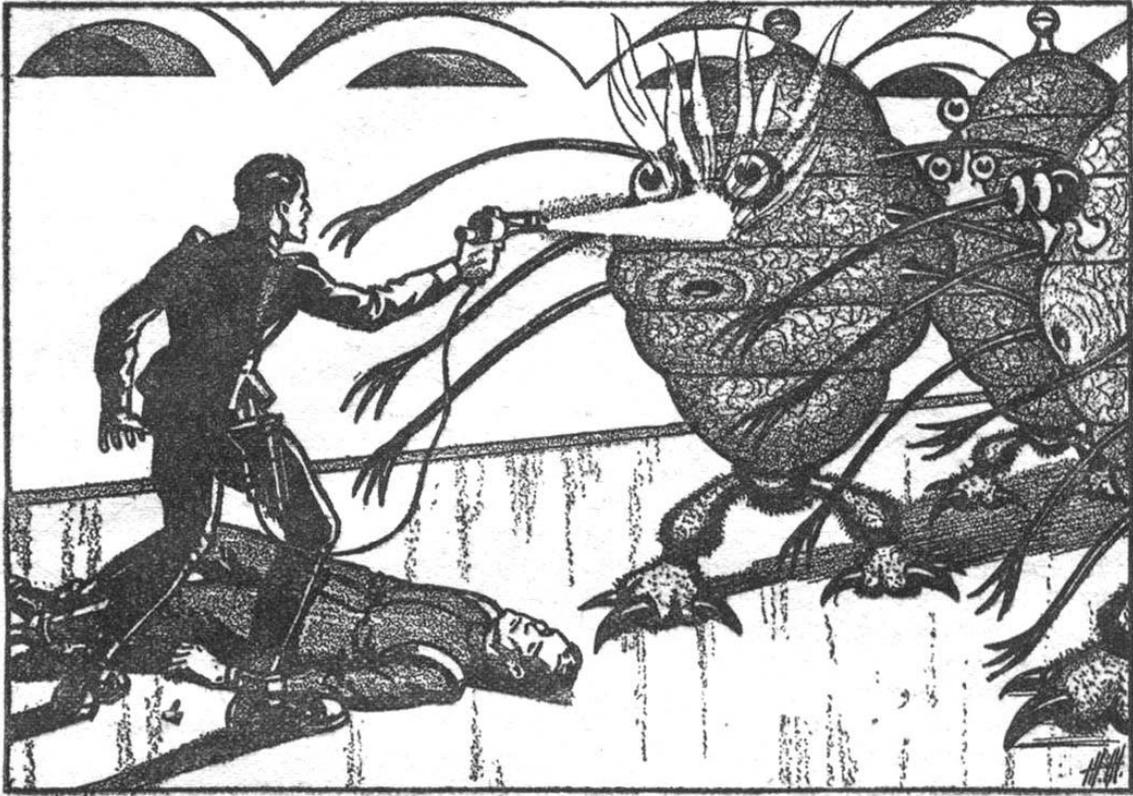


*Thrilling Wonder Stories*, October, 1936

**Humanity is Menaced by an Insidious, Sentient Life-Force  
on the Satellite Deimos!**



*Coruscating pencils of fire hissed from the spaceman's weapon*

# CRYSTALS of MADNESS

**By D. L. JAMES**

**T**HOSE hours of waiting, while the little moon of Mars drew near from out of the immensity of space, were hours of intense strain for Bruce Collins, crack pilot of

G-rockets. Forty million miles behind him men of Earth struggled in the grip of a strange paranoia—madness which they vainly tried to combat with the newly discovered anti-

telepathic serum.

It was good to have Red along on this strange crusade. Larry Gillmore was a man who could be depended upon in a pinch—a little reckless and headstrong in certain ways, but possessed of a daring and initiative which would be likely to prove invaluable when danger threatened.

And just what sort of danger, other than madness, was to be anticipated from this obscure power radiating from Deimos, moon of Mars, to Earth across forty million miles of space? What was this enigmatic menace that sapped the minds of men and twisted their bodies into strangely distorted shapes?

Underneath them, emerging from the frightful, star-dusted depths of infinity, the tiny disc of Deimos swelled like a toy balloon. How absurd it would have seemed to astronomers of a century ago to have accredited such a tiny satellite with a breathable atmosphere. To old-time physicists the kinetic theory of gases had seemed to prove that a small planet couldn't hold onto an atmosphere.

They hadn't known that the molecular speed of a gas was dependent upon the strength of the gravitational field in which the molecule moved.

With jets blasting downward in a braking effect, Bruce lowered the silvery G-rocket to the rocky surface of Deimos, just in the edge of twilight, near the foot of a fantastically tilted cliff.

Larry's voice broke the sudden stillness:

"Took your shot of serum?" he asked.

HE was gazing warily out through the glass ports at the disturbingly lurid locale.

"Sure," answered Bruce, his grey eyes intent, his lean face bronzed from exposure to the searing light of outer spaces. "How about you?"

"O.K.," said Larry.

"Well, let's strap these static pads over our shoes and take a look around—there's not gravity enough here for walking without them."

Five minutes later they were standing outside the rocket, with Mars hanging like a big crescent moon near the abnormally low horizon, bathing their rough environs in a red-tinged glow.

"What now?" Larry's eyes were eager. "Scout around until we find Horker's laboratory?"

"Not exactly. Our instructions are specific—destroy Deimos. Horker probably built up some sort of place here in which to carry on his experiments with those pebbles from Patagonia, but we might search for a hundred hours without finding it here."

"It's over there," stated Larry calmly, waving his arm down a talus slope of loose stones.

Bruce's eyes narrowed. A half mile away the talus seemed to dip into a mist-hung crater or gully.

"Why?" he snapped. "What makes you think so?"

"Just a hunch—and you'll find I'm right."

Bruce regarded his copilot suspiciously.

"Listen, you! Take another shot of that dope. Get me?"

"Who, me?" Disgust was in the red-haired spaceman's voice, but as their eyes met his hand reached for the pocket case. "O.K.," he grinned. "Think I'm touched, eh?"

Bruce watched him fill the small cylinder with serum and screw on the needle.

"No," he said. "I guess you're no more locoed than usual, but we're not taking any chances. I'll start getting out the cone apparatus."

He reentered the rocket, switching on the light in the after compartment, and proceeded to unpack the hastily stored

conglomeration.

Ten minutes later, when he emerged from the rocket, Larry had disappeared!

It was an odd sequence of events which had caused these two spacemen to be sent to destroy the tiny outer moon of Mars to save Earth from madness. Horker, a physicist of Earth, was at the bottom of it. Somehow he had discovered that certain pebbles in Patagonia—pebbles which had puzzled geologists since Darwin's time—were dormant forms of alien and inconceivably ancient life.

Stopped by order of a world tribunal from continuing this line of inquiry because it was deemed too dangerous to humanity, Horker had fled to Deimos to continue his research, taking some of the pebbles with him.

Two years passed. Then, suddenly, men went mad. No one knew why until Horker returned to Earth in his private rocket. He was mad as a hatter, his body strangely altered, and he babbled of some inhuman, sentient life, neither animal nor vegetable, which he had liberated from a pebble on Deimos—something that must be destroyed. Something that through its telepathic power could control the bodies and minds of men across millions of miles of space. There appeared to be some abnormal shifting and extension of certain of his anatomical parts.

And now, only a few minutes after the arrival on Deimos of the two spacemen who had been chosen for this vital mission, Larry Gillmore, copilot, was mysteriously absent.

For a moment Bruce stood in frozen dismay. Silence and shadows hemmed him in, the ruddy Mars-shine touching the crumbling cliffs and crags with blood.

By what strange, recondite power had Larry been snatched so stealthily away?

Bruce cursed as the answer flashed suddenly to him. What a fool he had been! Distinctly he recalled that on no occasion had he actually seen Larry jab the needle into his

arm and shoot home the plunger. Wasn't it exactly like the headstrong, self-willed spaceman to feel that he needed no such protection as the anti-telepathic serum?

And what about that "hunch" of Larry's? Might that not have really been only an insidious hallucination, fraught with madness, twisting his brain with mephitic fingers?

"Larry!"

The call sounded weak and futile in that thin air. He called again, louder: "Red! Yo-ho. Re-e-ed!"

There was no answer. In the moment that followed, Bruce imagined that he could almost feel the dizzy wheeling of that small satellite under his feet, as it silently pursued its endless spiraling through space.

He must find Larry. His eyes circled the low-hung, misty horizon. But if he left the rocket unguarded—

With the sudden realization that on his shoulders, alone, rested the duty of saving humanity from a fate that might well be worse than total annihilation, Bruce commenced with frantic haste to assemble the apparatus he had hauled from the rocket.

BUT first, he carried the parts, one by one, for a distance of perhaps three hundred yards from the rocket, selecting an expanse of smooth, level rock for his contemplated operations. Then, before he actually commenced work on the cone projector, he withdrew a short range weapon from a holster at his hip—a pulverizer pistol, capable of reversing the molecular force of cohesion in any organic body—and made sure that it was ready for instant use.

It was an odd instrument, that retarding ray projector, on which mankind's last thin dime was staked. The thing consisted, mainly, of a sectional mirror of paraboloid figuration, with a microwave exciter hung at its focus. This reflector was capable of throwing an

enormously extended, invisible beam in the shape of a cone with the mirror at its apex. This beam, colliding with light waves or photons, produced an infinitesimal retarding effect, similar to a lens, thus refracting the light waves toward the axis of the cone.

Light entering this invisible cone would conform to it exactly as water entering a funnel. Although never fully tried out, the devilish possibilities of the thing lay in the fact that it could be focused to cover any incandescent body of however great extent—the sun, for instance. And in that case the results should be similar to those attainable with a Gargantuan burning glass of a size sufficient to cover the sun's disc.

Working with a speed and determination that soon caused drops of sweat to trickle down his bronzed face, Bruce struggled with the thing far into the night, while the thin, red crescent of Mars waxed wider and wider until it became like a full, ruddy moon. But it still retained its place, floating low on the horizon, for Deimos, moon of Mars, kept always the same face toward his primary.

There was plenty of light to enable Bruce to work effectively even though it was night on Deimos; for, due to refraction of sunlight around that small globe, the night was but a sort of pearly twilight, touched with blood by the oblique Mars-shine.

Bruce was more or less familiar with the scanty vegetation and animal life among the rocks nearby. Years before, he had piloted an exploration party from Earth, consisting of four eminent men of science, which had spent some time in studying this tiny moon.

After several busy hours, Bruce stole a few minutes to search the pitted face of the cliff near which he was working. There was nothing to fear from these aboriginal dwellers of Deimos, as he was well aware, for he remembered them as inoffensive, sessile-eyed, snail-footed Arachnida, only a few inches tall.

But he was wondering if this strange, unknown thing which Horker had hatched from his pebbles had affected them in any visible manner.

Although small, sluggish creatures, these Arachnida, he remembered, possessed an intelligence considerably higher than that of any animal of Earth—a quaint, semi-human intelligence, which enabled them to use certain primitive tools.

And now, here in the shallow niches of the cliff, he found their tiny, conical, adobe huts. His eyes traced the small terraces lying before the huts, filled with dark loam which the industrious Arachnida had carefully collected from the scanty supply available.

But these small gardens were neglected, the tiny huts abandoned. Not an Arachnida did he find, although he searched for several hundred feet along the cliff,

HAD they fled, wisely, from this menace which stalked with giant strides over their too-small world? Or had they succumbed, been swallowed up or enmeshed, somehow, in this brain-twisting thing released upon them by Horker from the dark ages of Earth's past?

With a sickening sense of futility, Bruce returned to his task. The stillness became oppressive. It was hard to keep his mind centered, and he would now and then find himself gazing warily down the talus. How was Red making out? Well, anything could have happened to him by now—anything! Bruce tried to blame himself for this delay. But what else could he have done?

At last the machine was ready. Bruce adjusted it, with the wide mirror facing the sky, close down to the horizon.

In the natural anticipation of events, dawn should presently creep along that horizon. Then the sun would rise, sweep upward into the field of the mirror. Nothing would happen for twelve minutes thereafter—it would take that long for the scooped-up rays of light and

heat to reach Deimos. Of course the machine would disintegrate at the first touch, but that wouldn't matter—the heat would blast away for twelve minutes longer.

Bruce threw in the time switch. He had set it to kick the current over into the wave oscillator at dawn.

Now he could go on with his search for Red. Whether or not he returned wouldn't matter—the machine would function without further attention.

But if he found Red—alive—and could get him back to the rocket before dawn...

Bruce swung off, down the talus slope, his eyes striving to pierce the mist ahead. It wouldn't be dawn for some time, for nights on Deimos were long—fifteen hours.

Despite his cautious advance, the stones clattered harshly underfoot, sliding for yards around, and sometimes rising, weightless as feathers, to drift before his eyes. There was the disturbing sense that, should he leap upward, he would leave Deimos forever.

For a quarter of a mile he kept steadily on, while the talus narrowed between up jutting, rocky pinnacles.

Suddenly he froze, eyes leveled straight ahead. Something moving on the dim crest of a ridge beyond the gully! An indistinct form, larger than a man—vague, shapeless—too large for anything on Deimos. Abruptly it was gone.

Then a gleam as of light on polished metal caught his eye. It came from the rubble underfoot. He stooped, reached down. Sick at heart, he picked the thing up.

Red's pocket kit of serum!

Bruce felt, now, that his sinister apprehensions in regard to Red were justified. Only incipient madness could have caused" the levelheaded spaceman to cast the box away.

A rising mist from the gully ahead somehow suggested smoke. Then, as Bruce

advanced, a small, moving object a few yards away caught his attention.

An Arachnida! The first he had seen.

Bruce drew closer. Why didn't it try to run away? From past experience, Bruce knew these little creatures to be habitually shy and timid in the near presence of man. This one paid absolutely no attention to him.

For a moment he watched it as it forged steadily ahead, as if in answer to some urgent summons, down the talus. Was it drawn by that same invisible force which had overpowered Red?

Muttering a curse, Bruce strode on. Now the talus dipped into a narrow gorge which opened like a doorway onto the level floor of the gully.

Ah-h-h-h!

His hand wrapping frenziedly around the butt of his pistol, Bruce dodged behind a providential spur of outjutting rock—to peer forth with cringing eyes at the dreadfulness of what he saw.

For the place was alive with moving monsters, abstruse organisms, of a kind that man should not see. Sights which made one shudder repulsively.

As tall as men, but of such bloated girth and bulk that Bruce felt suddenly like a pygmy, they were wandering here and there over the floor of the gully, as if gathering something from the rocks. Here, then, were Horker's pebble people! And, as one blundered near his hiding place on thick, jointed legs articulated to the lower segment of its squat body, Bruce had ample opportunity to observe it closely.

ITS bloated body was composed of a series of distinct, horizontal rings or segments, each segment provided with a pair of unjointed, flexible feelers. There was no distinct head. From the third segment, counting downward, grew a pair of eye stalks; and on the fourth segment was a queer circinate formation!

which might serve either as olfactory or auditory equipage. Bruce saw no organ which suggested a mouth, but from the top segment grew a sort of pedicle or antenna, terminating in a round, bulbous knob.

But it was not the distinctly nauseous aspect of the thing that rendered it most singularly abhorrent, for Bruce was used to the strange planetary fauna of other worlds than Earth, although its appearance was sufficiently disgusting.

Where on this tiny satellite had they found the nutriment to grow such fat, squat bodies?

Bruce, his eyes darting from one to another of these grotesque monsters, saw that no two of them were alike. Some had a greater or less number of segments and appendages—others more than two eye stalks. Thin plates of horny, chitinlike deposit seemed to armor certain specimens, although the one nearest him was entirely bare—but each was provided with that bulb-tipped pedicle.

Incongruous and unpleasant as was the spectacle occasioned by this utter unconformity to a set system of development, the real foundation of the spaceman's heart-sickness and loathing lay still deeper. He wasn't sure yet, but—

Bruce allowed his eyes to shrink away, to roam over the gully.

Horker's laboratory!

The gully was perhaps a quarter of a mile wide, and in the center of this grottolike basin stood a long, rough building of stone. So, Red had been right in that "hunch" of his.

Near the building was a rounded, domelike structure, apparently of baked clay, with an aperture near the top from which came puffs of greenish, phosphorescent smoke; and on a level expanse of the gully's floor beyond the furnace—if it was a furnace—a hundred foot circle was outlined with a low wall of piled rock.

Horker had undoubtedly constructed

this rough building—might be responsible for the furnace—but that vaguely suggestive and disturbing circular wall bore the aspect of nothing human.

With the pulverizer pistol in his hand, Bruce stepped out from behind the rocks. He was expecting a rush from these monsters.

Nothing of the sort happened. Only their waving eyestalks indicated that they were aware of him, but they seemed to sense no threat in his presence.

Did the anti-telepathic serum work both ways? Did they trust implicitly in their powers of metapsychosis—their ability to read thoughts?

Hoping that such was the case, Bruce walked in among them toward the building, which was perhaps two hundred yards distant.

Now, striding close between two of these monsters, a terrible comprehension assailed him. Something in the flesh texture of these slimy, skinless things gave him an answer to his question of their origin. For, in vague patterns on those swelling surfaces were distorted, yet unmistakable designs—familiar outlines. Patterns that could be nothing other than the twisted, crushed bodies of Arachnida!

TO Bruce, now, it was only too apparent that these monsters had not formed through the embodiment of any natural organic, or animal-like, growth.

Although built of flesh they were not animals.

They were complete structures—assemblies! They were quasi-bodied monstrosities, built of hundreds of small pieces—modified, united, coalesced and welded, in consequence of some peculiarly blasphemous travesty of nature. In a flash of understanding Bruce knew what these monsters were gathering from the rocks—knew what had become of the Arachnida. For each piece in these horrid structure! was an

Arachnida—still living, although no longer a separately conscious entity.

Thus, on a small world, peopled by tiny, defenseless creatures, these monsters had built themselves up. Had not the same thing started on Earth, years before, among the wild cattle, the guanacos of Patagonia?

He must find Red!

Bruce strode on to the open door of the building. The place was a busy workshop. This laboratory of Horker's was larger than it had looked to be from across the gully. Just within the wide doorway a dozen pebble monsters were working over a basketlike structure of metal. Bruce saw a queer, intricate mechanism attached to the top of this structure, which, despite its open appearance, somehow suggested that it was intended for a space ship—although fashioned along some enigmatic principle utterly foreign to anything he had ever seen.

Further on, along the back wall of this big, rough place, was a group of three other monsters bending over something on the floor.

Grasping his pulverizer pistol, and shrinking in every cell of his body from a closer contact with these multi-shaped abnormalities, Bruce walked into the room.

Again their extended, pointing eyestalks indicated their consciousness of his arrival.

Larry Gillmore! A strangely immobile and silent Larry. He was stretched out on the floor, his eyes open, but with a look in them which indicated past all doubt that his brains had ceased to function.

The three pebble monsters drew back as Bruce advanced. Probably they were aware of and puzzled over their lack of control over him.

"Red!" he gasped, bending over the lax form.

There was no response. Then Bruce noticed a faceted, crystalline nodule, the size of a small orange, around which the tanned fingers of the

unconscious spaceman's hand were gripped. And on top of this came the almost paralyzing conviction that, before his very eyes, a subtle change or atrophy was taking place in those fingers that were clutching the nodule.

Heavens! Was the hand really beginning to look like one of those bulb-tipped pedicles?

Whipping out his hypodermic needle, Bruce filled it; then, with a violent kick, he dislodged the malignant object from Larry's hand.

A second later he had shot home a tremendous dose of serum into the bared arm. But now the pebble people seemed to awake to the fact that all was not right. Suddenly they rushed forward.

Brace jerked erect, the cool grip of the pulverizer pistol settling reassuringly into his palm. And in that same split-second, he saw one of the monsters snatch up the crystalline nodule, open the bulb-tipped pedicle which sprouted from its upper segment, and place the loathsome object within the confines of its no less abhorrent self.

On they came. Coruscating pencils of fire hissed from the spaceman's weapon. And where it touched the monsters, lambent flames raced and spread as they splattered into nothingness, filling the room with a vile, noisome and unbreathable vapor, and from the midst of each drop a crystalline nodule, still intact.

PATAGONIAN pebbles! Bruce guessed what the things were. But they must have undergone some obscure metamorphic rebirth, some chemical dissolution with subsequent reformation or recrystallization, for their lines were clean cut, their facets polished and faultless.

The three monsters who had been gathered around Larry were thus accounted for, but now the atmosphere was too thick to allow Bruce to see if the others were

approaching.

Gasping for breath in that vile air, he dragged Larry toward the doorway; and as he did so, a sound, a single musical note like the twang of a harp, beat upon his ears.

Was it a danger signal? A call to arms?

Again it came: *Twang—twang—twang...*

Now he dragged Larry out through the door where it was easier to breathe.

Bruce saw that things had been happening, there in that pearly, red-laced twilight, while he had been inside the building; for now the space within the confines of that circular wall of rock was occupied.

Here hung a kaleidoscopic thing which set his senses reeling. A shimmering, colossal polyhedron of a thousand scintillating facets, an indescribable, unstable thing, twanging tremulously in measured cadence.

And from the rocky floor of the gully, from far and near, Bruce saw the pebble monsters assembling, as if drawn by some omnipotent command, around that hundred foot circular wall.

Now was the time to get away! Bruce whirled back to Larry, to find the latter's eyes, suddenly sane, staring at him.

"Thank Heaven!" he gasped.

He jerked the lanky spaceman to his feet.

"Come along, you!" he gritted.

Unmolested, they slunk away in that pearly, half light, across the floor of the gully toward the talus slope.

And as they fled from the near proximity of that towering thing within the circle of rocks, Bruce sensed that he was fleeing from something he could not understand—did not want to understand.

Yet, despite this mind weariness, as he saw these pseudo-bodied monsters assembling around the wall, a vague, unwelcome comprehension sickened him. If they would

only continue to be thus occupied!

Reaching the rocket in safety, a half hour later, the two spacemen blasted away from that accursed moon of Mars. Now, hanging in space a few thousand miles from Deimos, with jets silent, they were waiting for results.

Larry was in a repentant mood.

"Guess I pulled a damned fool stunt," he remarked, looking at his twisted hand. He had, in fact, been examining it for some time past. Now, true to his nature, he grinned, broadly. "A little more and I'd be holding a tin cup on a street corner."

"Wrong." Bruce was watching Deimos through one of the ports. "You'd have been built into a first class pebble man—a handling machine for a little crystalline brain to operate, a brain that can outthink any living man or animal!"

Bruce continued his watch through the port. Dawn must now have whitened that blood-tinged horizon. Soon he would know if his efforts were to be in vain.

SUDDENLY the little disc of Deimos glowed white with the incandescence of lime in an oxyhydrogen flame. Then, slowly, this brilliant dot puffed up to a thousand times its previous size, like a star from a Roman candle, a glowing, gaseous Nova.

"All over," reported Larry, who had been watching intently from another port.

Bruce turned to the control bar, throwing the blast full open. "That thing"—Larry hesitated—"I mean the thing within that circle of rocks—what was it?"

"I don't know," confessed Bruce.

"But—where did it come from?"

"Out of space—somewhere. It wasn't there when I entered the gully."

"Was it a space ship, do you think?" insisted Larry.

"No, I don't think so. They were building one of their own. That's why the furnace was smoking."

“Going to blast back to Patagonia, I’ll bet you.” Larry’s eyes were thoughtful. “Well, it’s just too bad now.”

“Somehow, I hated to do it,” mused Bruce, “but those things and men couldn’t possibly exist in the same universe.”

“Were they alive—those crystals—do you think?”

“I don’t know. Half alive, maybe—but possessing a still, cold intelligence that could mold and fashion living things into exactly the form they wished, through the power of sheer thought.”

“I—er—got a queer impression about that other thing—the thing that came. I wonder why it came.”

“They were expecting something to come, for they had prepared a place for it. I

imagine they had called it—called it out of space—out of the past, maybe—and it came. That’s all.”

Bruce ceased speaking, and for a moment there was silence between them as they listened to the screaming blast from the rocket’s jets, hurling them homeward, away from that weird place of unbelievable monstrosities.

Presently, with a thoughtful look in his grey eyes, Bruce asked: “What was that impression you mentioned?”

“Why, it seemed to me,” explained the red-haired spaceman, “when they gathered in a circle around that thing within the wall, that they were—er—praying.”

“Strange,” mused Bruce, “I thought so, too.”