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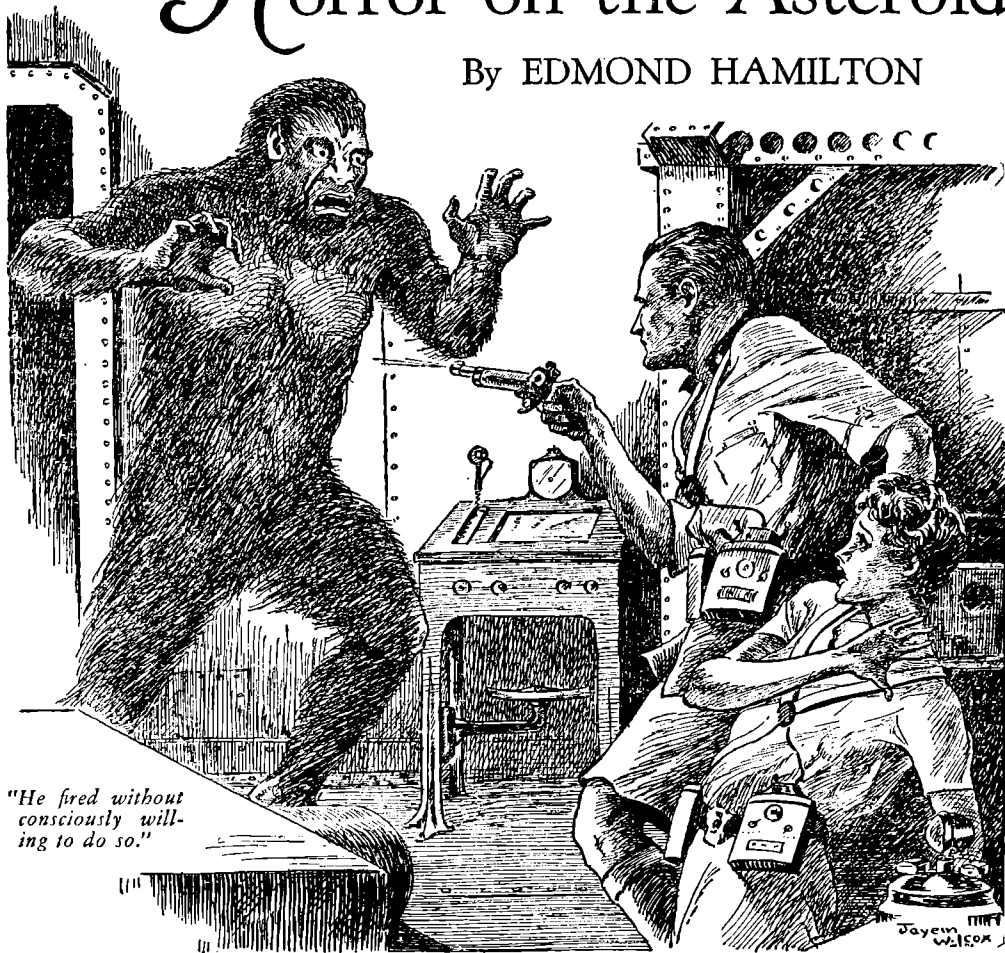
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Horror on the Asteroid

By EDMOND HAMILTON



"He fired without consciously willing to do so."

A story of interplanetary space, and the weird fate that befell the passengers and crew of a space-ship that was wrecked by meteors

LINER *Vulcan*, bound from Earth to Jupiter, calling all ships," tapped Jimmy Dane swiftly. "We have run into an uncharted meteor-swarm and fear that——"

Jimmy Dane was flung against the radio-room's wall at that moment as a terrific shock jarred the *Vulcan*. The great interplanetary liner spun dizzily in space, and then as the first thin cries of terror

came from its decks and rooms, another terrific shock smote the ship and hurled Jimmy Dane along the floor.

He staggered up, the ship still rocking wildly. The radio-room was a wreck, the instruments smashed by the impacts. He could hear the nerve-chilling shriek of air rushing out into space from the lower decks, the slam of the air-doors between decks automatically closing, the

screams of passengers. Dane got the door open and staggered out onto the deck.

The *Vulcan's* upper deck was a scene of wild confusion and panic. Along its transparent-walled length chairs were lying in disorder, and the men and women passengers who had occupied them a moment before were staggering about in unreasoning panic. The gray-uniformed space-sailors among them seemed as dazed as they. The huge liner was still reeling, and though the outshriek of the air below had ceased, ominous cracking sounds could be heard.

Out of the panic-driven passenger mob a stern-faced man in gray officer's uniform fought his way to Jimmy Dane. It was Houston, the second-officer.

"Dane, two meteors of the swarm hit us!" he cried. "They smashed up both the middle and lower decks—Captain Rawlins and First-Officer Jackson were down there and killed with the rest."

"My God, is there any chance for those of us up here then?" cried Jimmy. "My instruments were wrecked by the shocks before I could finish my call."

"The automatic air-doors between decks closed in time and are holding this upper deck airtight," Houston cried, "but the ship can't hold together a half-hour! Dane, there's an uncharted asteroid we sighted to starboard just before we were struck—we've got to get these passengers into the life-boats and toward it before the ship breaks up."

He thrust a stubby rocket-pistol into Jimmy's hand. "I'm in command now that Rawlins and Jackson are dead, and I appoint you second in command. Shoot any one who disobeys orders—we've got to work fast!"

Houston spun about, shouted to the panic-stricken mob of passengers. "People, there's no further danger if you keep your heads!" he cried. "We're near an

asteroid that has air, and we can make it in the life-boats.

"Kechnie—Drick—Cardell!" he called to the sailors. "Break open the life-boat ports. Get these people into the three starboard boats—women and children first."

"But my husband!" screamed a woman to Houston. "He was down in the middle deck! I've got to go down to him!"

"No one can go down to the two lower decks!" yelled Houston. "The air is gone from them and every one down there is dead. If we're not out of this in the life-boats before the ship breaks up we'll be gone too."

"Cardell, get those people away from the air-doors!" he cried. "Dane, take the stern end of the deck and take charge of Boat Three."

WITH Houston yelling orders at one end of the deck and Jimmy Dane at the other, the gray-clad space-sailors worked frantically to open the round ports leading into the cigar-shaped life-boats bolted to the *Vulcan's* side. Jimmy Dane's shouted commands could scarcely be heard over the din of screaming voices.

Most of the passengers were already pressing toward the life-boat ports, but some were fighting to get to the air-doors and reach the lower airless decks where some father or husband or wife lay dead. Jimmy Dane saw Cardell and his men fighting these back from the air-doors. Now some of the ports were open and women and children were pouring into the life-boats.

A prolonged and terrible cracking came from below as the shattered *Vulcan* sagged on through space. It was still rocking slowly from the shocks. Jimmy Dane expected that at any moment a crack would rive the upper deck's walls or roof and send its air shrieking out into

space. Through the deck's transparent walls the cold, brilliant stars of space looked in upon this mad scene of human wreck and terror and confusion as they had looked on many another.

The women and children now were all in the three big life-boats and at the commands of Houston and Cardell and Dane the men passengers were struggling through the ports into the boats. The sailors had stood aside, but now as more ominous crackings came from below a few of them pushed in toward the boat-port of Boat Three.

"Back there!" yelled Jimmy Dane to them. "Passengers first! Get back or I'll shoot!"

A big, brutal-faced sailor turned a fear-maddened countenance to Jimmy. "We're not going to be killed here to save a lot of blasted passengers!" he cried. "We're getting out while we——"

Flash! The soundless whip of flame from Jimmy Dane's rocket-pistol caught the man's arm and he reeled back from the boat-port. "Back from it!" Jimmy Dane warned them. "I'll shoot to kill next time!"

The sailors fell back, the male passengers crowding on into the life-boats. Some one pulled at Jimmy Dane's arm and he turned to find a stern-faced elderly man whom a girl was trying to drag into the life-boat.

"We can't go into this boat!" this man cried to Jimmy Dane. "It's too crowded and there are plenty of other boats down on the lower decks."

"We can't reach those," Jimmy told him. "Get in there before the two of you are thrown in!"

"You insolent pup!" stormed the other, forgetful of peril in his anger. "Do you know that I'm John Wentworth of Wentworth Mines? I say that my

daughter and I won't go in this boat and——"

"Dad, we've got to go!" cried the girl. "We can't get down to the other boats now."

"But it's an outrage, Ann!" stormed John Wentworth. "No whippersnapper man can tell me——"

"Get in, you fool!" cried Jimmy Dane. "Kechnie, push these people into the boat! We've got but minutes left!"

Houston came running along the deck. All the passengers were now inside the three life-boats, only the gray-clad sailors and officers remaining in the deck.

"All right, men!" cried Houston. "I'll command Boat One, Cardell Boat Two, and Dane Boat Three. I'll give orders by space-phone. In with you now and cast loose at once. She's breaking up."

The men without need of further command leapt through the ports into the crowded boats. Jimmy Dane entered his with Kechnie, gave the command to close the boat's inner port. The interior of the thirty-foot cigar-shaped craft was crowded with passengers in all stages of panic. Kechnie spun the port shut.

Jimmy Dane saw Cardell entering the second boat and saw too that Houston, highest in rank, was last to leave the deck and enter Boat One. The ports of the two other boats were shutting now also.

Dane had pushed through the crowd in his craft to the small control-cabin at its prow. "All right, loosen the bolts!" he called back to the sailors.

The bolts which held the life-boat to the interplanetary liner's side were rapidly loosened with the wrenches that hung beside them for this emergency. Boats One and Two dropped away from the great liner's side as their fastenings also were released.

A tremendous cracking and crashing came from the *Vulcan* as Boat Three also

dropped away from it. Jimmy Dane pressed on the controls, and as the rocket-tubes at its rear blasted, Boat Three shot aside from the *Vulcan* into space, after the other two.

Jimmy Dane could hear the passengers crowded in his boat still in uproar, men talking hoarsely, excitedly, some one screaming. But all fell silent as through the life-boat's windows they watched the *Vulcan* drift onward. The great ship's inertia was carrying it toward the glowing white speck of Jupiter, on and away from the three hovering life-boats.

The *Vulcan*, drifting away in death, was a magnificent sight. Jimmy Dane and Kechnie watched, a lump in the radio-operator's throat despite himself. The *Vulcan*, pride of the Jupiter run—going to its death in the great gloom of space as many a mighty ship had gone before it. But this one, the *Vulcan*, carried down in its lower decks the stiff and frozen bodies of officers and men he had joked with not an hour before, drifting on with their ship in death.

THE silence that held the two men was unbroken by any of the passengers. In all the three life-boats they were watching, as the huge dark mass with its crown of light became smaller and smaller in the star-flecked void. Then they saw its lights wink out, could almost hear the crash of its last collapse.

"She's gone," said Kechnie huskily.

Dane nodded wordlessly and was turning to the passengers back in the boat when Houston's voice came from the space-phone.

"Boats Two and Three all right? All right, Cardell? All right, Dane? Very well, now listen to me, all you passengers.

"Our greatest danger is over now. You see that little spot of pale light over to the right? Well, it's an uncharted asteroid

and it has an atmosphere. We can get there in these life-boats in about six hours.

"So we're heading toward that asteroid. Once there we can wait until relief comes, for relief-ships will be putting out in search of us as soon as it is found that something has happened to the *Vulcan*. There is therefore no cause for further fear.

"Cardell and Dane," Houston continued, "we'll head at once toward that asteroid, on acceleration-schedule 14. Keep on the schedule, so our three boats won't become separated in space."

Houston's boat moved a moment afterward, a soundless burst of fire showing from its stern tubes as it headed toward the asteroid's pale speck of light. Cardell's craft, Boat Two, followed quickly after, and as Jimmy Dane touched the firing-studs of his own boat, its tubes blasted also and it followed after the others.

The three craft, moving on the same acceleration-schedule, kept closely together as they shot on through space toward the asteroid. Jimmy Dane, satisfied as to their boat's progress, turned to look back into its interior.

The first panic of the crowded passengers had given place to a black gloom. A woman was crying hysterically for her children, caught in the middle-deck of the *Vulcan*. Two other women were trying to comfort her. A stony-faced man who looked at no one had lost his wife and daughter. Tragedy was intangible, concentrated, in the life-boat's thirty-odd passengers. Jimmy Dane felt it.

Jimmy saw the big sailor he had shot nursing his burnt arm, but apparently bearing no malice. Then he saw a man, John Wentworth, pushing through the other passengers toward the control-cabin. With him was his daughter Ann.

"I want to know what this Houston means by having us head toward an uncharted asteroid," John Wentworth declared. "Why don't we head for Jupiter?"

Jimmy Dane heard Kechnie snort. "We don't head toward Jupiter," he told the magnate, "because Jupiter is over thirty million miles away and our air wouldn't last us for a tenth of that distance."

"But why go to this God-forsaken asteroid?" John Wentworth demanded. "It looks to me like sheer stupidity—and it looks like stupidity to have run the ship into that meteor-swarm at all."

Jimmy Dane faced him squarely. "Look here," he told him, "that meteor-swarm was uncharted and nobody could have foreseen it. As it is, most of the *Vulcan's* officers and men are dead, so make no more cracks about them. We're going to this asteroid now, not because we want to but to save our lives."

"I'll certainly make a strong complaint when we reach Jupiter," said John Wentworth as he turned away. "I lost valuable papers in the ship and now I'm to be marooned on some asteroid while my business on Jupiter goes to pot!"

Ann Wentworth lingered as her father turned away. "Don't mind father," she told Jimmy Dane. "Neither he nor most of the passengers know much about space-travel, and they don't appreciate the real situation."

"They'll appreciate it before long," Jimmy told her grimly. "Getting to that asteroid doesn't mean our troubles will be over."

"What will it be like there?" she asked, but he shook his head.

"There's no telling, though since it has air it may have life of some kind. But the real question is how long we're to stay there."

"Why, won't the relief-ships be com-

ing to search for us as Mr. Houston said?" asked Ann Wentworth, in surprise.

"They'll search, but how they're to find us if we're on an uncharted asteroid is a question. But don't say anything of that to the rest," he added hastily. "I don't want to worry them."

"I won't," she smiled. "And no matter what father says, I'm sure you're all doing the best thing possible."

Jimmy Dane's eyes followed her as she went back into the crowded life-boat after her father.

"A swell girl," the radio-operator commented, "though her father's not so hot. Can't endure to stay on this asteroid a few days, eh? He ought to be glad it was handy here for us to light on."

THE asteroid grew steadily in apparent size in the next hours as the three life-boats moved through space toward it. Houston's voice came each half-hour on the space-phone to assure himself that all was well in the two boats commanded by Cardell and Jimmy Dane. The passengers took courage from Houston's statement that soon they'd reach the asteroid and that then it would only be a matter of waiting for the relief-ships.

Those who were not touched by the tragedy of losing family or friends in the disaster became cheerful. Jimmy Dane heard their excited talk as they gazed ahead toward the asteroid's greenish disk of light, rapidly broadening in the star-gemmed void. He was glad that they kept up their spirits, anyway.

The asteroid grew from a disk into a green sphere, and Houston phoned that they would land upon its sunlit side. Kechnie estimated that it was a hundred miles in diameter, a pigmy world with a dense little atmosphere and a day and night due to its rotation. The three boats swept in together toward the sunward

side, with speed rapidly decreasing at Houston's orders.

They shot downward, and the asteroid's convex surface became concave under them. A whistling outside the boats showed they had entered its atmosphere. Its surface seemed entirely covered by a dense green forest, but at one place an outcrop of gray rock made a clearing in the vegetation. Houston headed the boats down toward this.

"Tests show atmosphere apparently breathable but with high chemical content of unidentified elements," Houston spoke. "Gravitometers show point one eight two six. All passengers and crew will adjust gravitation-equalizers to that figure."

"Point one eight two six for all equalizers," Jimmy Dane told the passengers and men in his boat, and all adjusted the flat belt-cases worn by every interplanetary traveller.

"We will land in the clearing below," Houston's voice continued from the space-phone. "Cardell and Dane with two men each will emerge from the boats after landing. No other crewmembers or passengers will emerge until permission is given."

The three boats swept lower toward the clearing, that rushed up at them like a bald gray patch in the dense green vegetation that swathed this little world. Dane's hands flew over the studs, blasting the boat's nose-tubes and bringing it to slower speed. It landed with the others in the clearing, with a soft bump and jar.

Jimmy Dane strode back to the lifeboat's port. "Kechnie, remain temporarily in command here," he said. "Urmson, you and Drick come with me. Here are rocket-pistols for you."

The port had been spun open, and there entered a flood of dank air that had a highly chemical odor, pungent and

slightly irritating. There was also in the air a rank smell of vegetation. Jimmy Dane stepped out with Drick and Urmson, the two sailors, into the clearing.

Houston and two sailors were emerging from Boat One, a little distance away, and Cardell and two others from the other craft. All wore rocket-pistols. They met at the center of the clearing.

"Dane—Cardell—I'm glad we got here safely," Houston said quickly. "I was afraid we might become separated before we got to the asteroid."

"But now that we're here on the asteroid it doesn't seem any too encouraging, does it?" said Cardell.

They gazed about them. Around the clearing the dense green vegetation rose in an unbroken wall twenty feet high. It was vegetation of a highly unusual kind, great clump-like growths that bore no ordinary leaves or foliage or branches, but were simply branching trunks of solid green fiber. They were lower in the scale of plant-development than any vegetation these men had ever seen.

This thick forest of green trunks dripped constantly with drops of water that condensed upon them. There was no underbrush under them but a growth of primitive-looking lichens. The weak sunlight lay across this unusual forest's top but penetrated only here and there into the dripping green gloom of its lower levels.

There was no sound in the air save an occasional rustling breeze and the steady dripping. No living thing could be seen to move in the surrounding vegetation. The landscape of the asteroid was weird and depressing, and the rasping, irritating quality of the chemical-laden air drawn in with each breath did not improve matters. Jimmy Dane looked around with unusually strong feelings of oppression and irritation.

"Sure is a damned uncheerful place," said Cardell. "I hope we'll not be here long."

"That depends," said Houston, "on whether the relief-ships can find us. Jimmy, do you think that last call of yours got through to any one?"

Jimmy Dane shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "I'd hardly more than started it when the shocks came one after the other and wrecked the instruments. There's not much chance that any ship heard it."

"Then that means," said Houston, "that we'll be here until relief-ships come out after the *Vulcan* and find us. This being an uncharted asteroid, it may take them weeks or months to locate us. We'll have to make the best of it."

Jimmy jerked his head toward the life-boats. "What about the passengers? They want out now."

Houston nodded impatiently. "We'll let them out and tell them what we're facing. Urmson, you go tell them they can emerge now. Cardell, you and Drick and Ames prod around the clearing to see if there's anything dangerous in these forests."

AS URMSON turned to go, Houston suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation, pointed to a point in the surrounding wall of vegetation. "There go creatures of some sort—see!"

Jimmy Dane spun with the others and saw two large reptilian creatures that had skirted the clearing's edge running back into the vegetation. His short glimpse of them before they disappeared in the growths was enough to let him see that they were five or six feet in length and two feet in height, that their dark-green bodies ran on four legs with taloned claws, and that their heads were elongated and had jaws set with short, sharp teeth.

Then the scaled green bodies were gone in the weird forest's depths. Jimmy Dane had never seen such creatures, but had a momentary baffling sensation that they were somehow familiar. Somewhere he had read or heard of just such reptilian running things—but he could not place the memory and gave it up in disgust.

"Living things of some kind here, anyway," Cardell was exclaiming. "Do you suppose they'd be dangerous?"

"Don't look very prepossessing, but we have our rocket-pistols," Houston said. "Get going now, Cardell, but look out."

As Cardell and Drick and Ames started into the surrounding vegetation, Jimmy Dane motioned to the clearing's center.

"There are the passengers," he said, and with a nod Houston led the way toward the survivors of the *Vulcan*, about a hundred in number.

They stood in groups around the life-boats from which they had just emerged, looking at the weird surrounding forest of the asteroid with some awe and doubt. As Dane followed Houston toward them, he noted John Wentworth staring about in evident displeasure and then making some remark to his daughter.

Houston faced the passengers, who had all turned toward him. "People, we've reached the asteroid and we may as well understand each other. No matter what conditions are like here we'll have to have some semblance of order, and for that reason I will remain in command with Mr. Dane and Mr. Cardell under me.

"I must ask you to obey all orders as given. Our first work will be to prepare these three boats so they can be used as quarters for the women and children. The men will sleep outside, and we will have a system of watches to prevent any unpleasant surprizes. We've already seen

forms of life here that might be dangerous, and there may be others. But if all goes well we'll have a relief-ship here before long and we'll all get off safely."

John Wentworth stepped forward. "Why should we passengers obey your orders now that the ship is gone? We're not in space now."

Jimmy Dane saw Houston's stern face contort with anger. "I say you'll all obey orders and you will!" the officer shouted angrily. "And I'll stand no more murmuring!"

Jimmy Dane's surprize at Houston's sudden unreasonably heated anger was mixed with dull anger of his own. He felt his temper flaring. "Why shout at people?" he snapped to Houston.

Houston turned on him. "Keep quiet, Dane!" he ordered savagely. "I'm running this!"

Jimmy Dane was sullenly silent. He saw the passengers looking in amazement at the two quarrelling officers. Ann Wentworth's face was astonished. Jimmy realized suddenly how strange it was for him and Houston, the best of friends, to be snapping at each other at this strained moment. What in the world was making them do so?

The weirdness of the asteroid's scene, the depressing surroundings of green leafless growths, the irritation of the chemical-laden air in their throats and lungs, these must be responsible, Jimmy decided. He and Houston couldn't quarrel now! Yet even as he resolved this, Jimmy was aware still of a dull animosity toward Houston that his reason seemed unable to smother.

CARDELL'S voice came suddenly from back in the vegetation. "Houston, I've found something!" he cried.

"All right, I'm coming!" Houston snapped. He hurried in that direction with Jimmy Dane following.

Jimmy saw that the passengers were streaming after them into the forest, too. But Houston did not bother to order them back.

The ordinarily capable Houston was showing a lot of weaknesses under the present strain, Jimmy decided. Then they reached Cardell and the two sailors, a few-score yards back in the vegetation.

Houston and Jimmy Dane stared, the passengers behind them peering also. It was a space-ship that Cardell had found, a corroded freighter lying almost hidden in the towering vegetation in which it had landed. Its whole stern was twisted and distorted as though by great forces. On the freighter's bows was the name, *Jackson N. Willings, Venus*. Its door was open but all inside it was as corroded and rusted as the exterior by the dripping of the vegetation around it. The green growths had sprung up around and over it since it had landed there.

"Tube-explosion in the stern," said Houston. "They must have had it out in space and managed to get in here and land. Any sign of the crew?"

Cardell shook his head. "No sign at all. But there's another back farther—there's another——"

Houston stopped his babbling with an angry exclamation. "Another what? Tell me what you're trying to tell me and don't stand there mouthing!"

"I was telling you!" flared Cardell heatedly. "There's another back farther in the growths."

Jimmy Dane wondered if their minds had not all been strained by the events of the last hours. Since they had landed on the asteroid their tempers seemed to have grown steadily shorter.

Houston plunged through the growths in the direction in which Cardell was pointing. The sullen-faced Cardell followed, and Jimmy Dane and some of the

passengers. They came in a moment upon another wrecked space-ship.

This was a much smaller one, a swift-lined craft that had apparently been a private space-yacht. Its bows were bent and crumpled and its name was not visible. It was much more corroded than the freighter, and there was no sign of its occupants either.

"It's been here longer than the other, by a good bit," Houston said. "Probably there are other wrecks on this asteroid, other ships that had trouble in space but managed to get here."

"But where are their crews and passengers then?" Jimmy Dane demanded. "We've not seen a living soul."

"How should I know where they are?" Houston countered angrily. "What's the matter with you anyway, Dane?"

"What's the matter with you?" returned Jimmy Dane fiercely. "I don't have to stand for your orders if I don't like them——"

His fists had clenched, and Houston's face was livid with equal anger when Ann Wentworth stepped between the two men. Amazement and horror were on her face, and on those of the watching passengers.

"Are you two crazy?" she cried. "What's happened to you? For the last half-hour you've been at each other's throats!"

Realization struggled through the sullen fury on Houston's face. "By heaven, it is unbelievable, the way we've changed in the last half-hour!" he exclaimed. "Do you suppose——"

"Look! Look there!" came a scream from one of the passengers. He was pointing into the vegetation.

A group of strange creatures was advancing slowly through the growths toward the humans. There were nine or ten of the things and they were hairy,

ape-like animals of about human size, walking on their hind limbs, with the frequent aid of their elongated front ones. The masses of hair that grew on their heads as on their bodies hid all of their faces except the dark bright eyes and the protruding jaws.

They were uttering chattering, barking sounds as they advanced, and in their noisy progress was no attempt at concealment. When they saw the humans turn toward them they stopped, a dozen feet away in the vegetation, and returned their gaze. There was something disconcerting in the bright-eyed, fixed stare of these ape-creatures.

"Get back to the clearing, all you passengers!" yelled Houston. "They may attack us!"

Cardell uttered a shrill, senseless laugh. "They won't attack *me*!" he exclaimed and fired point-blank at the creatures.

His pistol's flash seared the side of one, and the creature uttered a piercing cry of rage. It and the others hastily retreated.

"Damn you, I didn't tell you to fire!" Houston cried and with a furious blow knocked Cardell staggering.

Cardell got to his feet with an animal-like snarl of rage, but before he could spring at Houston, Jimmy Dane caught him.

"Not now!" Jimmy cried. "It's no time for fighting now!"

Jimmy felt a desire to strangle Cardell, so hot was his own anger against him and Houston at the moment. But his reason conquered enough to make him see that they could not fight among themselves at this moment.

The hairy ape-things had disappeared back in the vegetation, though their shrill cries of rage could still be heard. The passengers were streaming hastily back toward the clearing where were the life-

boats, and Houston and Cardell and Jimmy followed.

Houston in loud tones ordered the women and children to retire into the life-boats. He then divided the sailors into watches to guard the camp from surprise, he to head one watch, Cardell the second and Jimmy Dane the third.

WHEN Houston ordered the sailor Urmson to take his post in the first watch, Urmson replied only by a defiant snarl. With a bellow of fury Houston sprang toward the man and would have beaten him senseless had not Jimmy Dane and another sailor pulled him off. The other men and the passengers watched apathetically. Were they all going crazy, Jimmy asked himself?

He had further occasion to ask himself the question in the next few hours. It was as though a germ of insanity was spreading through the little encampment. The tempers of passengers and sailors alike had become suddenly explosive, it seemed. There were two fights among the male passengers, in one of which a half-dozen of them participated. Houston broke up both battles by rushing roaring into the combat and striking right and left until the fighters separated.

There was even a quarrel and fight among the women in the life-boats. There came shrill cries from them until the quarrel suddenly ended. Cardell and others of the men outside began laughing when they heard. With a shock Jimmy Dane realized that he too was laughing. What was the matter with him, anyway?

Night was striding swiftly across the asteroid's surface, the little world's period of rotation being small. The sun plummeted down with amazing speed behind the horizon, and the stars blazed forth silently to illuminate everything with their clear light. The metal life-boats glittered

beneath it, the towering vegetation reared in a dark solid wall around the clearing.

Houston's watch ended and Cardell began his. By then the women in the life-boats were sleeping, and most of the men slept also around the fires they had kindled outside. Jimmy Dane, still awake, saw suddenly that Cardell too was stretched sleeping, completely oblivious to his duty as head of that watch. With a snarl of anger Jimmy strode to him and shook him, but Cardell, half waking, thrust him away and sank back again.

For a moment Dane's hot anger made him want to beat the sleeping man into a pulp. He straightened, looking about the starlit clearing. The other sailors named for that watch were stretched in careless slumber also. A few hours before they would not even have dreamt of doing such a thing. But all ordinary discipline seemed vanishing in the creeping madness that had apparently taken hold of them since they landed on the asteroid.

Jimmy Dane's head ached badly and each breath of the pungent, chemical-smelling air seemed to burn his lungs and cloud his brain. Over the anger he felt toward the others and his dull apathy toward their fate, there persisted the thought that some one had to keep watch. He walked slowly around the clearing, casting an eye toward the dark forest of towering growths.

He heard distant sounds, shrill cries that must come from some of the ape-creatures they had seen. There were hoarse, booming calls now and then, too. Could those be from the other things they had glimpsed shortly after landing? What had they been?—Jimmy found his memory functioning badly—two things that had run away into the growths, reptilian shapes . . .

He heard some one come out of one of

the life-boats and approach him. It was Ann Wentworth.

"What are you doing out here?" he demanded. "Go back into the boat."

"I won't!" she snapped, her voice rising to an angry scream. "I won't!"

Then suddenly her voice dropped, her white face was changed and serious. "Jimmy, are we all going insane?" she cried. "What's happening to us all to make us like this?"

"I don't know," Jimmy Dane muttered, passing a hand over his brow. "I've been trying to think—we've all changed——"

"Ever since we landed on this asteroid!" she exclaimed. "Something's been making us more and more irrational and short-tempered!"

"There must be something about this place we don't know," he said dully. "If we could find the men who were in those wrecked ships—there must be some of them still alive here——"

"Let's go back to the wrecks and see if we can find any trace of them!" Ann Wentworth exclaimed.

Jimmy Dane stared at her. He felt somehow that the idea was irrational, that if the men had not been at the wrecks that afternoon they would not be now. But his slow-working brain could not place the idea's wrongness and he gave it up. "All right," he said. "Come on."

Without hesitation he started into the dark vegetation. Ann Wentworth hastened beside him.

THE forests of towering growths were weird in the darkness, dappled here and there by patches of starlight that sifted through the tangle of monstrous trunks.

The girl beside him tripped upon a projecting root, and in swift unreasoning anger she turned and kicked it. This

struck Dane as funny, and he uttered a senseless laugh.

"Jimmy, come on!" Ann almost sobbed. "We're getting worse, somehow."

They plodded through the great growths until their progress was halted by the looming metal bulk of the wrecked freighter. As they came out of the vegetation onto it they saw a dark, hairy shape swing out of its door and into the growths, without seeing them.

"One of the ape-things!" Ann Wentworth exclaimed.

"They seem to haunt this wreck—I wonder why," Jimmy muttered. "There may be more inside."

But when they went closer to the door and listened they heard no sound from inside the wreck. Jimmy stared stupidly into its dark interior.

"What did we come here for?" he said. "We were looking for something—but what?"

"How should I know what?" said Ann.

"It was your idea," he started to say wrathfully, and then with a strong effort controlled himself. "No—no fighting now. We'll look through it."

They found the interior of the wreck not completely dark, for shafts of starlight entered through its window-ports. They fumbled through the corroded fuel-tanks and firing-mechanisms in the lower deck, climbed up to the middle deck. This, the freighter's cargo-deck, was filled with heavy metal cases.

Ann wandered up the stair to the upper deck, and Jimmy followed. The patches of starlight showed that this deck had been occupied by men since the freighter had landed on the asteroid. There were cots and blankets, now in hopeless disorder.

"The ship's crew must have lived here for a while," he said. "Then something

happened to them—maybe those ape-things or other things got them——”

“Jimmy, I found something!” came Ann’s exclamation, shrill with excitement.

She was in the navigation-room opening at the front of the deck, and Jimmy found her with a thick leather-covered book in her hand.

“It was on the desk—I think it’s the ship’s log!” the girl told him. “It might give some clue to what happened.”

“Give it to me!” Jimmy snatched it brusksly from her hand, walked over to one of the navigation-room’s windows and opened the log-book in the clear starlight from the window.

He stared at the pages of neat handwriting riffling beneath his fingers. The words, the letters, were perfectly familiar in appearance, but Jimmy found them oddly hard to read. It was as though his brain found difficulty in connecting the written words with ideas.

“What does it say?” asked Ann impatiently.

“Wait—I’ll read it.” Jimmy with a strong mental effort deciphered the meaning of the words as he read them aloud.

“*June 14.* Fourth day out from Jupiter on our return voyage. The course we are following ought to bring us to Venus in six weeks. We’ll have to put on unusual speed, though, to get by the worst of the meteor zones between here and the orbit of Mars. But the old *Jackson N. Willings* can make it. . . .

“Nothing in that,” grunted Jimmy, turning the pages. “Here’s something!”

“*July 9.* Disaster has struck us. We had been putting on extra speed for the last few weeks in order to clear the meteor zones, and our firing-tubes could not stand the strain, apparently. Four hours ago two of the stern tubes back-blasted suddenly and wrecked the rear part of the lower deck. Barrett, the sec-

ond-officer, and six tube-men and two cargo-men were instantly killed. I, Captain Thomas Harkenson, with First-Officer Manning and the other nineteen members of the crew, were in the upper and middle decks and so escaped. Air-doors are all holding, but we are drifting helplessly in space and as we have no power to operate our radio-set, can’t broadcast our plight.

“*JULY 11.* It has become apparent that the *Jackson N. Willings* is not drifting toward Mars as we thought, but toward an asteroid. As our charts show no asteroid in this position it must be one hitherto undiscovered. Manning and I made observations on it, and we find that it has an atmosphere; so if we land safely upon it we will have some hope of survival. We all feel very much more cheerful.

“*July 12.* Drifting nearer to the asteroid.

“*July 13.* Drifting nearer to the asteroid. Should reach it tomorrow.

July 14. Two hours ago the *Jackson N. Willings* reached this uncharted asteroid. The ship drifted in around it in a decreasing spiral and finally crashed onto the surface in a forest of dense green vegetation that apparently covers the whole sphere. Due to the low gravitational attraction of this little world, we did not crash with much force, and though the ship was wrecked further none of us was killed or badly injured by the shock. We have found that we are not the first to reach this asteroid, for very near where our ship crashed is another space-ship, a small yacht, that was apparently wrecked in much the same way as ours. There is no sign of its occupants, but they must be living somewhere on the asteroid. Our prospects are not very encouraging, for there does not seem to be much in the

way of animal life on this little world. The atmosphere is heavily impregnated with elements we can not identify and is very irritating to breathe. But we are still alive, and that is much.

"*July 15.* Things going very badly—we have been fighting among ourselves almost since the time we landed here, not twenty hours ago. One would think reason had deserted us by the way in which we snarl and strike at each other. Manning almost killed one of the sailors in a fight, and I regret to confess that I, Captain Harkenson, instead of stopping these fights, have taken part in them. God knows what madness has seized upon us, for our position here is very precarious. We searched for the yacht's people, but found none of them. We did find another wrecked ship, though, a small freighter named the *Alice N.*, some distance away in the forest. But there is no sign of its crew either—I am beginning to fear that there is some thing or things on this asteroid that takes toll of those who land upon it. But what? We have seen living creatures here, it is true, of several kinds. There are some ape-like, hairy beasts who watch us from a distance, a half-dozen in number. There are also some reptilian creatures of considerable size. Manning also reported that in the forest he found a small lake or pool in which some curious amphibious creatures lived. But none of these things seem formidable enough to have done away with the people of the two space-ships who landed here before us. But enough—my head is aching and I find it somehow hard to write.

"*July 16.* Very hard to write now—my thoughts are not coherent and I don't seem entirely able to put down my ideas in words. A sign of my brain giving, I suppose—but then madness is rife among us now. Less than two days here, and from a clean company of officers and

space-sailors we have become a pack of snarling brutes. Two of us dead already in fights among ourselves—Manning choked one and a sailor smashed another's head with a stone. I myself have fought, striking and shouting like the rest, but somehow have retained enough reason to set down here what is happening to us. We are all going rapidly crazy—that is the only explanation. The cause of this remains a horrible mystery, but one whose solution I think I can guess at. The air! The chemical-poisoned atmosphere of this asteroid! The elements that impregnate it, which we could not identify, must be elements unknown to human science that break down the human mind. Perhaps they even affect the body, for somehow we all seem to have grown more hulking and brute-like. One of the men says that he saw the ape-things we saw yesterday, but that now they are running on all four limbs instead of walking upright. Also the reptilian creatures that were running in the forests when we arrived have taken to the water and are living in the lake or pool. This seems to be a world of madness!

"*July 17.* Only able to think and remember in flashes—can't write long, I fear. Things on this asteroid become more horrible each day. Men are now almost utterly beast-like, snapping and snarling over trifles, throwing themselves into death-combats with each other for the most trivial reasons. Seem gradually losing power of speech, too, uttering instead meaningless cries. Two more were killed this morning, Manning and one of the sailors. They snatched food from some of the others, and the whole crowd darted upon them and tore the two apart like a pack of furious beasts. God help me, I was one of those beasts! The madness that possesses the others is strong in me also, and though I have decreasing

intervals of comparative sanity I am most of the time no better than they. I was right, too, about our bodies being affected as well as our minds. Heavy growths of hair appearing on us, our bodies becoming more squat, shambling and clumsier. Can only with difficulty manipulate the pen to write these words. Everything else living here seems changing too. The reptiles that only days ago were land-creatures have now become green, slimy amphibious things. The amphibians formerly in the lake are nowhere to be seen, but there are some large and curious-looking fish in the waters who have rudimentary limbs. The ape-things we saw when first we landed have now no ape-like resemblance at all but are simply running animals. What does all this mean? My dulling brain can not fathom it but I am sure that it is the asteroid's poisoned atmosphere that somehow works these changes. I fear I shall not be able to write here again.

"July 18. Very hard . . . hand can not hold pen right and mind can't remember words . . . put down what I can . . . change going on and we who were men are now but apes, more hairy and brute-like each day . . . the running animals that were apes becoming scaled, verging into the reptile . . . the amphibians that were reptiles becoming fish-like and the fish-things changing into God knows what other and lower horrible forms . . . the secret of this asteroid's horrible mystery! . . . its poisoned atmosphere containing elements that reverse the course of evolution in living things . . . elements unknown to us that are potent to thrust life back down on the road of evolutionary progress it has slowly climbed for ages! God help us, why did we not see it? The ape-things and the reptiles and even the amphibious things of the lake we found here . . . all had

once been men! Men of the two other wrecked ships and perhaps also of ships we did not find, men who had been here longer than we! Men, some of whom had been living in this hellish world's poisoned air long enough that they had been thrust back down the evolutionary road of man's past, back down through the ape and the running mammal and the reptile that preceded it, back down into amphibious things such as man's ancestors were far in the dim past! And those who had not been here quite so long had gone down as far as the reptile stage! And others who had come since then were at the ape-stage! And since we came, all have still been steadily slipping downward, the amphibians into fish such as they sprang from ages ago, the reptiles into amphibians, the apes into running mammals and then into reptilian things! And we too have been changing, from man into ape! Our beast-like anger and quarrels, our decreasing capacity to reason, were the first signs of it, and steadily in the following days as our minds have become more irrational and animal-like, our bodies have been taking on more and more of ape-like aspect . . . with last flicker of intelligence none of the others now possess set this down . . . we too going downward through all those forms . . . down through animal and reptile, through amphibian and fish to what . . . to darkness and nothingness, I hope . . . to . . ."

THE scrawled words, which had become more and more illegible, faded into an indecipherable scribbling. Jimmy Dane stared at the white page in the clear starlight from the window. His mind was still working only dully, but he had a sense of infinite horror somewhere in it, and he saw horror reflected on Ann Wentworth's face.

"That explains it," Jimmy struggled to say. "This asteroid's atmosphere—poisonous in some way that reverses the course of evolution——"

"But that last date is only a week or more ago!" cried Ann. "The man who wrote it—the others of this ship, must be somewhere!"

"The ape-things!" Jimmy whispered. "Oh, my God!—the things that haunt this wreck still——"

"Jimmy!" screamed the girl, and Jimmy spun around to see hulking shapes shouldering into the wreck's upper deck from below, dark ape-shapes from which came snarls of fury as they saw the two humans.

There were four of the ape-things, and the foremost of them screamed and sprang at the same moment. With red anger exploding in his brain, Jimmy snarled and leapt to meet the thing. He had forgotten the horror he had just read from the log-book in the rush of his unreasoning rage.

He struck the hairy ape-thing with flailing blows that could not prevent its elongated arms from grasping him. He was crushed to it, smote the hairy beast-face hard as he felt his ribs cracking in its grasp. He heard the chattering cries of the other creatures and the screaming of the girl as from a remote distance.

His knee drove up, and as the ape-thing released him for a moment he struck again with crazy anger.

Through the crimson mists of passion that clouded his mind the cry of Ann Wentworth penetrated.

"Your pistol, Jimmy! Your rocket-pistol!"

The pistol! Jimmy's hand went mechanically to his belt as with a wilder scream the ape-thing charged again.

He fired without consciously willing to do so. The red flame struck the hairy creature charging, and he reeled and fell.

Another of the ape-things fell as the pistol's flame shot in their direction.

The other two scrambled to flee down from the upper deck. Jimmy felt his arm jerked aside as he trained the pistol on them.

Ann was sobbing as she held his arm. "Don't—they were men once!" she was crying.

Jimmy emerged from the red haze of anger enough to remember. This beast-like quickness to anger was the first symptom of the slipping back down the evolutionary path that had made men into these ape-things. Houston and Cardell and all the rest of the *Vulcan's* survivors—drawing in with every breath the poisoned air of the asteroid—already quarrelling and snarling——

"We've got to get back to the others!" he told the girl, thickly. "Get them off this asteroid before we too——"

They stumbled down to the lower deck and out of the wreck. The two surviving ape-things were not to be seen.

Ann staggered as they started through the towering growths. "Come on!" yelled Jimmy, and then with a sob in his voice repeated the words as he took the girl's arm.

They stumbled through the dark, weird forest in the direction in which Jimmy sensed dimly that the clearing lay.

It was only by concentrating every thought upon what he must not forget, that they and all the others must leave the asteroid at once, that he could remember why it was they were racing thus through the darkness.

Chattering cries and hoarse calls came from distant places in the night, and knowing as he did what things made them, he felt a sickness in his dazed brain. They lost minutes when Ann halted and insisted angrily that the clearing lay in another direction. Their voices rose to

furious screams as they argued, until Jimmy Dane grasped the girl and pulled her with him by force.

THEY burst into the clearing. The *Vulcan's* survivors apparently all slept, the women in the life-boats and the men on the ground around them. Jimmy Dane found Houston's sleeping form and woke the officer by shaking him violently. Houston snarled viciously and struck his arms aside.

"We've got to get away, in the life-boats!" Jimmy cried. He found odd difficulty in explaining clearly. "The asteroid's atmosphere—poisoning us—making ape-creatures and worse out of men here——"

"Let me alone!" Houston shouted.

Others were waking, calling angrily. Jimmy heard John Wentworth snarl at his daughter as she woke him. "I tell you, we've got to leave!" Jimmy cried desperately. "If we stay here days, even hours, longer we won't be able to leave! We'll be animals and not humans!"

"Jimmy, none of them will listen to me!" came Ann Wentworth's despairing call.

The unhuman, animal-like rage surged swiftly in Jimmy and he dragged Houston to his feet. "Order them into the life-boats—now!" he roared.

Houston's eyes blazed crimson and with a blow he knocked the radio-operator back. From his throat came a bull-like bellow.

The other men were on their feet. Jimmy sought to control the red tide of anger rising in him. If he gave way to it now they were all lost.

He sprang forward with fists clenched. If he could knock out Houston he might get the rest to obey his orders. If he could get them into the boats—away from this hell-world——

His fists thudded into Houston's body but in his insensate fury the officer seemed not to feel the blows. His clutching hands sought the radio-operator's throat.

They struggled, staggered about locked in combat. Jimmy heard the men about them yelling, heard the sound of other blows as some of the others started fighting.

The clearing had become a place of madness, men fighting with the unreasoning fury of beasts, women who had emerged from the boats cheering them shrilly as they fought. Jimmy still heard Ann Wentworth's despairing call over their cries.

He tore Houston's hands from his throat, spun and got his own forearm around the officer's neck from behind. The madness of a battling animal possessed him further as he tightened his grip on the choking man. Far back in his red-lit brain a part of him told him that this was the end of everything, that in surrendering thus to his rage he was becoming still more the animal, going with the others down that dreadful path from man to beast.

But there was no chance of escape now. These madly fighting humans around him could never now be induced to enter the boats and leave. All chance of escape was gone and there was nothing left but to fight on, to kill the man in his grasp—to kill——

"Jimmy!" The utter and frantic despair in that call made him slacken his hold a little. It was Ann Wentworth, clinging to him as he held the choking Houston. "Jimmy, look! A ship!"

Dully, still holding Houston in his grasp. Jimmy looked up to where the girl pointed. A huge dark bulk sinking out of the night above them—the gleam of lights and the thunder of rocket-tubes blasting——

Then the space-ship had landed beside the clearing, crushing the edge of the towering growths beneath it. Doors in it were opening and uniformed men were emerging, men who stood aghast at the spectacle of the crazily battling humans in the clearing.

JIMMY dropped the half-unconscious Houston and staggered with Ann toward these men.

"What in God's name has happened?" a wide-eyed officer demanded of him. "Are these the survivors of the *Vulcan*?"

"We got the *Vulcan's* interrupted radio-call, and as our ship was nearest we stood toward it," he was saying. "Saw this uncharted asteroid and supposed survivors would have made for it. But have they all gone crazy?"

"Listen," said Jimmy Dane hoarsely. "Don't talk—drag them into your ship, now. If they stay here much longer they'll be done for and so will you—poisoned atmosphere——"

He was only dimly aware of the following minutes. He felt himself and Ann Wentworth being half carried into the ship, heard excited voices and running feet as its crew struggled in the clearing to bring others inside. He heard the slam of space-doors and the blast of tubes as the ship rose.

His only clear sensation was that his breathing no longer rasped his lungs, that the pungent smell of chemicals was gone from the air he inhaled. Then slowly his mind cleared and he realized he was in the upper deck of the ship, and that near by were Ann Wentworth and her father, and Houston and Cardell and all the others.

They had ceased struggling now, were looking dazedly at one another as though only now conscious of their identities. Their minds were clearing, Jimmy knew, even as his was, as they breathed clean air again. They would continue to clear, now that they were out of the asteroid's deadly atmosphere, until once again they approached the normal. Would even they who had spent but hours in that atmosphere be ever entirely the same as before? He felt they would, prayed they would.

He found Ann Wentworth beside him, clinging to him and gazing back at the asteroid. It was a diminishing green ball in the star-scattered void now. Dane, gazing somberly back at it, knew that she was thinking even as he was of those upon it who were far beyond all hope, those who would go down and down and back and back along the awful record of man's past until they reached the end. Might that end come soon! And might no other men set foot upon the asteroid until time itself had ended.

