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Invisible Ships

By Harl Vincent



CAPTAIN STONE of the Fifty-first Terrestrials ("Rocks" to the gang in the barracks when they were sure he was not within earshot), stood in the

open door of the C.O.'s office, looking gloomily out over the plains of Thrygis in the direction of Seritania, queen city of the planet Venus.

He meditated on the changing fortunes of war and cursed the recent move of the Martians which had cost him the lives of the two best men in his outfit and was now bringing new terror and despair to the cities of the allied planets, Earth and Venus.

When the Allies, at the end of the sixth bloody year of the Second Interplanetarian War, threw their entire resources into the heavens in the form of vast fleets of space ships, it appeared that the war was won and the Martians effectually held off from the two inner planets. Indeed, the red planet itself was so thoroughly blockaded as to shut off the source of supplies to the many ships of the enemy still giving battle to the allied forces.

Then had come this startling new development. Seritanis, a mere thirty miles distant, was crumbling. The great flat-topped pyramids that were her buildings yielded one after another to the devastating force of a mysterious ray from far out in the heavens, the proud structures raining into the streets and crushing the populace under enormous piles of sand and finely divided metallic particles to which they were reduced. And panic reigned in all other cities of the planet, none knowing when a similar bombardment might be started elsewhere.

The destroying rays generated no excessive heat in the annihilation of the tall edifices and carried with them none of the deafening sounds that accompanied the disruption of the atmosphere by the various destructive energy beams previously used. And more baffling still was the fact that the source of the ray shifted constantly and thus rendered useless the direction finders of the Allies. The scientists of Mars had discovered a new and deadly weapon.

“Rotten war!” the captain grunted. “Wonder if it’ll ever end.” He tossed away the frayed end of his cigar and turned to enter the room.

The major, “Bulldog” Carlson, was reeling off a tape from the ethergraph recorder. “Look at that, Stoney!” he roared, tossing it to the captain, “Orders from the Home Office. All of our ships on the bum, too; every damn one of them needing repairs and some so bad we hardly dare trust them out of the atmosphere. And those idiots back home order us to send out every last one after a will-o’-the-wisp or something. Can you beat it?”

Captain Stone scanned the tape from end to end, frowning angrily. “We’ve reported fully too, sir,” he growled. “The dumb-bells! It looks like suicide to me, for a lot of the boys.”

“Sure is, and they know it down there at the Home Office, too. Lot of slide-rule navigators and story-book fighters, they are—what can you expect of them?”

“Besides, they’ve just sent this batch of recruits. Have to use some of them or the ships’ll be undermanned.”

“Yes,” the C.O. grated. “Just to make matters even worse. A flock of greenhorns to fight with. Well, such is life—in this lousy war anyway. Gotta do it regardless, Stoney. Let’s hop to it.”

He glared savagely at the offending tape and pressed a button. In a half hour the entire force would have reported, the regulars at their posts and the recruits for inspection.

“I’ll command my regular ship, sir, the 9B5?” Stone inquired. “And the usual squadron?”

“Certainly. What shape are they in?”

“Fair. At least we’ll keep ’em going. But I’ve lost my two best men, you know—Hargreaves and Smith. In the

Rudan Theatre collapse, the first of the new disasters. They were in Seritanis on leave.”

“Oh, yes. That’s bad, Stoney, but I don’t see anything for it but to grab yourself a couple of good recruits and do the best you can under the circumstances.”

“Yes, sir, I will, sir.” Captain Stone forgot to salute as he turned on his heel. They were close friends, he and the C.O.

HIS grouch intensified as he wandered across the field. Hargreaves had been a crack engineer and Smith the finest ray operator in the service. He had no heart for the picking of recruits to replace them, so left the job to his first officer and ducked into the 9B5 to give her a final looking over.

The little scout ships of the Fifty-first sure did need fixing, he thought. And all on account of this neglect by the Home Office. A thousand of them there were at the base in Thrygia, good ships and speedy, but they had been considered useless during the past few months. The big cruisers and battleships were far better for blockade and defense lines. Never counted on needing the little fellows again, had they?

Now they were wanted by the Home Office for immediate service, these trim little “9” ships, and they were in rotten shape for any kind of a campaign. Many of them had but one ray projector that could be operated; others had no spare oxygen apparatus; some relied on a single generator of the gravity energy which propelled them, the spare generator having burned out months before and no replacements being available since.

But the men responded to the call with alacrity. They were tired of inactivity and besides, the niners always managed to come through somehow—most of them.

In groups of five the niners took off; they were to search for the source of the new Martian ray in independent squadrons, each squadron with its flagship and commanding officer, whose task it was to direct their movements and to keep in constant touch with headquarters by etherphone.

Captain Stone, officially recorded as commanding officer of squadron 101, sat in the control room of the 9B5 when she took off and, gravity field intensified to full repulsion from the planet, soared up through the low cloud ceiling and into the blue. Before him were two screens, one connected through magnetic waves with the master position chart at headquarters, the other his own locally operated televue. At his flicking of a tiny lever, the latter was illuminated and he saw the four egg-shaped vessels that followed closely behind. His squadron! His grouch softened as he thrilled anew to the responsibility, to the call of battle.

On the replica of the master position chart glowed hundreds of tiny light flecks, some red, some blue and some green. These were the ships of the defense fleet in the sector to which they were heading, the colors distinguishing stationary supply depot, cruiser and battleship, respectively, and all accurately locating the various units by means of the electro-magnetic waves relayed through the great re-transmitter at Thrygis. He studied this chart carefully for a time, his brow wrinkled in thought. In the black background, behind the colored lights, was a reproduction of the heavens into which they were boring. The sun, partly masked in the reproduction by a ray quencher, shone hazily in the upper right hand corner. He spoke into the microphone, whose support was strapped to his chest.

“Pilots attention!” he snapped.

“Bear toward quadrangle 298 and head for the two cruisers in its southwest corner. Then pass between them and head for Alpha Centauri. Acceleration maximum.”

The voice of the loud speaker brought four “Yes, sirs,” to him from the pilots of his other vessels. His own pilot, a few feet away at the controls of the 9B5, waved his hand and grinned. The ship surged violently ahead and an immediate rising whine beneath their feet told of the functioning of the internal gravity mechanism and acceleration compensators, without which their tremendous speed in outer space would be impossible for the human body to withstand.

“H-hm!” Stone grunted. “Good thing those are working. Hope they stay that way. How’d you like to be squashed flat by the acceleration or go knocking around in the ship like a peanut in a barrel? Are we out of the atmosphere, Dan?”

“I wouldn’t, sor—answerin’ your first question,” answered the pilot, Dan Healy, “we are, sor—answerin’ your second. And niver a flicker of the timperature indicaytor, sor.”

Healy was inordinately proud of his ability to bring any kind of a space ship in or out of an atmosphere without heating the hull plates unduly. It was a delicate touch, that ability to sense the precise balance between speed and atmospheric friction at which the temperature might be kept from rising above a safe point.

Someone was standing before the captain now and he looked up from the chart to see a tall youngster in the uniform of the scout service and with the insignia of the Terrestrial War College on his sleeve.

“Another of those damned dudes that fight by slide-rule!” he growled.

“What’s your name, man, and what do you want? Speak up!”

The tall rookie flushed hotly, then paled. The reputation of “Rocks” could not have escaped him in the bunk house, however short his time in the service. Hard as his name they said this captain was, second only to Bulldog Carlson, the C.O.

“Yes, sir—beg your pardon, sir,” he stammered, “I’m the new beam apparatus expert. Victor Masters, sir. I wanted to report the stern projectors out of order.”

“Hmph!” the captain snorted, eying him up and down with the disdain of the old campaigner for the college-bred under-officer. “Didn’t you think I knew it? Expert are you? Well, why in hell don’t you fix ’em instead of standing there like a ninny and shaking like a leaf? What’s the matter—scared?”

“Yes, sir. That is, no sir. But there are no spare parts. We’re defenseless astern, sir.”

Captain Stone still surveyed the recruit contemptuously. A college boy! Next thing the kid’d be telling him how to run the war. And he was white as a sheet; shivering. No guts; none of them had any guts. Suddenly he laughed.

“Victor, eh?” he roared. “Swell name for a fighting man! Bet you’ve never seen a scrap in your life. You’d run like the devil was after you if you did. Learned how to retreat by reading it out of a book, didn’t you? And now—Victor—run right along, prance out of here and back to your ray apparatus.”

The rookie was standing stiffly at attention. His checks were very white indeed and his eyes burned strangely.

“Yes, sir,” he whispered hoarsely, through set lips, “Very well, sir.”

His heels clicked smartly as he turned and walked stiff-legged to the

communicating door. The captain exchanged winks with Dan Healy, who was grinning in appreciation of the scene. At the door this amazing recruit turned around and they saw that a deep flush had replaced his former pallor.

“What do you think of Hubert as a fighting name?” he asked softly. Then he was gone. Dan Healy turned suddenly to his control panels, his face red and his shoulders shaking.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” the captain muttered. “Now who do you suppose it was told him my name is Hubert?”

Discipline was lax on the niners. On a battleship, or on one of the cruisers even, an under-officer would have gone to the brig for addressing a superior as had this recruit. But Stone did not even rise from his seat. True, he glowered with rage for a moment. Then something suspiciously like a chuckle escaped his lips. He hunched his shoulders and studied the maze of cross lines on the master chart. His squadron, he saw, was heading directly for the quadrangle he had specified.

Promptly forgetting the incident of the fresh rookie, he gave himself over to speculation as to the outcome of this mad search of the heavens for the mysterious destroyer. What hope was there of locating so intangible a thing? What chance of their success?

A HALF an hour later they had passed between the two cruisers and were heading into the void. A heliogram from one of the big ships advised him there was no indication as to the possible location of the generator of the new rays; direction finders, both magnetic and reflecting, were still of no avail. The great telescopes were searching the skies in vain, they reported. Certain it was that the source of the

terrible energy was outside the defense lines. But whoever heard of a destructive beam which could be projected more than fifty thousand miles through space and from a constantly shifting projector that must be carried at the speed of light in order to cover the angles indicated at five-minute intervals? It was a hopeless and thankless quest.

Etherphone advices from headquarters told of the continued destruction in Seritanis. Estimates of the total number of lives lost ran into the hundreds of thousands. The populace was fleeing the city in all possible haste and so great was the crowding of all roads and air stages that hundreds of lives were being lost in the panics and rioting that resulted. Police and military authorities were entirely helpless.

Orders were to patrol the blackness out here between sixty and one hundred thousand miles from the planet, with a continuous watch at the direction finders. That was the job of Masters, the new ray operator and beam apparatus expert. Captain Stone’s thoughts again dwelt on the rookie. Better take a walk aft and see how things were coming along in the cubicle where the dude was stationed.

Victor! He snorted as he thought of the recent conversation. But a glance into the screen of the televue erased these thoughts from his mind in an instant. He froze with horror. Pictured on the screen before his eyes, he saw that two ships of his squadron had taken on a sudden eerie luminescence. Then, in two puffs of vapor, they vanished! Snuffed out like candles. The enemy was near!

He pressed a button and shouted into the microphone, “Masters! Masters!” Why in the devil hadn’t the dude found them with the direction finders and told him?

There was no reply. "Hold to your course, Dan!" he bellowed. "I'm going aft."

He dashed from the control room and went roaring through the passage to the room of the intricate beam apparatus. Victor Masters lay face down beside the pedestal of one of his direction finders. He dropped to his knees and rolled the limp body over, lifting the eyelids.

"Fainted, by God!" he exclaimed in disgust. "Got a line on the enemy and keeled over like a girl. Scared—the swab!"

In the next moment he was at the companionway shouting down to the engine room for one of the oilers. Devil of a mess this was! Most important man of the crew, outside of Dan Healy, and he has to be a swooner—a white-livered skunk that faints in the face of real danger. And here they were, about to meet the enemy! Lord only knew how many of them there'd be or how close in they were.

"Here, get me a pail of water," he puffed, when the oiler came running, "Soak his head good—the bum!"

He was tearing open Masters' shirt as he spoke and he noticed the whiteness of the recruit's skin. Soft! All these youngsters from the War College were soft—yellow too. Why in the devil they trained these kids in a namby-pamby school with nothing but books to fight with and with silly drills and maneuvers, he couldn't make out—ever. Gave them their first bar without having won it in active service, too.

"Wot'll I do, sir," asked the oiler, who was standing by with a full bucket, "douse 'im, sir?"

"Yes, plenty. Snap him out of this and tell him I want him to report to me at once."

The captain rose and turned on his heel as the mechanic threw the entire

contents of the pail over Masters' head and shoulders. He was disgusted with the man who had fainted and, besides, headquarters must hear of this latest development. Bulldog Carlson would have a fit of apoplexy when he heard of this.

DAN HEALY turned inquiring eyes on the captain when he again seated himself before the viewing screens.

"Fainted!" his superior growled. "This guy Masters flops like a scary woman when he sees trouble coming."

"No foolin'."

"Fact. Just like all these pretty boy, silk-stocking fighters, he hasn't got the—"

But Victor Masters snapped to attention before him as he spoke.

"You asked me to report, sir," he faltered, pale and shaking.

"I did. You—you ninny," the captain sputtered. "What have you to report? A weak stomach?"

"No, sir. I detected the beam, sir."

"Yeah! Then fainted, didn't you?"

Masters flushed angrily. "I did not, sir," he maintained. "I was struck down by emanations from the direction finder when this new energy was picked up."

"Likely story! Know they got two of our ships? Know how?"

"I know they got them, saw it in my local screen. But, captain," Masters' voice rose excitedly, "there are no attacking ships within range. I think I know what happened and how they are deceiving us with this new ray of theirs."

"Oh, you do, eh? What makes you think so?"

"It's a curved beam, sir. Had a line on it twice from separate angles. My idea is that they've a generator way out somewhere and are projecting this ray in a huge arc that ends at Seritanis; curving it

by magnetic or other impulses and swinging it around constantly so that it always seems to enter the city at a different angle. It was an accidental contact of the ray that destroyed your two vessels, and a lucky thing it is it didn't get us all."

Captain Stone stared at the man's flushed features. Might be something in this at that. He remembered that light rays are deflected by the force of gravity when passing a celestial body and thus become curved rather than straight lines. In fact, a set of correction factors which he used enabled him to allow for just such curvatures in his navigation of the heavens.

"Think you can locate the source?" he asked with a hint of new respect in his voice.

"I'll try, sir, and I believe there's a chance. I've determined one frequency I can identify with the ray and have the evidence of two angular measurements. If— if——"

"If what?"

"You'll have to change your course, sir."

Captain Stone purpled. "What do you mean?" he roared. "Want to tell me how to command this squadron?"

Again Masters paled and bit his lip. "No, sir," he stated, after a tense moment, "but if you'd like to locate this new menace, it will be necessary to work from a different course. We must be paralleling the orbit of Venus, traveling in the same direction and at the same velocity as the planet. Otherwise my measurements will be of no avail."

"H-hm, I see. You want to maintain a definite position with reference to the planet so as to get a base line. Sure, I get you. But, God help you if this is a bum steer. Go on now and get back to

your instruments. You'll have your new course."

Masters saluted and was gone.

Dan Healy turned around with a twinkle in his eye. "The bye seems to know his business, sor," he said guilelessly.

"Shut up!" snapped the captain, bending over his chart.

Then Dan found himself very busy, as did the pilots of the two other ships, for the orders shouted into the microphone called for rapid manipulation of the controls. The 9B5 vibrated to the throb of her atomic engines as additional power was called for to increase and stabilize solar attraction in swinging into the orbit prescribed by the ray operator.

The captain flipped a lever and called into the microphone to the youngster who had brought about this unexpected change in plans. "Got it, Masters?" he roared.

"Yes, sir, to a hair. Stand by, sir," the loud speaker blared. The rookie's voice had taken on new confidence.

"How the divil did the bye know our two ships was pulverized by a crooked ray, sor?" Healy asked.

The captain stared. "Lord! I don't know," he admitted. "A couple of smoke puffs and they were gone. I didn't see anything else." Then into the microphone, "Say, Masters, you sure about this curved beam and that it's what got our two niners?"

"I am, sir. It was a chance contact as the thing swung on its measured course through the ether. That was when I first picked it up—just before it hit them."

"Certain?"

"I am, sir. Had it on three sights and they indicated a definite radius of curvature—but wait—here it is again!" Masters' voice broke on a rising note.

The captain peered into the screen of the televue as if he expected to see the invisible ray playing on its surface. Maybe this young ray operator was a coward at heart but he sure did know his onions when it came to the technical end of his game. "Keep me advised, Masters," he ordered.

"Yes, sir—one minute." The voice from the loud speaker rose in pitch. "Five points—no, six—captain, I've got it! Focus in quadrangle 614, about ninety thousand miles from the planet!"

"Check it, Masters!"

"Right-o! Seven—I was wrong, captain ... eight ... nine. Here—wait! Of course ... should have known—the thing's on an orbit of its own, swinging around the planet. A satellite of Venus!"

"What?"

"Sure—built by the Martians. Distance is correct as given, sir. The inclination of its orbit is—just a moment—I have it. Six degrees, twenty-nine minutes to the equator. Their velocity is just sufficient to follow the planet's rotation and keep directly in line with Seritanis with the exception of the six and a half degree swing either way which makes it still more difficult for us to locate them from the surface. Clever thing."

"Good work, kid!" Rocks was softening.

There was no reply from the loud speaker.

"Masters!" the captain called. Then, disgustedly, "Fainted again, by the Lord Harry! Guess he got the dope, though. Hop to it, Dan!"

Once more his orders rattled into the microphone and his three ships swung about on a new course.

"Will ye be goin' aft to look after the bye, sor?"

"Yes—dammit!" Captain Stone

stormed through the communicating door for the second time.

MASTERS was prone as before and, in a fresh rage, the captain rolled him over. Rotten break this was! Why the devil hadn't he picked his own recruits?

The loud speaker in the ray apparatus cubicle was bellowing a frantic call. Parry, pilot of the 9C8, was yelling bloody murder. Enemy vessels approaching. The abbreviated squadron in danger! He forgot Masters and rushed to the emergency control box, plugging in and illuminating the master screen.

"What's this?" he shouted into the microphone. "An enemy fleet, you say?"

"Three cruisers, sir!" boomed the speaker. "Swinging in through quadrangle 41."

He peered into the sector designated and saw that Parry had reported correctly. Three of the great spherical battle cruisers of the Martian fleet were looming close. A glance at the still figure of Masters told him that no immediate help could be expected from that source.

"Hell's bells!" he yelled. "My ray operator is out cold, Parry. You all right? Are you, Farmer?"

"Yes, sir." "Right, sir," came the replies from the 9C8 and 9F1.

"Good. Break formation now and make independent attacks with your disintegrators as soon as you're within range. Meanwhile, I'll see if I can get our own ray working. Then I'll join you."

He turned to the mechanism of the forward d-ray projectors and fiddled with the controls. It was a long time since he'd fussed with this apparatus. He saw his other two vessels close in on the enemy, the purplish pencils of their d-ray reaching for the great globular hulls of the enemy cruisers. Then the vacuum tubes of his

own projector glowed into life and he pressed the releases of the twin rays to make sure they operated properly.

In the screen of the televue he saw that the three cruisers had spread out to form a triangle. Then, before he could shout his orders into the microphone, the three huge spheres melted into the blackness of the heavens; vanished as utterly as if they had been swallowed by some Gargantuan monster of space. Just blinked out, like snuffed out lights, and were no more visible in the screen. He couldn't believe his eyes, for the rays from his vessels had not yet contacted with their hulls. Besides, there was none of the fireworks accompanying the contact of the d-ray with a metallic object. Had the cruisers been destroyed by their own curved ray from farther out, if there was such a thing? He gazed at the screen, speechless with amazement.

"What is it, sir?" asked the voice of Masters at his shoulder.

But the captain gave him no heed, contenting himself with a series of bellowing sounds addressed to the microphone. Masters had come to, he knew, but what in hell good was that now? Parry and Farmer should know something about the fate of those three Martian cruisers. They didn't, though; the thing was as mysterious to them as to their captain. The enemy ships had simply disappeared without trace or an explanation of the phenomenon. Their master screens showed only the star-studded blackness of the heavens.

Masters, without further speech, had turned to his direction finders and was busily engaged with their mechanisms when the captain stamped from the cubicle and returned to the control room.

"What's up, sor?" inquired Dan Healy.

"Didn't you hear?"

"Sure and I did—from the speaker. But what does it mane, sor?"

"How in the devil do I know?" The captain's eyes were glued to the screen now and he resented even Dan's chatter. The etherphone was shrilling its insistent call. Bulldog Carlson wanted to know why in the bloody blank blank he hadn't reported. He threw the switch with a savage jerk and stilled the clamor.

Masters's voice came through the loud speaker. "I think, sir," he stated, "they've found some way of making themselves invisible and that they are closing in on us."

"Fiddlesticks! You stick to your direction finders, you yellow striped night school soldier!"

"I am, sir." Master's voice was steely but respectful. "It is the direction finder that gives me the idea. I'm telling you that one of the enemy cruisers is approaching each of your vessels, whether you can see them or not."

"You're crazy as a coot! Invisible!" The captain rose from his seat in a black rage. He'd go aft and sock that nut of a rookie in the eye. Knock some sense into him.

Then the lights went out; just blinked out as had the enemy vessels. The musical purr of the atomic motors slithered down the scale to inaudible pitch and stopped. All was silent as a tomb; the 9B5 had gone dead as a mackerel.

"Lord! Perhaps he was right," gasped Stone, "they have paralyzed us." He groped in the darkness for the communicating door, muttered imprecations of Dan Healy ringing in his ears. What a vocabulary that Irishman had!

There came a lurch and a heavy clanking jar as they were drawn to a larger body and held fast. The enemy vessel,

invisible or not, had captured them with its magnetic attractors. In a moment they'd be boarded.

THE hull of the 9B5 reverberated hollowly to the tramping of weighted metal shoes and to the sounds of mechanical connections being made to their own hermetically sealed manhole entrance. In a few minutes they'd be inside, the bestial Martians. The captain located a pocket flash lamp and, by its light, assembled the crew in the bunk room. Masters was missing. Fainted again probably. He decided to let him shift for himself.

Dan Healy armed himself with two ray pistols from the rack and was dancing around pugnaciously.

"Put 'em down, Dan," he ordered. "We'll surrender."

"Surrender, sor?"

"You heard me. We're caught like rats in a trap."

"But, sor, beggin' your pardon. 'Tis well you know what thim divils do with prisoners."

"Enough. We haven't a chance if we fight. If we are taken prisoner—who can tell? We may learn something aboard this ship of theirs; may even gum their game."

Dan Healy subsided but surreptitiously thrust a ray pistol in his pocket.

And indeed, resistance was useless, for the rarefied air to which the hated Martians were accustomed would make it impossible for the Terrestrials to expend any great amount of physical energy for some time after they became subjected to it. Even now the hiss of their own air as it escaped into the larger vessel reached their ears. Soon they would feel its scarcity.

Strident voices echoed through the

passageways of the 9B5 now and Captain Stone faced the door through which the boarding party must come. Already foul odors of the Martian atmosphere as duplicated in the great spherical ship to which they were attached were mingling with the thinned air within their own vessel. One of the men coughed and then cursed horribly.

There were sounds of tinkering in the control room and the engine room. One of the small generators hummed into life and the 9B5 was alight once more from its normal source.

A new sound smote their ears, a shrill moaning note that set their pulses throbbing and blurred their vision with the vibrations set up in their bodies. Another new weapon of the Martians!

Dan Healy was panting from the effort to obtain sufficient oxygen from the unaccustomed medium he was forced to breathe. It was his first experience with the rare but rank gas breathed normally by the inhabitants of the red planet and it quickly took the fight out of him. Even the captain swayed uncertainly on his feet. In the matter of a few hours they would become used to it and would get along with very little difficulty, though with a higher rate of respiration and with greatly quickened pulse.

Captain Stone experienced a new sensation, a gradual stiffening of his muscles, a creeping rigidity that told him this moaning, throbbing note that filled his vessel was the warning of a diffused paralyzing energy that would quickly render them helpless. The wily Martians were taking no chances of meeting with organized resistance. One by one he saw his men topple to the floor and lie starkly staring. He fought the energy stubbornly but without avail. Distorted bestial faces leered at him out of the thickening haze

and he knew the enemy had swarmed into the room in droves.

Confused impressions came to him of flabby pawing hands that he fought off weakly and ineffectually; of semi-dark passages through which his pain-racked body seemed to float; of a babble of excited gutturals that sometimes swelled to a deafening roar, only to fade again into the dim distance and leave him with a sickening feeling that he had lost them altogether. He drifted into a state of blissful repose and quiet. If only they would leave him alone like this, to die in peace ... if only he might slip away this way ... from the humiliation and disgrace ... losing his ship!

He lost consciousness.

REALIZATION that he was still in the land of the living came to him as a distinct surprise and disappointment. He was stretched comfortably on a padded couch. Opening his eyes experimentally he was forced to close them against the glare of a tremendously powerful light that shone on him from above.

New strength suffused his being under the warming rays from the great light. It seemed that the blood coursed through his veins with renewed pressure; he could feel his heart pounding at his temples. His perception quickened rapidly and once more he opened his eyes, this time to stare into the lidless green optics of a huge Martian. He sat up on the instant.

“Ha!” exclaimed his captor, using the universal language of the planets with atrocious accent, “Captain sleeps long time but now awakes. It is good.”

Stone observed the decorations covering the bloated chest of his evilly leering companion. He must be an admiral, at least. “What do you mean, it’s good?” he growled into those unblinking

red-rimmed eyes.

“It is good!” The Martian emitted a series of cackles that were intended to indicate mirth. “You have stumbled on our secret, you and your tiny vessels, and we captured you every one. It is to laugh.”

“Huh! May I ask what you intend to do with us?”

“You should know, captain. The canals of Mars and the pumping plants are sadly undermanned and all prisoners from the inner planets are welcome as laborers there. But first you shall witness our triumph, the triumph made possible by the invention of Kiro, who sits before you.”

“Yourself, you mean?” Captain Stone was scornful, but his inflection was lost on the braggart Martian.

“None other.”

“And this marvelous discovery of yours?”

“You learned of it—the invisibility. We now can make our ships invisible to your observers—all of them. We shall go through your defense lines unseen and finish the war before your people know what has happened.”

“Yeah? And I suppose this curved beam of yours is the first step in the new method of warfare.”

“Bah! It is but a gesture, captain. A discovery of one Zin, an obscure scientist. It is effective, as you well know, but the cost is enormous. The real work will be done by the cruisers—with the invisibility. You shall see.” The Martian officer had risen to his full height and was pacing the floor in excitement.

Stone watched him narrowly. Insufferable egotism, the mark of the Martian since time immemorial, radiated from the ungainly Kiro. He had difficulty in restraining his merriment at the sight presented by his captor as he strutted about—the great head and enormous chest

surmounting spindly legs that seemed incapable of supporting more than a small fraction of the weight of the upper body. But he remembered the Martian gravity; his own sensations told him of the slight intensity of the energy in the floorplates of this vessel. He'd have to get used to it—have to be careful in a gravity field only a third of the strength to which he was accustomed.

“When does your little party begin?” he asked.

“Very soon. Even now our entire fleet is being equipped with the invisibility feature. Then comes the great day, and though we are outnumbered nearly ten to one by your fleets, we shall win. Yes, we shall win without losing a vessel of our own number.”

“Meanwhile what is to become of me and of my men?”

“You, captain, will be allowed the freedom of the vessel within certain bounds. This is granted on account of your rank and because we expect to learn many helpful things from you. Your men are incarcerated in the hold of the vessel and will so remain until we return victorious to our own planet.”

“Thanks.” The ferocious glare that shot from under the bushy eyebrows of “Rocks” would have caused any enlisted man in the Fifty-first to quake in his boots. “You expect to get information from me regarding the plans and armament of the Allies, information that will be to your advantage in the campaign you have projected?”

“Of a certainty. We have many ways.” The toothless gums of the Martian were revealed in a nasty grin.

“Like hell you will!”

The captain bounded half way across the room and swung a mighty right toward Kiros' jaw. But he overshot the

mark badly; he'd forgotten to figure on the Martian gravity. Quick as a flash a ray pistol appeared in the hand of his captor. With its spiteful crack came the dread numbing sensation in his right shoulder. The energy that paralyzes! His arm hung limp and useless and would remain so for many hours before returning to normal in an excruciating agony of revitalization.

Kiros cackled venomously and strode from the room.

IT was evident that the narrow room in which the captain had awakened was intended as his sleeping room for some time to come. There was a long cot and a table, two chairs and the curious stand-lamp which had been used to bring him to consciousness. Otherwise the room was bare and unadorned, a cell. He tried the door through which Kiros had left and found it opened freely. A furtive peep down the corridor revealed a Martian guard on watch, a big-eared malicious looking fellow who was armed to the teeth. He withdrew his head from the opening and closed the door softly.

Yeah! Freedom of the ship ... within certain bounds was right. He slumped into one of the chairs and fell to musing. The throb of the cruiser's motors came faintly to his ears and he wondered whether they were bound anywhere or were merely maintaining their position in space with relation to the planet Venus. You never knew unless you could compare the position indicators with the cross lines of the master chart.

He thought of Masters; wondered whether they had gotten him or whether he passed out completely in that last swoon of his. Funny, the rookie had been right at that, both about the invisibility thing and about the curved beam being used in the destruction of Seritanis. If only he wasn't

such a white-livered devil. Imagine one of his own roughnecks fainting at sight of an enemy ship! Why, Dan Healy would fight at the drop of a hat even if the odds against him were a million to one. He grinned at thought of what Dan must have done when he came to his senses in the hold of the cruiser. Probably would get himself bumped off by tearing into a half dozen guards at the first chance he got.

Why hadn't he listened to Dan in the first place? They could have given a good account of themselves with the ray pistols when the 9B5 was boarded. Suicide, of course, but then wasn't honorable death preferable to this? Still—something might happen yet.

His arm was beginning to ache and he stretched himself on the cot, which had been built for the body of a seven-foot Martian. A feeling of homesickness came to him. He hadn't been home in three years. Rotten war, this was, and Lord only knew when it'd be over now. This curved beam attack on Seritanis—funny Masters got wise to that so quickly—was demoralizing, of course, and would go a long way toward breaking down the spirit of the Allies. No doubt they could move the generator of the thing anywhere they pleased and destroy one city after another—if the Martian resources held out. Must consume a whale of a lot of energy. But the invisible battleships were another thing again. Why, they could just slip in through the lines and lay waste all the great cities of both planets, the defenses being entirely useless against an enemy who could not be seen. Even the direction finders, sensitive as they were, would be of no avail. You couldn't direct a ray at a moving object that was invisible to the eye, no matter how good a line you had on it with the direction finders. There was too much time lag to be taken into

account between the obtaining of the finder indication and the release of the ray. You had to see them to hit them. What a problem for the Allies! First and most important problem, though, was to get out of this mess and get word to headquarters, if there was any chance in the universe of doing it ... looked like a tough job ... still ...

Captain Stone fell asleep.

HE wasn't sure at first whether he was awakened by a low voice he thought had whispered in his ear or whether it was by the agonizing torture that now racked his right arm and shoulder. The lights were out and the darkness was so thick it stifled him. The soft purr of the ship's motors was the only sound. He lay very still and listened.

"Captain!" He knew he had heard a voice now.

"Who is it?" he whispered cautiously, fully awake at last and with every sense alert.

"Dan Healy, sor. Are you all right?"

"Yes." He blessed the loyal Irishman fervently and quickly slipped to his feet. "What's up, Dan?"

"The divil's to pay, sor, if you don't hurry. We've escaped from below, the intire blissid crew of the 9B5. Burned sivin of the guards to cinders with the flame pistils Masters brought. In a jiffy, sor, they'll be after findin' us out. Can you make it to the intrance manhole?"

"Sure. Come on," the captain whispered hoarsely, "but how in the name of the imps did you do it? Masters again! How did it happen that whippersnapper always had a hand in things?"

"Niver mind now, sor. You'll find out later."

Marveling at what he had heard,

Stone followed the Irishman into the corridor. He saw the crumpled body of the guard who had been stationed at his door. Dan scurried along the passageway and he followed unquestioningly. Into a side passage they ducked and down a ladder well into the dark regions between decks. Healy had him by the hand now—his good hand—and was dragging him unceremoniously through a narrow space between a steel bulkhead and the curved hull plates of the vessel. Feeling was returning to his right arm but every movement of the slowly releasing muscles brought exquisite torture.

“Quiet now, sor,” Dan warned, “we’re near the manhole.”

Then they were through, inside the air lock of the 9B5. Two of his own men were there, armed with disintegrators, and they welcomed him enthusiastically.

“Is iverybody in?” Dan asked.

“Naw. Masters is still fooling around inside the big ship. Said not to wait for him if he was gone from here more than twenty minutes,” one of the two watchers replied anxiously.

“Masters!” Dan Healy stole a glance at the grim face of his superior.

Captain Stone took in the situation at once, though still confused by the sudden turn of affairs. Masters again! Would that damned rookie always be a pest?

“What’s he doing inside, Anderson?” he asked.

“Said there was something he had to learn about the workings of the big ship, sir.”

“He would do a fool thing like that.”

Dan Healy eyed the captain curiously. “He’s a great bye, sor,” he said. “Wasn’t for him, we’d all be—”

But the sentence was never

finished for, at that moment, there came a shout from within the huge globe to which the 9B5 was attached. Sounds of fighting reached their ears; the bestial scream of a mortally wounded Martian. Masters bounded into the circle of light by the manhole connection, sending streamer after blinding streamer into the darkness from his flame pistol. By its light they saw that he was battling a dozen of the ugly creatures that were the highest form of life on the planet Mars.

Marveling at the sight of the rookie battling like a veteran the captain dragged him inside and swung the manhole cover home. Inside the air lock, young Masters collapsed. His hair was burned from his head and his face was blackened and blistered.

“Quick!” the captain bellowed. “Every man on duty! We’ll pull away.” He rushed to the control room, noting first that Masters had staggered to his feet. Perhaps there was something to this rookie, after all.

“Can we do it, sor?” Dan asked him, when they were at their accustomed posts once more and the 9B5 was throbbing to the energy of her atomic motors.

“Sure. It’s a slip joint they used to connect us—one of those rubber gasketed things, you know, and with only two anchor bolts. Give her hell!”

The little vessel creaked as the repulsion energy was thrown full on. Dan rocked her back and forth to break the anchor bolts. Then there was a lurch as she pulled free and the instruments registered a terrific velocity of escape.

Captain Stone peered into the televue and watched the great spherical vessel as it went hurtling off into the blackness. He knew the Martians would be struggling frantically at their own air lock

seals to prevent the escape of their rotten atmosphere. Nothing invisible about that ship now. But, by Jupiter, it had been invisible when they were captured! He scratched his head in perplexity.

“Say, Dan,” he blurted out, “tell me what happened.” He had forgotten his aching arm in the excitement and now found that the pain was mostly gone and that he could move his fingers freely without having to grit his teeth in agony.

“Plinty, sor. This crazy Masters busted in on us where we was locked up and he had more ray pistils in his two hands than you iver saw a man carry. Killed four of the sivin guards hisself. They was craymayted before they knew what was happenin’. He said whin the Martians searched our ship he rolled under a table and they missed him intirely. Thin he took command of the situation like a old-timer. Sint me to look fer you and wint huntin’ hisself for somethin’ he said he was wantin’ to find out about the big ship. The rist you know, sor.”

The captain stared incredulously. It sounded too much like a fairy tale. Imagine that rookie pulling a stunt like this!

“What do you know about that!” he exclaimed. Looked like he’d misjudged this rookie after all. He turned to the microphone. “Masters!” he called.

There was no reply. His kindly feeling toward the rookie evaporated. Now what was wrong with the bird? Once more he dashed through the communicating door.

Masters was not in the room of the beam apparatus, not even on the floor where he had fully expected to find him stretched. But two heavy cables had been connected to his high frequency generator and these were strung along the floor and led toward the engine room below.

Experimenting without permission! Stone followed the cables, his mind a riot of conflicting emotions—unwilling admiration for the rookie, even though he did swoon on the least provocation—dark threats of court-martial for his action in fooling with the mechanisms of the ship.

He found the ray operator and his chief engineer engaged in making some electrical connections to the junction box of the gravity system, where the supply buses branched off to carry the propelling energy to the hull plates of the vessel.

“What goes on here?” he snapped.

Masters straightened up from his task and his eyes shone with excitement. “I think I’ve learned the secret of their invisibility, sir,” he said, “and we’re all set right now to try the same thing on the 9B5.”

“Yeah? What do you think this ship is, a laboratory? You get back on the job now and forget all this monkey business. Our late hosts are just liable to take it into their heads to come back for another attack on us.”

“Exactly what I was thinking, sir, and we’ll be ready for them if they do come.”

Masters dashed for the companionway without further explanation. Growling, the captain followed him to the projector room where he plugged in on the duplicate controls.

A glance at the televue showed him he had guessed correctly about Kiro. The great Martian cruiser was returning to the attack, visible as yet and coming in fast.

“Ready with your forward rays, Masters?” he snapped.

“Yes, sir. Are they coming in?”

“They are. I’ll give you the settings in a moment.”

But just then the enemy vessel

vanished as it had done in the first attack. Snuffed out, like a candle. The televue was useless. Captain Stone swore picturesquely.

"Pick them up on one of the direction finders, sir," Masters suggested.

"Too slow. We'll never get them that way." The captain's voice was hopeless.

"I can't agree with you, sir." Masters was connecting a black box to one of the finders, a small mechanism that was provided with two eyepieces like those of a binocular.

"Look into these, sir," he begged.

MAGICALLY the enemy ship appeared in a cross-hatched field like that of the master screen. True, its outline was faint and of a pale violet hue, but it was there and he could direct the fire of the ray projectors with speed and accuracy. No waiting for calculations here. By some clever means Masters had solved the important problem.

Excitedly now, the captain was calling orders into the microphone. The ship swung around as Dan executed them. Now he was calling numbers to Masters, noting from the corner of his eye that the amazing recruit was at the projector controls.

A streaking pencil of violet light shot forth from one of the turrets of the enemy vessel. Amiss! Twin pencils of the same disintegrating energy issued from the projectors of the 9B5. The range was too great.

Stone had not noticed before but now realized suddenly that it was growing very cold in the little scout vessel. His fingers were stiffening as he twirled the knobs of the direction finder. But the enemy ship was slowing down now, moving uncertainly, its streaking d-rays searching the skies for them in all

directions but the right one. He watched in amazement.

Masters had deserted his post, was at his aide stealing a glance through another of the magic black boxes which was attached to the second direction finder. "It works, Captain, it works!" he exulted. Then he executed a war dance on the floor plates.

"What works, you fool?"

"We're invisible, that's what. Notice the cold? Notice they can't locate us. We're invisible, I tell you!"

It must be that Masters spoke the truth. By some chance he had stumbled on this secret of the Martians. The enemy vessel now was searching frantically for its tiny antagonist, using every beam of its five turrets. Then abruptly it turned tail.

"Back to the projectors, you nut!"

Captain Stone shouted now at Masters, now into the microphone. The 9B5 was tearing after the fleeing globe of the Martians. Gaining, too.

Soon they were within range and the twin rays poured into the great sphere's vitals. Gaping openings appeared in the hull where the vicious energy let loose its terrific destructive power. One of the turrets was blasted completely out of existence. Another! The cruiser wobbled uncertainly and started spinning from the force of the terrible energies that were tearing her to shreds. Then she collapsed into a lop-sided, shapeless mass and swung around on a new uncontrolled course. Her motors had stopped; her crew must now be victims of the cold and vacuum of outer space, for all of her filthy atmosphere had escaped from within. She went reeling off into the heavens, fated to be perpetually a new satellite of Venus.

The captain looked up from the finder. Black specks floated before his eyes. He saw that the sphere was once

more visible in the televue. Its power plant wrecked, the twisted metal of its hull was again visible to the eye. He laughed, a little crazily, he thought.

Masters was again at the second direction finder, his eyes glued to its little black box.

"Now, you son-of-a-gun," said the captain. "Tell me about all this. What's the answer?"

"Simple as A B C," the rookie grunted. He was twirling the controls of his apparatus. "I sneaked into the engine room of the Martian ship. Had a hunch about the invisibility thing, anyway, and there I saw they had some trick connections that solved the whole thing. You know the hulls of their vessels are plated with graviloy, the same as ours."

"Yes, I know. But where does that get you?"

"Captain, it's a cinch, I tell you. Gravity is controlled by setting up atomic vibrations in the graviloy plating. Its atoms are forced to take on a wave motion that is imparted to the surrounding ether and sets up the artificial gravity field that propels our vessels. Making the ship invisible is the same thing, excepting a different frequency and wave form is required. We merely set the atoms of the hull plating material in motion at such a rate that the material will reflect no color whatsoever with the exception of the ultra-violet and that, of course, is invisible to the eye. But it's not invisible when viewed through my little black box."

Masters paused as he made some further adjustments of the direction finder controls.

"And the cold?"

"Oh, yes. You see there is a direct relation between vibration frequency and temperature. On the other end of the scale—the infra-red, you know—there is

intense heat. That's what the infra-red ray is, a heat ray. With the frequencies I'm using to get the invisibility there is produced an intense cold, or rather the heat is permitted to radiate freely from our vessel out into space. Get it, Captain?"

"Er—yes. And the little black box; what's in it, Masters?"

"Oh, that's an idea of my own. Developed in the War College. Works on the principle of the photoelectric cell. Makes the ultra-violet visible. That's how I got the line on the curved beam at first and, Captain, I think I have it again right now."

Stone was dumfounded. This youngster certainly had a bag of tricks; took it all as a matter of routine, too. "Say, kid," he enthused, "do you know you've saved the inner planets from destruction? Know we can lick 'em to a frazzle now, having this information of yours? The Martians, I mean. Know you'll be the—"

"Wait, sir! Here, I want you to have a look. We'll be able to do what we started out to do. Watch!"

He had pulled the captain to the eyepieces of the finder and relinquished his place. There, against the jeweled blackness of the heavens, a great arc of violet light was weaving. A slender, curved pencil that originated out there in the void and ended at the brilliant surface of the enormous globe that was Venus.

The relentless swinging of the bowed beam fascinated him. He watched it in silent awe.

"See it, sir?" Masters asked.

He roused himself with a start. There was some sort of hypnotic influence to the accursed thing; something that gripped you and got you in its power before you were aware of it. "Sure, I see it," he said slowly. "This is a marvelous thing you've done, Masters."

"I didn't think of the ultra-violet rectifier at first. The first line I got on the beam was by straight readings of magnetic ray reflections. Then I realized it was the frequency of the thing that made it entirely invisible and that I could bring it into view with my rectifier. And there you are."

"Say!" The captain jumped to his feet and plugged in the microphone once more. "We can follow the dam' thing to its source now. Find out what sort of a machine is sending out this destruction and wipe it out of existence."

"Yes, sir. I believe we can."

STONE was snapping orders to Dan Healy now. The ship swung around and bored into the heavens toward the point from whence originated the mysterious ray that was destroying Seritanis. His eyes were glued to the attachment Masters had developed for the direction finder.

"Be ready at the projectors. Masters," he ordered. "We'll be within range in a very few minutes. I can make out the source of the thing now."

"Yes, sir." Masters had glanced into the televue, where nothing was visible, and now jumped for the projector controls.

The captain glued his eyes to the little black box. A great nebulous disc appeared at the outer end of the curved beam, a disc of faint purple hue. The color told him it was as invisible to the naked eye as was the ray itself. They were rushing toward the monster engine of destruction with terrific velocity.

"Distance, Dan?" he called.

"Ninety-two thousand from Venus, sor," the loud speaker boomed.

"Reduce to cruising speed."

"Yis, sor. Ninety-sivin thousand miles now, sor."

"All right. Full repulsion now,

Dan."

The 9B5 shuddered as the energy reversed. Masters tightened his fingers on the ray controls.

Stone called sighting numbers rapidly. The monstrous disc loomed very close, a menacing shape from which the terrible curved beam continued to stream.

"Let 'em have it, Masters!"

He saw the twin rays spatter against the side of the queer space ship as Masters pressed the releases. This flattened machine of the Martians must be a mile in diameter—an eighth of that in thickness. Must have expended a lot of their resources on that thing! No wonder Kiros had squawked about it. And to keep it invisible! The expenditure of power must be tremendous. He saw sections of the hull melt away in the characteristic puffs of vapor; saw the curved beam cease abruptly as Masters continued pouring in the deadly energy of the d-rays. The disc was altering its shape and color. Masters must have hit a vital spot. Now it would be visible in the televue. Things were becoming hazy. He raised his eyes from the little black box. Black specks floated and danced before them. He looked at Masters and saw him as through a swirling mist. Then there seemed to be three of him; three grotesque replicas of the young ray operator. He clutched at the finder pedestal for support; slipped to the floor. Jupiter, those floor plates were cold!

His senses deserted him.

When the captain opened his eyes this time he half expected to meet the baleful glare of Kiros, the Martian commander. Instead, he beheld the smiling features of Dan Healy.

"What—what happened?" he gasped.

"You fainted, sor," said Dan, looking slyly at him.

“The hell I did!” Captain Stone sat up suddenly and gazed about him. He’d lain by the pedestal of the direction finder and there was Masters, over there, grinning like a Cheshire cat. He jumped to his feet and squared his shoulders resolutely.

“Are you all right, sir?” Masters inquired.

“Sure. But how about this big, flat Martian ship?”

“It’s done for, Captain. Whirled off into space like the big sphere. There’ll be no more destruction here.”

“Good. Good. That’s fine.” Stone stared uncertainly from one to the other. Then he became a whirlwind of energy. Dan followed him into the control room.

In a moment he had started the motor-generator of the etherphone. Headquarters must be notified at once. This was the biggest news of the war! Matter of fact the war was over, if they only knew it, and it was up to him to start the ball rolling—get the story across to the allied forces. He was calling Bulldog Carlson.

“Get Masters in here, Dan,” he said, between calls.

Before the C. O. answered, Masters stood before him.

“Say, kid,” he growled, “what are you doing out there in the projector room, all by yourself?”

The rookie’s eyes lighted. “Experimenting, sir. I thought you wouldn’t mind—now.”

The captain stared. This boy sure was a glutton for punishment! Couldn’t even let up after he’d won the war for them. “Experimenting?” he asked weakly. “What in the name of the imps with, this time?”

“This extreme frequency of atomic vibration, sir. The reduction of internal temperature in the vessel when we are

invisible. There must be some way of overcoming that disadvantage as the Martians undoubtedly accomplished it in the big, flat vessel.”

“Yes. Yes. Umm.” The captain was developing a healthy respect for this youngster.

The loud-speaker blared. There was a screeching note that finally stabilized and died down to a whisper. Bulldog Carlson’s voice came through clearly then and the captain started talking.

“Shut up, will you?” Carlson eventually roared. And Stone was silenced. “We knew the ray generator was destroyed, Stoney. Hell, the Martians are suing for peace right now! They found out that one of our vessels had discovered all their secrets and we’ve been breaking our necks trying to learn which one it was. Knew all about it before you called, but didn’t suspect you were the one who had done the dirty work. You old wisenheimer! How the devil did you do it, tell us all about it.”

“I didn’t. Just a minute—I’ll let you talk with the man who is responsible for it all.”

He forced the microphone on Masters. Dan grinned.

Masters found his voice after a while; told the story modestly but accurately. When he had finished there came a roar from the loud speaker that rattled Dan Healy’s instruments on their board. A roar as of a million voices it was and the ray operator growled his resentment when he realized that the populations of two planets had been cut in on his recital.

The captain was at the microphone once more, talking rapidly to the C. O. Things were moving fast back there in Venus and on Earth. The Martians, thoroughly cowed by the unexpected turn

of events, had surrendered unconditionally. Even now the Allies were formulating the terms. A fleet of war vessels, carrying the army of occupation, was on its way to the red planet. All enemy fleets were to be turned over to the Allies; all prisoners to be returned. Reparations in payments of radium and other precious metals would be enormous. The Martians knew when they were licked and were saving their skins at the cost of most of their resources. Many a generation would pass before they could again become a menace to the inner planets.

Reports received at Thrygis by heliograph advised that the 9C8 and 9F1 already had been released by their captors with all men of their crews accounted for and on board. The 9B5 was ordered to her base at once and the captain and Masters were to report to the Home Office at the earliest possible time. Decorations awaited them there, and promotion.

A LITTLE later, back in the C. O.'s office, the captain was writing his official report. Young Masters and Bulldog Carlson were conversing in low tones by the window.

"Say, Victor," the captain called, and somehow the name didn't seem so silly to him now, "what rays did you say those were that knocked you out at the direction finders?"

"Just call them stray harmonics, Captain; I didn't analyze them completely. And, if you remember to say anything about yourself in that report, you were knocked flat by the same thing, you know."

Rocks glowered at the smiling ray operator. Then he sat back in his chair and guffawed noisily. "Aw, hell," he said, "I'm going to tell 'em I fainted. I still believe I did."

The C. O. grinned his appreciation.

THE END