

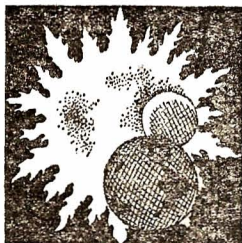
STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 19, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

July, 1949

A Complete Novel



FIRE IN THE HEAVENS

By **GEORGE O. SMITH**

Outside the world of science, Jeff Benson was a man of no importance—until the day he stumbled on the mistake in the law of conservation of energy! 9

Two Complete Novelets

- THE SACRED MARTIAN PIG**.....Margaret St. Clair 78
Delivery of an inanimate object of worship from Mars seemed simple—but it involved George Baker in amazing escapades!
- HOLLYWOOD ON THE MOON**.....Henry Kuttner 108
Drive along Lunar Boulevard and dine at the Silver Spacesuit with Tony Quade in this Hall of Fame classic reprinted by popular demand

Short Stories

- THE UNWILLING HERO**.....Rene LaFayette 98
No hunger for glory lured Vic Harden into the reaches of space
- TRANSCIENCE**.....Arthur C. Clarke 125
Though the world may die, man will go on!
- THE ONLY THING WE LEARN**.....C. M. Kornbluth 129
If we could see clearly, would we hate our future enemy?
- THE LONELY ONES**.....Ray Bradbury 135
A strange woman on a strange planet causes curious complications

Features

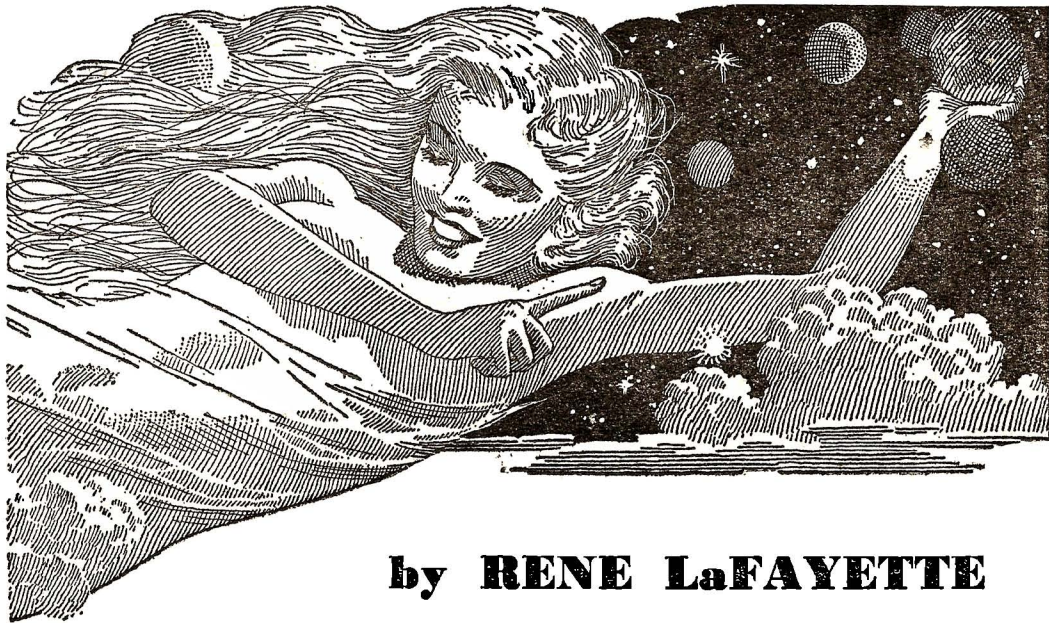
- THE ETHER VIBRATES (Announcements and Letters)**.....The Editor 6
- THE ROAD TO SPACE TRAVEL (Station in Space)**.....Willy Ley 73
- NUCLEAR NUGGETS**.....Carter Sprague 97
- CURRENT FAN PUBLICATIONS**.....A Review 154
- THE SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF**.....A Department 161

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the unwilling hero

No hunger for personal glory lured Vic Hardin into the reaches of outer space on a daring rescue mission—he was ordered out there by his editor!





by **RENE LaFAYETTE**

TEN of thousands of years ago, Earth and Earthmen had no concept of the stars nor the destiny of mankind. Difficult as it may be to believe, the tiny planet which gave birth to Barstow, Chun-Ka, Whitlow and Marin looked upon space travel and conquest as a sort of novelty, a thing to be read about in the Sunday Feature Section, a stunt without any great meaning or scope.

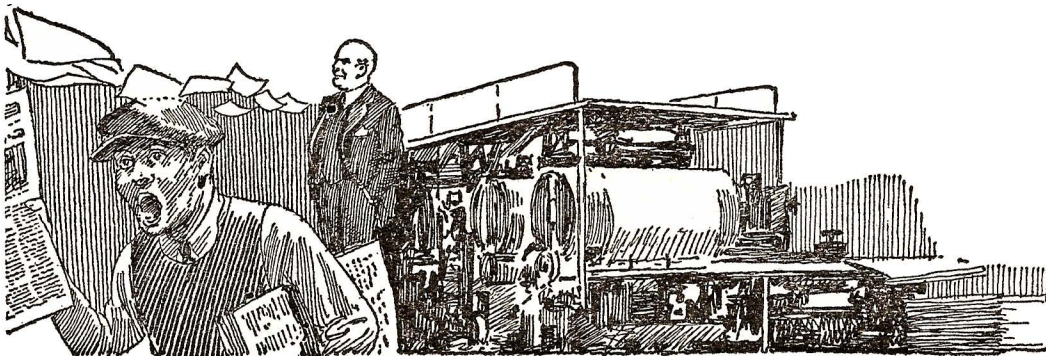
The average Earthman thought such voyages vaguely interesting but of no personal concern to himself. Expeditions, he believed,

went out to help astronomers and check their guesses, to collect new animals for the zoo or provide heroes for parades up Fifth Avenue.

According to the records which exist in the Galactic Archives (exhumed lately from a ruined library on Mars) Victor Hughes Hardin—the V. H. Hardin so dear to legend—had no more idea of being a space explorer before he became one, than he had of being immortal.

The school children who dutifully chant

One of a series of stories on the Conquest of Space



the dates and events of his life in our schools probably think Vic Hardin was ninety feet tall, breathed fire and lived on raw lion. Certainly this is not their fault. The cold facts revealed in the histories and geographies do nothing to paint a man. Vic Hardin considered himself more of a martyr than a hero.

He became an explorer because he was ordered to do so. He went unwillingly. To him it was just a hard, lonesome, dangerous job. His total preparation for space travel was a course in physics in high school, which he flunked.

He was a newspaper reporter, habituated to receiving assignments and carrying them out with something more than average zeal, which fact brought him, one fall day on Earth, into the office of J. P. Malone of the Malone newspaper chain.

Vic Hardin was far from ninety feet tall. He was about five feet five. He had a wiry shock of hair, a good-natured grin, a snub nose and freckles. He was not afraid of anything commonly met on a reporter's beat except his city editor and Malone.

Malone was built on hero proportions, which may have been why he rarely left his desk. He ran a hundred and five newspapers all over the world and he could have written a check larger than any bank on five continents could have conveniently cashed. He had Vic Hardin in at once.

"I have an assignment for you!" said Malone.

Vic smiled. "Sure."

"Find Whitlow!"

Vic looked at Malone. "You mean his widow, sir."

"I mean Whitlow!"

VIC took a new tack. He was not accustomed to being summoned up from his normal job on the *Star* except when something hot and positive needed to be done. "You mean Commander Whitlow got back!"

"He didn't get back. This did!"

Vic Hardin grabbed the teletype which was brief:

ARMY REPORTS FAINT RADIO MESSAGES RECEIVED FROM OUTER SPACE RECEPTION BLURRED BUT SIGNATURE WHITLOW DISTINCT. FURTHER EFFORTS DURING NIGHT WITHOUT RESULTS. OFFICIAL CIRCLES NON-COMMITTAL BEYOND PROBABILITY THAT COMMANDER STILL ALIVE. MILITARY COMMUNICATIONS STRESS IMPOSSIBILITY OF BEAMING AND WHEREABOUTS OF EXPEDITION

REMAINS UNKNOWN.

Vic read this with interest. Fourteen years before, while Vic was still in school, Commander Whitlow had disappeared with a Government expedition. Whitlow long before that had made a great deal of news by discovering habitable planets around a near star while commanding the first successful Government outer space expedition. Rumors, for all these fourteen years, had arisen that Whitlow was still alive. Vic had interviewed several explorers about the matter.

"I'll get right on this," said Vic. "Make a nice story—"

"No!" said Malone. He leveled a finger at Vic. "You are going to find Whitlow! You interviewed his widow! That was two years back. We had to follow up on it for ten editions. It was a good story. Good reporting. People remembered it. It sold papers. And now you're going to sell more papers. You are going to find Whitlow alive!"

Vic blinked. It had never occurred to him that he would some day go sailing off into the absolute zero of space on a suicide mission. Of the scores of voyages attempted into outer space, only two had come back.

"Whitlow was a hero!" said Malone. "He's news. He will always be news. This is worth everything I can give it even if it costs ten million dollars! You have a unique record of always coming back from assignments with a story. I want you to come back now with Whitlow!"

Vic remembers picking up his hat, bowing politely and saying, "Yes, Mr. Malone."

The most famous manhunt in history had begun.

Vic Hardin went downstairs to Mike's and drank four beers, and wondered disconnectedly whether he should give up his room.

A copy boy found him later in the afternoon and put a draft into his hand for five hundred thousand dollars and until late in the evening Vic sat at the bar, looking at the draft, arising occasionally only to go outside and look up to see if the stars were still there.

The morning edition found him just before midnight. It had a big banner:

WHITLOW ALIVE

Malone Sends Expedition
To Rescue Hero

Vic stared at himself in the bar mirror and

at the check for five hundred thousand dollars.

Vic Hardin had never felt so lonely in his life.

The next morning Vic went to see Mrs. Whitlow. He had no idea where to begin. All night long he had been seeing nightmares in which J. P. Malone kept throwing stars at him and he dodged only to be chased by unwholesome beasts who turned every time into J. P. Malones. He had no thinnest notion where to start.

Mrs. Whitlow had grown quite old in the two years since he had last seen her. Her hair was white. Every line on her face told how much she had loved her husband and how long she had worried and hoped. Her small apartment graphically showed a government's neglect of a supposed widow of fame. She had papers spread all over the living room, shouting from every page the glorious news that J. P. Malone was going to have Commander Whitlow brought home.

"You're to command an expedition to find him!" said Mrs. Whitlow, eyes luminous with confidence. "Mr. Hardin, when you told me you hoped he was still alive, I didn't know you would start a thing like this."

Vic's conscience suddenly troubled him. He remembered the interview and recalled his own professional talk. Reporter patter. Human interest.

"I didn't think of this," he said.

"But you're going! You're going to risk your life to save my Bob! It's wonderful!"

Vic had come to her to ask her for help. He couldn't now. She had him pedestaled above godhood. He told her he was doing what he could, was vague about departure times, heartened her, tried to tell her, even, that the relief might fail. But she would have none of it and he found himself on the street before noon as hopeless as before.

INSPIRATION came with lunch. He left his hamburger half eaten and caught a cab for the Explorer's Club. Here was the place they could tell him. Here might be the only place he could find out.

The Government, certainly, after the way Malone was hogging glory in the news, was going to be hostile, since it was under fire. But here at the Explorer's Club, in this haloed hall, he would learn what he had to know. How did you get a ship and go to the stars?

The quiet interior was massive and dusty,

filled with old flags, strange trophies, faded photographs and ghosts. He stood looking at the appalling corona of Vega and the plaque for the dead of the Apollo Expedition and the various grim and dreadful reminders of the fatality of space, until he was rescued by an attendant.

No, the secretary wasn't in. The executive secretary would not be here today. Vic was daunted. The very atmosphere seemed laden with glory. What had he, a newspaper reporter, to do with these courageous ghosts.

He would have left but the door opened and a young man came in. Vic waited.

The young man was an uncommon looking youth. It was not in his clothes nor yet in his face. But about him hung something of mystery and high adventure, in the quality of his smile, the sureness of his movements, the quiet depths of his eyes.

"Any mail for me, Gus?" the young man said.

"Just a moment, captain." The attendant went into the mail room to look.

Vic was interested suddenly. This fellow seemed too young to be a captain.

The attendant came, back. "Nothing today, Captain Taylor."

"Wait," said Vic. "Excuse me, but haven't I seen you somewhere?"

"Don't think so," smiled the youth.

"Picture section," said the attendant.

"Oh, well, that," said Taylor.

Vic suddenly beamed. "You're Taylor of the *Martian Queen*!" He thrust out his hand. "I'm in luck. I need help. Lord how I need help! Can you give me a minute, captain. I'm Vic Hardin of the *Star*."

Taylor brightened. "Not the Whitlow rescue man!"

"Unfortunately—yes!"

"Here, sit down!" said Taylor, pushing Vic into a deep chair. "Gus, bring us some tea or something. Say, Mr. Hardin, I'm confounded glad to see you. This place belongs, look, stock and barrel to anybody who'll bring back old Bob. Tell me. What are your plans?"

"That's it," said Vic, getting dejected. "There are no plans. But before you condemn me, hear me out. You're an experienced man. You took the *Martian Queen* to Pluto and you'll know a thing or two. I need a ship. I need a pilot. I need supplies and a million things I don't even suspect. I need help!"

Taylor was silent and thoughtful. He

looked at Amundsen's flag and then at a model of the first Moon ship. Then he called upstairs and a moment or two later an old retired admiral, who served as honorary recorder, permitted himself to be wheeled from his rooms.

"Admiral," said Taylor respectfully, when he had introduced Vic and outlined the problem, "there must be *somebody* fit to go. There has to be! Who would you suggest, sir?"

The old admiral furrowed a wind-beaten brow and thought for a long time. Suddenly his face lighted.

"Taylor, I've got it!"

Vic and the young captain leaned eagerly forward.

"You take him," said the admiral, promptly shaking hands and walking away.

Thus Vic Hardin found himself with a pilot and a ship which could be converted, found himself with several hundred members of an exclusive fraternity trying to outdo each other in favors.

He got the story to Malone before the edition went to bed and the morning papers were stuffed with copy about the project with old pictures of Taylor and the *Martian Queen*.

One month and a day later, in a sphere crammed with food and strange gear, Vic Hardin waved good-by to a battery of flashing cameras and shut the port.

He had learned a very great deal in that month and a day. He had learned that Commander Whitlow's radio message, traveling at the speed of light, might have been sent on the day he landed in some strange system and might have taken every one of those fourteen years getting back.

HE HAD learned about a "field drive," which was just making its appearance in space ships of the time and which, when the speed of light was reached, ran on collected particles of energy residual in space. He had learned painfully—for his arithmetic was bad—to calculate the "curve of space" and to perform rudimentary navigation and pilotage. And he had learned, hardest of all, to do without cigarettes.

Taylor took the ship slowly up to a thousand feet on repulse fields and then squared away for the nearest star.

The crowd below shrank and shrank and then became a dot in a vast geometry of fields. Finally the sky turned black and the

Earth grew curved and Vic Hardin was convinced that he was on his way.

During the weeks which followed, Taylor's respect for Vic Hardin increased. Taylor had been an Army pilot up to his twenty-first year, graduating from the Space Flight School maintained at Amarillo at eighteen and riding the superspeeds for three years thereafter in the usual aimless atmosphere of military restraint. He had been lent, then, to the Naval Survey and had spent a violent year with Commodore Millan charting Saturn and Jupiter which project was not completed but ended by Millan's death. A surprised Army had received Taylor's resignation and the usual whispers of broken nerve followed him until his solo to Pluto had given him a distinguished reputation.

At twenty-nine, then, Captain Taylor could truthfully say that he had spent six of his last eight years "off Earth." And flying here in the rebuilt *Queen*, it looked probable to him that he would tally up a few more.

Taylor, watching his companion, grew appreciative day by day. Vic Hardin had a certain adaptable aplomb which blanketed any fears he might feel deep down. To see Earth and the Moon grow small, to behold the Sun dwindling to an unimpressive star, is an experience which has unnerved many a hardy rocket man. To be nothing amongst nothing, to be all encased in pitiless blackness so cold that air would liquify and solidify in an instant, are things upon which it is difficult to dwell without a shudder. For ships are frail. Their force shields can sometimes be pierced by a single insentient particle blasting through. Dwelling on that while hurtling along at a thousand times the speed of light, had crushed the wits of many a strong and able man. And does so even today.

Vic Hardin set up his typewriter so that the force of acceleration would still let the carriage slide, perched upon a provision case, and wrote his departure story.

He looked through the ports back at dwindling Sun and said, "I wish I had a smoke."

Their journey to their first system, Alpha Centauri, was filled with working and planning. The *Martian Queen*, by any modern standard, was cramped, uncomfortable, dangerous and slow. She required constant attention despite her automatic controls. Numerous small machinery habitually broke down. When a man wanted to sleep, he laid

himself out on a cartridge bank or a provision case. A flight meant wearing one's clothes for the duration. No prison ever offered less hospitality. Yet Vic Hardin and his pilot managed to be happy at it.

If our ancestors were superior men, it was a superiority of hardship and daring, but Vic Hardin and Taylor were to spend a long, long time under these circumstances.

Vic, amongst his tricks at repairing, control observation, cooking and studying found time to turn out copy. It was not natural to him not to turn out copy.

They were outrunning all communication. A radio note sent out from that ship, such were the crude communications of the time, would have been pitched down below the range of any possible receiver, such was their speed. The why of all this copy bothered Taylor.

"When we get to the first place and look around, then I send what I got here," Vic said.

"But it won't reach there for years!"

"Okay, so it won't reach for years. But a story is a story."

Taylor looked closely at his friend. "An assignment is really serious business to you, isn't it? I don't think you'll turn back until Whitlow is found."

"This old baby," said Vic, patting the bulkhead of the ship, "and you holding together, no."

"Have you any real idea of the size of a planet?" said Taylor, smiling.

"Sure. It's big."

"What if Whitlow was lost in the Canadian Northwest? Just one small plane down in a wilderness of trees. Think you'd have a good chance?"

"We'll find him."

"Why are you so sure," said Taylor, curious.

"Because I got orders to," said Vic and sat down to write a story about a comet they had just passed.

THEY fetched up in the bleak fastnesses of New Earth, long since discovered and explored and despaired of for its double gravity, poisonous swamps, lumbering beasts and two-hundred-mile per hour storms.

On a lonely stick in the middle of a rocky plateau the tattered fragments of an Explorer's Club flag drooped over a cairn and Taylor pulled forth the records left in it, opened the casque and added a copy sheet

of their own log. He came back to Vic beside the ship to tell him that Whitlow's records were not there and found a thoughtful Vic.

"Coming in," said Vic, "I saw an awful lot of ground. Seas and continents and mountains ten miles high."

"Well?" said Taylor.

"A man could get awful lost in this place," said Vic. "What I mean, it's big."

"Twice Earth," said Taylor. "You want to put a story in that casque?"

Vic shook his head. "It's about sundown. I want to see the Sun."

They plotted it out, when darkness came, although the Sun was a very small star and better seen even through an optical instrument than with the naked eye. The constellations were all askew and this world was full of strange sounds. Vic entered the ship and beamed their antenna. He began to pound brass, a newly learned art of which he was proud. Wireless telegraphy would reach across in years what they had traversed in a few weeks. Two monitor stations on Earth would someday pick up these dots and dashes and some day they would reach Malone's big presses.

The next day they leisurely bobbed in New Earth's stratosphere, their beams for detecting the presence of metal turned on full, their radio alive and listening, their eyes upon the sores of swamps and cruelty of mountains below.

The following day they were still doing it.

"How many planets," asked Vic, "do you suppose there are in a fourteen-light-year range of Earth?"

"I'd guess several hundred."

"It is going to be a long job!" said Vic.

But no matter how long the job, they made the best of their time. Vic kept a minicam running and his antenna beamed at Earth with a flood of copy always going out. Taylor filled notebooks with precise script on matters of technical interest.

They moved from planet to planet. They visited planets no one had ever dreamed existed, even Whitlow, and they moved on to more. They had adventures which would have made more stolid men nervous wrecks for life. And they kept looking.

Once, when they had been out thirteen months, they caught a message which they thought was from Whitlow. It was in the Caligar System, a tiny star not much bigger than Sun surrounded by a huge number of

planets none of which was habitable.

With eagerness they traced it, for the static here was bad and they could not decipher the message, and located it as coming from Vega. Their excitement pitched high for twelve hours and then the message conditions cleared and they knew what it was. They were fifteen light years from Vega and they were receiving, no more and no less, than the message which had begun their original quest.

It was Whitlow's SOS, the same SOS which had started Vic Hardin on his way.

This made them glum, for as a beam it could come from either way and might not be Vega at all but a hundred and eighty degrees reverse. They had been glum anyway for the planet which they currently explored was a strange blue mass of terrible growth whose only life was tiny and insectine. And then Vic conceived his idea.

Up to this moment he was a reporter only, recording exploration but contributing nothing. But there was nothing wrong with his mind; on the contrary.

"We're leaving!" he announced suddenly.

Taylor, who had been half asleep in dejection over a chart, came awake to the brightness of Vic's grin. "Where? Why?"

"Son," said Vic, "can we take shots on this Caligar to estimate our exact distance from it?"

"Certainly."

"And we can drift motionless in space, can't we?"

"Yes."

"Close the hatches. We're gone."

The astonished Taylor complied.

WITH Vic plotting, they went three light days toward Vega and stopped as nearly as one can stop in space. Taylor did not yet understand and when Vic, after waiting forty-eight hours, ordered them on a new course at breakneck speed, Taylor thought his companion had lost his wits. When they traveled eight light days in this new direction, only to stop again, Taylor was sure of it.

But Taylor's opinion abruptly altered. Suddenly, after they had been there but an hour, the SOS came in again.

Vic Hardin had invented a method of location in use for many centuries after. He was playing tag in space with a radio message!

Taylor's liking for Vic Hardin had been

genuine. There was respect in it now. A great deal of respect. And he set himself to do the manual labor of the plotting with which they burned the next sixty Earth days.

They outran the message and caught it again. It was indistinct. It merely said, amongst much interference, "—ALIVE—STORES—AS SOON AS POSSIBLE IF—INJURED—WHITLOW." But it was enough and it could be plotted on a curve and it was plotted on a curve of intercepts.

When they had finished they had a small segment of a sphere. Its diameter averaged thirteen light years. Its azimuth each time, necessary as well to the drawing of that sphere, indicated an unnamed star in Vega's direction.

If jubilation had not fortified them they would have been exhausted by the work, the constant acceleration and deceleration, the tension of waiting and, above all, this long continued laboring in their ship without respite. That they were now nearly as far from their destination as they had been on Earth did not trouble them in the slightest. The weeks which lay before them now were pure pleasure.

Traveling with Sun abeam to port, Vic could occupy his time getting rid of copy as they voyaged. He had become very used to telegraphy and often now he composed with the key instead of his typewriter. That he might be back home long before these messages arrived did not slacken his labor.

For some time past his material had taken on a strange, visionary aspect; but he was beginning to see a dream.

He saw the people of Earth, blinded to the stars by the flash of their lighted signs, cramped on their land by outworn economics and too little food. He saw a planet warring over lands and personalities not worth a breath when compared to time. For he had seen planets with green meadows waiting, planets with their mountains full of fuel and ore, planets with splendid stars to light them and crystal air to breathe. And he not only saw for himself how petty was that life on Earth, he saw also that he must make his readers see.

Man was not an insignificant bug on the small planet of a smaller sun. Man was a gigantic, a strong, a magnificent creature, a god who could conquer All.

He told them of the fog planet and the strange sentient beings there who might

live forever within ten miles of a neighbor and never know he was about. He told them of the sea planet where no land now showed. He told them of the crystal world and how it looked at sunrise.

And he took his tricks with Taylor, turn about at the watch, plunging at a thousand times the speed of light toward Whitlow.

What they would find, Vic did not speculate. He had in the back of his head the gray little woman in the shabby apartment who wanted her Bob. She had waited another fifteen months now.

They called the star Whitlow. And through the groggy days when they never received more than four hours sleep at a time and ate cold food and breathed foul air, Whitlow became to look to their imaginations not like a man but like that point of light they chased, seen blue in their leaded ports, turned bluer by the terrific speed with which they approached it, made visible only by a reducing filter which spaced its rays.

Once they came near disaster. They were into a System they did not know existed and almost upon a gigantic mass which seemed to fill all space. Their guiding star went out suddenly. A new star, a dead star ten thousand times the size of Sun and yet only a pinpoint in this immensity, had almost sucked them in with gravity.

They went over it, tumbling wildly off their course and had the second near coincidence of striking its dead twin. They missed this also. Two hammer blows were felt but their force screens had held against billion ton bits of space dust. Then they were clear.

UNSTEADILY Taylor rose, holding his bruised side, a little sick.

"Do you suppose that knocked a hole in the hull?"

"We're alive," said Vic. "Plot it so some poor guy doesn't bump his nose some day."

He looked back through the ports, but nothing could be seen. The incident now could be read on the meters alone. They had passed between that gruesome binary, burned dead eons back, Drago which, one hundred years later was to claim the lives of five hundred men in one fatal, forgetful instant.

Seventy-eight days from their fix, they braked down and gazed upon their goal, Whitlow.

It was an insignificant star to them, so far as size went. But it was history making in

its import.

About one half again the size of Sun, Whitlow burned with a clear brilliance in the telescope. And at this distance of fifty million miles, its planets could be seen, twenty-nine of them.

Nearly sixteen years ago they knew that Commander Whitlow must have sent a message from this place. Now either Whitlow, and whatever remained of the expedition, might be found amongst these twenty-nine planets.

The numerousness of worlds balked them for a little while and they hung for nearly ten hours making intricate recordings of orbits in an effort to get a plot of this system and discover which planets were nearest and which furthest from their sun. It seemed, although their time of observation was hardly long enough, so crude were their instruments, to be conclusive, that this was no pancake system such as Earth's. There were two distinct planes of rotation tipped at seventy degrees to one another as though this star had fused from two stars and two systems, each having planets.

Considering the brilliance of the present sun and measuring the various orbits, they concluded that Whitlow had probably taken the eighth to twelfth orbits as his goal and on this assumption they cruised toward the eighth and landed there on its moon side.

It was a terrible view. A howling sand-storm was in force, sweeping over their ship and shaking it in gusts. Gaunt specters of pinnacles showed themselves yellow and red on every side and a wide blue chasm reached forever downward near at hand. They did not open the ports. They did not dare. This scarlet and saffron world was dead and if it still had air, it had no promise of life for anyone who could have landed there.

They slept for all the storm, so exhausted were they, and took off again in the night.

The planet of the ninth orbit was all the way across the sun but the eleventh was nearer to hand. Rested now, and feeling great confidence, they approached.

It had an atmosphere and, as they settled to sub-curvature height, they realized that here must be a landfall worth making.

In the middle of a huge savannah of grass, then, they landed. A cautious venture out the airlock assured them they could breathe and after scouting the way with that caution which became inborn in all voyageurs, so many and unexpected could be the dangers

there in wait, they found themselves and three-quarter gravity ground, breathing pure air, luxuriating in sunlight and suddenly reborn from that metal monster which had so closely housed them.

If their impatience had not been so great to find Whitlow they would have lingered here for, if any two men needed rest, they did. Such was their nearness to collapse after their hardships that they could not walk naturally but stumbled and fell down.

Vic laughed and tossed up handfuls of grass which settled and spread in the gentle wind. "It's paradise. We'll name it Paradise! I saw a sea when we landed and a river!"

"I see a saw," said Taylor.

They laughed over it as though it was something very funny.

"I sea a saw!" said Vic and began to howl with laughter.

"I sea a seasaw!" said Taylor and rolled on the ground.

VIC SUDDENLY sat up. He grimly composed himself. "Hold it, son. We're not going crazy at this late date. Where's our friend. That's the question."

Taylor stopped laughing. He had verged so close to hysteria that it shook him. He went into the ship and began to pound out a call for Whitlow.

Somewhere in this system that message might be received, even sixteen years late. And all that day and night they took turns breathing good air and resting and talking into the mike or pounding brass.

They were much revived by morning. They looked, even to each other now, like tattered scarecrows, unshaven and seedy and unbathed. They could have found water and remedied this but they were too anxious to get on.

At noon, time having been ample for them to have gotten their messages to the furthest planets, with their receiver on full to the emergency band, they drifted upward at finite speeds and scanned the planet with care.

It was a beautiful planet, a habitable planet with all the things man needs. Vegetable life was there but, apparently, no higher forms. It was even temperatured, having very small polar caps, rotating at right angles to its sun and so giving itself no changes of season. But it was not beautiful to them when they could not find Whitlow.

They debated then as to their next step. The thirteenth planet and the ninth were about equidistant. They decided to be orderly and take the ninth.

They spent eight fruitless days cruising it. They found again that it was habitable and beautiful but not to them. They only landed once and then to get a supply of water.

The twelfth seemed closest now and they made a speech of it, growing more careful as they curbed their impatience, sending out a continual stream of messages both to Earth, thirteen years away, and to a possible listener in this system. And although another week was spent it only increased their weariness.

The fourteenth was nearest now and they cruised it to find their third habitable world in this system but their only gain was micro-film and notes for no trace whatever of metal did they find.

Their hearts were low enough when they came to the thirteenth planet, but lower still when they beheld it.

The thirteenth planet of the Whitlow System is, to this day, one of the wonder sights of that galaxy. All manner of adjectives have been expended upon it. It has been called the Rainbow World and perhaps this best describes it.

For the thirteenth planet is a system in itself, a central world surrounded by moon worlds, eight in number, which, each one is a world in itself. The largest of these "moons" is three thousand miles in diameter and the smallest about six hundred. The nearest orbit is about one hundred thousand miles and the furthest about one million two hundred thousand.

The central planet, aside from the one continent of Taylor, is of no great value, having four gravities and being mainly of water. The superabundance of atmosphere and the rapid rotation of the central planet also render it uninhabitable. But of the eight "moons" there is only one which is useless, that one being the smallest which is now domed.

In its pristine state, the sight of it was startling enough to these two haggard men. They saw before them not one planet to search but perhaps nine and their hearts nearly failed them.

They swooped close in and observed the extent of the water and the littleness of the land, saw the enormous rainbows arching through the sky, saw the jewel-like radiance

of the "moons" and drew out, stunned by the fanfare of color which had greeted them.

Vic pounded no brass about it then. He was too disheartened.

Methodically they took the moons one by one. On the first they found no atmosphere but on the second they were amazed to see a rainstorm slanting down in its polar region. They watched it from afar as though they had a toy under inspection.

Their beams here connected and it brought them quickly back to their search even though the contact was an iron mountain.

They progressed out to the fifth planet-moon before they, amazed enough already, could again be startled. They saw below them the regular earthworks which meant fortifications or city walls. They swooped down to find, instead of a living city, a dead thing of shattered towers and broken stairs, with nothing alive within it.

THIS STARTED Vic pounding brass once more for here was speculation enough to fill, as indeed it was destined to do in the centuries to come, a thousand thousand learned books which, at last, resolved upon no solution whatever.

The eighth planet-moon was nearest to them and to this they went. They circled it, saw its atmosphere and its verdure, its storms and calms and seas and came closer to begin a systematic scan.

The search was over so swiftly that their battered wits could not comprehend it. They did not need their radars nor even much of their eyes. On a plateau of about one hundred square miles in white lime letters ten thousand feet long was scrawled "SOS."

They hovered there, their eyes fixed upon that huge and welcome marker. Then Vic the strong, the tough, the newspaperman injured to all emotions, sat down suddenly and began to cry.

Taylor took the ship down and the *Martian Queen* landed near a clear road to the north of the sign. They opened the door on a gentle evening wind which smelled of flowers and walked forth, alert for danger or a hail and so passed down the cliff to a cluster of huts in the dusk.

There was a fire burning in a clearing and a man crouched over it roasting something on a stick. He did not turn at their footsteps and Vic Hardin stood at his elbow before he looked up.

He was a very old man, ragged and thin

and his sight was evidently made uncertain by staring into the flames.

"Sir, I am Vic Hardin of the *New York Star*. May I introduce my captain, Gene Taylor."

The old man stood up. He put the stick carefully aside and wiped off his palm before extending it.

"Commander Robert Whitlow, sir."

But the hand was not extended toward them but off to the side and Vic Hardin, looking closely, saw that Robert Whitlow was blind.

They shook gravely and sat down on the stones before the fire.

"I knew you would come," said the old man quietly, and fumbled for and found his stick.

* * * * *

When the three men who remained alive of the Whitlow Expedition arrived in New York City, a stunned press and a wild populace received them. The mobs on Fifth Avenue were so thick and so hysterical that it took fourteen hours to pass along the street from one end to the other. They had known of this rescue five days before Hardin's arrival. The mighty press of J. P. Malone had thundered headlines almost every hour of those five, as Hardin's story, teletyped from Mars, rolled in.

Vic Hardin's copy snowballed into columns and columns on his arrival and pages of comment from other papers followed suit.

Sitting on a folded top of a car, Whitlow waved back to the faces he could not see and his gaunt men grinned as they were buried under ovations. Vic Hardin had not intended to be in this parade. He had intended to cover it. But before five blocks had gone by he was thrust with Taylor into Whitlow's car and the crowds bellowed themselves hoarse.

The needle in the haystack hunt was ended. The alive had been returned from the dead. Newspapers had been sold by the billions and the story of Vic Hardin had become, all in an instant, a legend. His book, "How We Found Whitlow," sold through a hundred editions and became the model of most of those books which followed. He became a boy's dream of grandeur and so he has remained.

New worlds untrod by man, new suns never seen, new frontiers untouched, all these Vic Hardin gave to Earth, far above the return of a sick and weary old man.

(Concluded on page 124)

THE UNWILLING HERO

(Concluded from page 107)

Space exploration was suddenly popular. Money was abruptly available for it. Plans of conquest of new worlds were formed properly, as they should be, by thinking governments and Man was no longer a insignificant nothing on a minor planet of a minor sun. Man was suddenly tall, suddenly the proprietor of uncounted worlds, possessor of his right, ruler of the Universe.

But probably Vic Hardin was not thinking about that the day of his return. He makes no comment in his letters or his books of what J. P. Malone must certainly have

said to him in extravagant compliment on his return.

The big moment of that day for Vic Hardin was not found in the shouts of the crowds nor the glare of the headlines. He writes of it simply in his autobiography.

He got all the reward he wanted in a shabby little apartment uptown when he brought Bob Whitlow home.

An old lady, gray with waiting gave him his reward when she took his hand and said, holding back the tears,

"God bless you."