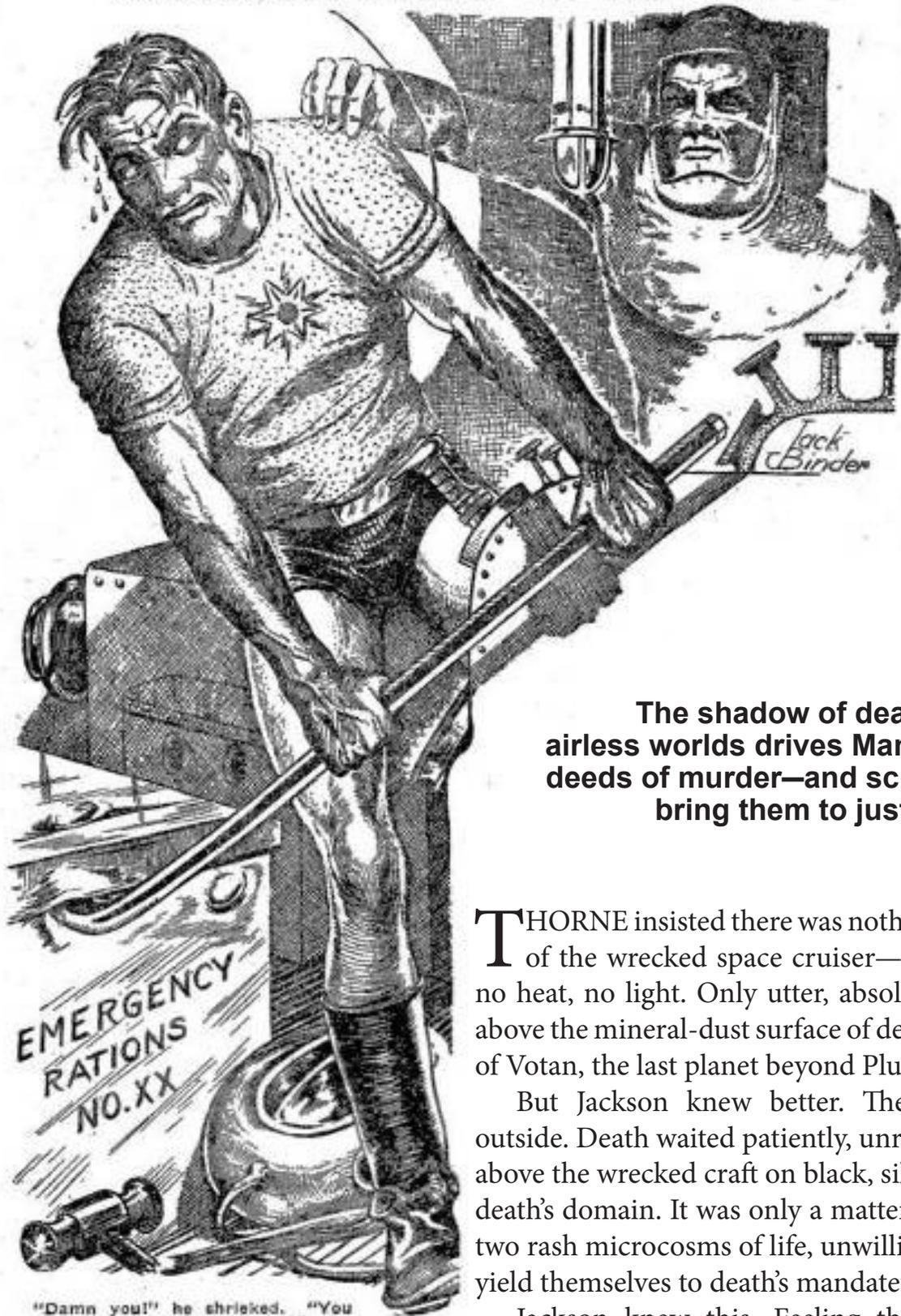


CRASH ON VIAR

By JOSEPH J. MILLARD

Author of "Master of the Walking Dead," "Thirty Fathoms Peru," etc.



The shadow of death on airless worlds drives Man to perform deeds of murder—and scientific laws bring them to justice!

THORNE insisted there was nothing outside the shell of the wrecked space cruiser—no air, no pressure, no heat, no light. Only utter, absolute nothingness lay above the mineral-dust surface of dead Viar, third moon of Votan, the last planet beyond Pluto.

But Jackson knew better. There was something outside. Death waited patiently, unrelentingly, hovering above the wrecked craft on black, silent wings. This was death's domain. It was only a matter of time until these two rash microcosms of life, unwilling invaders, should yield themselves to death's mandates.

Jackson knew this. Feeling the feather touch of

"Damn you!" he shrieked. "You came back to trick me!"

death's exploring fingers against his brain, he shivered as he watched Thorne make one last hopeless try for contact with life's outpost.

"If I could stretch transmission range just a fraction of a parse more." Thorne muttered through set teeth, "I could reach the guard station on Pluto. I'm going to try to overpower this rig long enough to get a call through. It may blow out instantly, of course, but I don't see that even then we'd be any worse off than we are now."

He bent over the communicator, which had been miraculously undamaged by the crash. Deliberately he turned the power controls up above the red danger-bar. The whole assembly began to hum, warning of the impending blowout. But still Thorne grimly fed power, easing it delicately into the instruments until its shrill protest was louder than the cosmic drone from the receiver.

Jackson, hunched forward on the copilot's seat, set his teeth and blinked a sudden flood of cold perspiration from his eyes. His fingernails dug into his palms, but he did not feel the pain.

"Calling Pluto," Thorne droned into the transmitter for the hundredth time. "Calling Space Guard Station Nineteen on Pluto. Astrophysical exploration ship Meteor calling Pluto. Answer quickly if you catch this."

They both heard it then. A faint, infinitely distant whisper of sound penetrated the eternal cosmic drone in the receiver. It was the sound of a human voice—the first to reach their ears in eight months of extra-galactic wandering!

“SPACE GUARD STATION NINETEEN
Son Pluto calling the Meteor. We hear your transmission faintly. Come through

again if you can. Give location and condition of ship.”

“Pray that the blowout holds off,” Thorne flung over his shoulder as he flipped the switch. “Pluto, we’re wrecked on Viar, less than a degree from the north pole. Send rescue expedition at once. We’re unhurt, but our food supplies are running low and there isn’t a living thing on this satellite. Hurry!”

“Be on our way in an hour,” came the answering whisper. “Hang on any way you can. It will take us six to seven weeks to reach you. Can you last that—”

Whoof!

With a surge of blasting overpower, the whole communicator system blew out. The lights went, too. There was a terrifying interval of absolute blackness until Thorne’s sure, unhurried fingers found and switched on the emergency circuit.

“Boy, am I glad it held until we established contact!” he breathed, wiping his broad forehead. “Now all we’ve got to do is play two-handed poker for six or seven weeks.”

“S-six or s-seven weeks?” Jackson could barely recognize that hoarse, terrified croak as his own voice. “But—but we can’t! We haven’t enough—”

“Food?” Thorne finished, eyeing his white-faced partner narrowly. “We’ll make out, now that we have to. We have enough food to get along for two weeks. By stretching it, we can make it last between three and four weeks. After that?” He shrugged.

“After that we starve in dead earnest. But we’ll make it. Life is a pretty tenacious quality in human beings. Most of us don’t realize how stubbornly life clings to us, especially with the cement of hope to strengthen the bond. When the rescue expedition finally lands, they’ll

discover two shrunken mummies here on the floor.

“They’ll think we perished. Then someone will discover that deep down in those wasted bodies is still a spark of life. They’ll go to work on us and pull us through. It’ll be close, I’ll admit, but we’ll make it.”

He turned away cheerfully and began to unzip his bulky space suit before putting it on.

“Might as well trot out and make a few observations,” he said. “This is really a wonderful opportunity for me to correlate some of my observations and strengthen a few of my pet theories. Well, keep your chin up, Jackson.”

He vanished into the air-lock. Presently the Meteor trembled slightly to the thud of the outer port slamming shut.

Jackson sucked in a long, shuddering breath. He brought his clenched fists around from behind him and put them on his knees, now that Thorne was no longer around to see their trembling. His haunted eyes avoided the black disk of the forward port, fearful that he would see the grimacing specter of death grown bolder now, beckoning through the glass.

Six or seven weeks! Food enough for three to four weeks. Three to four weeks for two, but six to eight weeks for one. Two men eat twice as much food as one man. Twice as much food lasts half as long....

ABRUPTLY the idea was born in Jackson’s mind. Spawned by the laughing demons of his thoughts, they fought their murderous way to his consciousness.

Thorne must die!

For a moment Jackson was surprised at the calmness with which he accepted the thought.

But then he realized that he had always hated Thorne—hated and feared him. He had hated him because Thorne was a scientist, a delicately tuned and maddeningly efficient instrument of research. And he feared Thorne because the man was never afraid.

Jackson had never belonged on this expedition. He was no scientist, not even a mathematician beyond the barest fundamental requirements of astrogation. He was one of the last of the old school of pioneer rocket pilots, daredevils who had opened the spaceways to traffic by their blind, heedless, pit-of-the-stomach and seat-of-the-pants astrogation.

They had pointed lumbering, fragile old rockets at the Moon. Missing their blind objective by millions of miles, they had unwittingly opened the farther planets to exploration and settlement. For the most part, those men had died or retired by the time science had taken over the new frontier of space travel and made it subject to schedules.

But Jackson had never really belonged to that crowd, either. For Jackson was a coward. All his life he had been afraid. Most of the crazy, desperate, sensational things he had done in the past had been done accidentally, the result of blind, panicky flight from something he feared.

Fear had made him Thorne’s assistant on this flight to chart the nearer galaxy. There had been a scandal in Swamp City on Venus. Money had been stolen by a man who feared poverty worse than he feared possible capture. A guard had died. And suddenly Jackson’s fear of the death penalty was greater than his terror of the unknown beyond the Solar System. He had leaped at this job with Thorne as an escape.

So, as always, fear drove Jackson on from

a lesser to an even greater terror. So Thorne must die because Jackson feared the gnawing pangs of hunger and the nearness of that hovering death.

Jackson stood up quickly, strengthened by his resolve, and went to the port. A turn of the thumb-screw brought the disks of polarized glass into co-ordination, restoring its transparency. Jackson looked out over the weird, phosphorescent landscape of Viar, with its jutting of knife-edge mineral rocks and its towering cliffs and mountains.

Directly below the port, he could see a corner of their food chest, imbedded in the sandlike metal dust. When the crash had ruined their refrigeration plant, Thorne had suggested leaving the food chest outside in the cold of airless space to protect its contents against mold. Not a single familiar life-form inhabited dead Viar. So there was no danger of loss by stealth.

Jackson stared at the visible corner of the black impervium chest until his eyes watered. How damnably, pitifully small it was! Yet under its air-seal lid was a man's life—and a man's death.

HE TURNED away and swept his gaze over the bleak land until he saw the moving dot of Thorne's space-suited figure on a hummock a quarter-mile away. Thorne had set up a maze of strange instruments on that hummock and spent most of his time there, taking readings and observations. He was about through, Jackson saw from the movements. He would be starting back at any moment.

Thorne must die quickly, before his useless body consumed any more of the precious food. But he must die in such a way that the rescue

party would not suspect murder. Jackson's brow wrinkled, then smoothed. His fear-sharpened animal cunning had discovered the way he was seeking. It was utterly simple and absolutely certain!

Hurrying, Jackson crowded his big, hulking body into a space suit. Fear kept him from venturing outside as often as Thorne, but he was familiar with the technique of locomotion on so small a world. He stood poised for a moment on the narrow step outside the airlock. Then he leaped out at an angle to carry him clear of the footprints left by Thorne.

On airless Viar, footprints would last through eternity to rescue or damn. There was no puff of wind to smooth their casual outlines, nothing to destroy their telltale presence. Jackson knew this, not because he had figured it out for himself but because Thorne had told him so. Thorne was a scientist who knew such things. Jackson had neither the time nor the interest.

He floated down, touched the soft ground and ballooned skyward again. He had forgotten about the lack of air pressure or gravity. But he compensated quickly, frightened, turning the gravity control on the spacesuit's belt to adjust his body to normal weight. His untrained fingers overcompensated at first, and the force of nearly two gravities crushed him against the ground. But he terrifiedly found the proper setting and rose to his feet. Then he marched out across the weird landscape, paralleling Thorne's footprints.

Half-way to the hummock, he found what he wanted—a knife-edged metal rock lying loosely on top of a larger boulder. He picked it up and went on. Plodding up the rising grade until he topped the crest, he halted not ten feet

from where Thorne bent over his meters.

Jackson's lips peeled back in a snarling, savage grin. Everything was working out perfectly. He had the idea, the convenient rock, and now Thorne stooped in exactly the right position.

He raised the knife-edged rock, sprang across the intervening distance and brought the deadly edge down with all his brutal strength. It struck the space suit, bulging out rock-hard from the internal air pressure, directly between the metal brace-ribs. Jackson could hear no sound. But he could see the long rent appear in the fabric of the suit, could watch the edges puff out a little from the pressure of escaping air.

THORNE jerked erect, spun clumsily. His eyes stared wide and horror-filled through the glassite port of his helmet. For a moment his arms milled wildly, trying in futile fury to reach and close the deadly leak between his shoulderblades. Jackson stood back, waiting impassively, still holding the murderous rock.

It was over with shocking abruptness. Thorne stopped his useless attempt to close the gap in his suit. He took a single stiff-legged step toward his murderer. Then he went down, collapsing like a Venusian fishman out of water, as the last of his air whipped away into airless space. He was dead when Jackson at last summoned enough courage to bend over his prone figure.

Thorne was dead, and it was over. Jackson would now live in comparative comfort until the rescue ship arrived. He lifted the dead man's shoulders gingerly and wedged the sharp rock beneath the body. Setting it down into the soft ground with its edge upward. He fitted it into the rent in the suit.

It would look exactly as though Thorne had fallen backward upon the imbedded rock, ripping his suit and dying there beyond human aid. Jackson, when the rescue ship finally came, would be too weak to go outside. The others would readily accept his story that Thorne had been alive until almost the end, had gone out while weak from starvation and that Jackson had lacked the strength to go to his rescue.

Laughing quietly, Jackson worked his way back to the half-buried Meteor. As he moved backward, he carefully smoothed away every trace of his own footprints. Back at the ship, he felt a return of the old familiar panic. Vague, formless terrors, a fear of things unknown, unseen and impossible, came back to haunt him.

He ran clumsily to the food chest and lifted its unlocked lid. Suppose something had happened!

But nothing had happened. The carefully packed food was there, snugly fitted into its impervium chest, waiting to supply a murderer with life in exchange for the life he had taken.

For a moment Jackson felt a great surge of exultation at his success, his cleverness in outwitting death. Then the exultation died, its flames extinguished by the cold breath of terror.

Panicky, he caught up the heavy chest and staggered with it to the airlock. Suddenly he was not able to bear the thought of leaving the precious store of food out of his sight, no matter how sure he was of its safety.

Back inside the cabin, he relaxed in the warm glow of the radiation bulbs. With his space suit off and the protecting walls of the tough hull close about him, the sharp edge of his terror dulled a little. He even managed to

forget that death waited outside the ports, its army augmented now by the addition of a new recruit.

He cursed viciously. He knew what had made him jittery. He was hungry. It had been nearly five hours since he and Thorne had last dipped into that chest for a skimpy meal.

He would eat heartily. There was no longer the horrible urgency for husbanding the supply. Then he would sleep. Eat and sleep—that would be the pleasant pattern of his life until help arrived. Eat and sleep!

Jackson caught the handle of the food chest and lifted. It resisted his efforts, though it had flipped up so easily outside. He swore irritably and nervously looped both hands around the handle and jerked. Muscles swelled across his powerful shoulders. Veins stood out on his temples and perspiration rolled into his bulging eyes.

By not so much as a hair's-breadth did the stubborn lid yield to his fury. He yelled curses that echoed back at him from the mocking walls and snatched up a lever to use as a pry. The bar bent under his frantic lunges but the lid held as if it had been welded. He put two bars together and leaped on them. The bars held, but the slender metal handle of the chest had been crystallized by the intense cold outside. It snapped off sharply, and there was no more leverage.

Jackson screamed, and the salt sweat on his tortured face was mingled with salt tears. He slammed the lever bars against the impervium chest until his numbed hands could no longer endure the sting of the blows.

"Damn you!" he shrieked. "I know what's wrong. You're holding it down. I can see you there, big and black and laughing at me. You're dead! You wouldn't stay outside any longer. You came in here to trick me!"

He snatched the loosened pilot's seat and shattered it against the implacable chest, followed that with every other movable object in the cabin. When there was no longer any usable implement, he fell down upon the wreckage and clawed at the mocking crack between lid and case until his fingernails broke off.

After awhile he checked his fury. Laying his head upon the cold black surface of the chest, he began to laugh softly. The laughter rose and fell for a time, and then died away.

LIEUTENANT Slane of the Space Guard gasped, forty-two days later when the rescue expedition landed. "Thorne up there on the hill and Jackson in here! Thorne died of a ripped suit and Jackson apparently went mad at the prospect of starvation. It's horrible!"

"Lieutenant," one of the younger guards said, "I can't get this food chest open. We don't know if they ate up all their supplies or not."

"Take it outside, you dope," Slane said irritably. "There's probably a vacuum inside, from being opened in the vacuum outside, where there's no air pressure. They probably kept it out there to stay cold, and all the air inside it must have escaped. Naturally you couldn't open it here, against normal Earth air pressure."

"Don't you remember the old Magdeburg Hemispheres they showed you in physics class at school? Creating a vacuum inside sealed 'em so tight, they couldn't be pulled apart. Take the chest outside, and a baby could lift that lid up!"
