them about it."

Webster did so. He handed Earth's answer to Admiral Cantwell. He grunted when he read it.

"Return to Earth, huh. This has been some mission. Well, we've got to obey it. Take her home."

Webster gave a last try for the answer. His mighty body was rigid with the tension he was under. But it wouldn't come. He was beaten. He gave a big sigh and sat back and relaxed as the *Sirius* swung around toward Earth.

Then it hit him. He had it. He leaped up with a yell that shook the panelboards. The Admiral and Second jumped a foot in the air looking wildly around.

"I know how to get through," shouted Webster. "Admiral," he calmed down a little, "Let me have the other gig. I'll take it down. I can get through. I know . . ." He broke off and headed for the door.

"Come back here," roared the Admiral. "Dammit, man, you scared ten years off me. Settle down now. Tell me what's this all about?"

Everybody calmed down.

"I THINK I know how they do it," said Webster. "If you'll let me take the gig I can soon find out without risking the *Sirius*."

"You're crazy," broke in the Second. "Try it with a remote-controlled gig. It'll only take a few hours to rig it. There's no sense in your going."

Webster ignored him.

"May I try it, sir?"

The Admiral was silent, looking at the towering figure of Webster. He spoke softly, half to himself:

"It's a helluva world when a man can't risk his own neck trying out some fool idea." Then louder. "No. I can't let you. Tell us about it first so I can see if it's any good."

Webster shook his head.

"I'll tell you about it over the radio, sir. Then you can follow me in the *Sirius*. That is—if I'm right. If I'm not, it won't matter."

"In that case, forget it," said the Admiral.

"I'm not going to have you torn to shreds."

Webster started to protest, but the Admiral cut him off.

"No. That's final."

Webster strode out mad enough to spit. He pulled up in front of a bulkhead, raised a mighty fist—and stopped. He didn't even give a second thought to the idea that crashed into his mind. He lit out down the passageway.

Ten minutes later the second gig took off, with Third Webster at the controls.

In the first few seconds Webster had a horrible thought. Suppose the Uranians now had enough data. Suppose their experiments were over and he just flew in, and they didn't even try to knock him down.

He switched on the visi-scope and radio. No. The Uranian ship was turning around and coming to meet him. Good. He reached for the throttle and cut off his rockets. The Admiral's voice came over the radio:

"Webster, you'll get thrown out for this. Come back here. And for God's sake don't slow down like that. You're a sitting duck for them."

Webster cut in his forward rockets to slow himself even more. He turned on the magnetic shield and then spoke to Admiral Cantwell.

"That's the idea, Admiral. All the ships that have been knocked down have been travelling at full speed. And that's what's done it."

He kept his eye on the Uranian ship. It was almost within range. He went on.

"We knew the Uranians were trying to increase the velocity of the Kant pellets. Well, I figure they've done it."

"But they still can't get them through the magnetic shield," said the Admiral, his tone growing less stern.

It was almost time. Webster's speed was down to five thousand miles an hour.

"They don't have to get them through the

shield," answered Webster. "I figure the pellets now move at close to the speed of light. So when one of them passes close by our ships going the opposite direction under full power it sets up—"

The gig gave a slight lurch. That was all, just a slight lurch.

"See?" shouted Webster. "They can't knock me down when I'm going slow. The relative velocity isn't great enough."

The Admiral's voice took on a new note.

"I think I see what you're driving at. Mass goes up with velocity."

"Right."

The gig gave another small lurch. Webster laughed and went on.

"The relative velocity between the ship and the pellet is probably only a few octillionths short of the velocity of light. So somewhere in the pellet-ship system a huge mass momentarily appears. It's enough to tear the ship apart. And our own high velocity has been what made it possible. They don't even try to hit us; they just try to come within some minimum distance."

Silence from the *Sirius*. Then.

"Well done, Webster. Well done. Go on in. We'll follow. You've got about a twenty-minute start on us so we'll meet you in Central City." He stopped, then went on: "I owe you something for that runabout incident I guess, so I'll overlook this disobedience. Besides, if you're ever going to get beyond Third somebody is going to have to overlook something. This'll do it. Good luck, man."

Just before Webster clicked off the radio he overheard the Admiral say to the Second:

"The Uranians have one thing to be thankful for. They don't have any teeth."

Webster grinned and happily pulled on his space suit. The jinx was broken. Second Officer Webster coming up. There was nothing but Uranians ahead of him. And just wait till he got his hands on *them*.