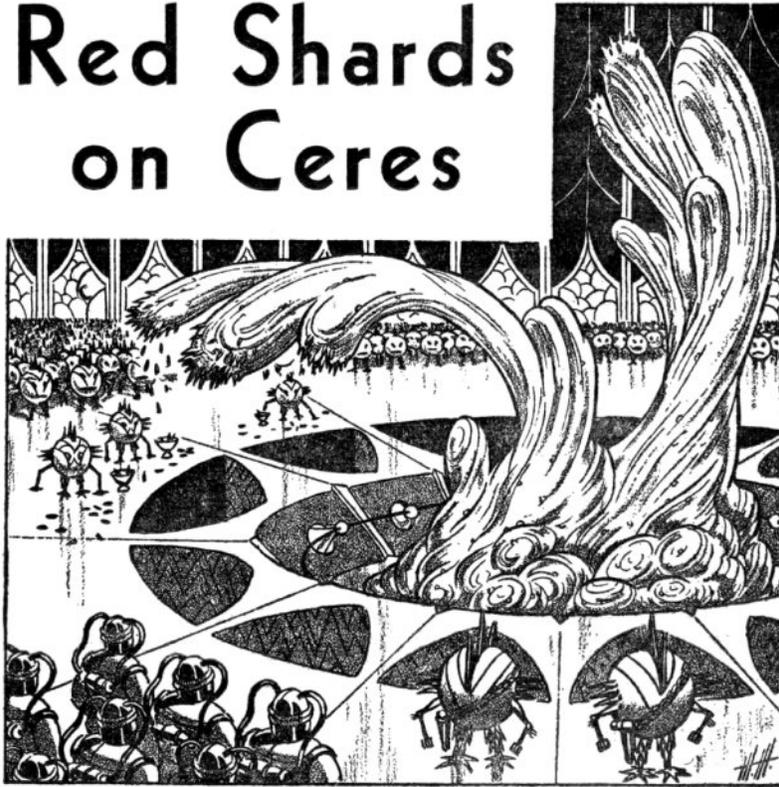


Red Shards on Ceres



The ghoulish mass thrust up hungry pseudopods

They Seemed Harmless Enough, These Broken Pieces of
Glass on a Deserted Asteroid—But Strange,
Crimson Menace Glowed in Them!

By **RAYMOND Z. GALLUN**

Author of "Old Faithful," "Saturn's Ringmaster," etc.

THAT it was Ronnie Iverness who found the devilish Red Shards was a trick of chance. He was not even a legitimate member of the Farnsworth Expedition to airless Ceres. He was just a freckle faced twelve-year-old with nerve enough to stow away on their ship, the *Antares*. Dave Iverness, the pilot, happened to be his brother.

Ronnie was dragged out of his hiding place two days after the *Antares* left Earth. For the balance of the trip, and for a while after

the landing on the asteroid, he was kicked around by the whole outfit.

Then fortune seemed to smile on the youthful culprit.

"He's a game little imp," Professor Farnsworth said to Dave Iverness, when the two were alone in the specimen room. "Maybe it would be the right thing to ease up on the hazing, and to give him a bit of freedom, eh? So far he hasn't even been out of the ship."

Dave, big and bronzed, chuckled softly.

“Sure,” he replied. “Ronnie’s taken his medicine like a man, and he’s regular. Not a troublemaker, either. He’s just so doggoned interested in space ships and other worlds that he can’t help himself sometimes!”

Master Iverness was called from the rocket compartment where Hansen, the engineer, was keeping him needlessly busy polishing metal. Presently, though he was expecting anything but favors, he found himself provided with a regulation space suit. When his good fortune was explained to him, he was too flabbergasted to say much, but his eyes became very large, indeed.

“G-gosh! Thanks!” was about all he could stammer just then.

The space suit was many sizes too big for him. The vast, bloated legs of the contraption made walking, and even standing, somewhat difficult for the boy, for he found it necessary to keep his feet spread wide apart. But Ronnie was quite willing to undergo physical discomfort for the thrills of exploration.

With Farnsworth’s full permission, he left the ship, along with six men, Dave Iverness among them. The group moved off toward the near horizon, and presently entered a jagged gorge that looked like the burrow of an angry Titan. Their purpose now, and in fact the entire purpose of the Farnsworth Expedition, was to collect mineral samples for the Smithsonian Institute.

For five hours the kid was in his glory, while he and his companions bounded and clambered over the rough, mysterious landscape, where shadows were as sharp and black as the fangs of fiends. The massiveness and clumsiness of Ronnie’s attire was largely made up for by the fact that the gravity of tiny Ceres was very slight.

Nothing special happened until the sallying band had almost completed their circuitous return to the *Antares*. Then Ronnie noticed something off to his right. It was a

cleft in the rusty ground. The other members of the party were straggled out ahead of him now; for he hadn’t been able to move quite as fast as they in his ill-fitting space armor.

THE cleft offered no unusual promise. The men had ignored it. Nevertheless, youthful whim sent Ronnie hopping to its brink. Thick gloom enveloped its depths. But close to the torn lip of the cleft there were curious, broken fragments lying in the dust. They were flat and flaky, like pieces of shattered, red glass. As any adult would have done, Ronnie stooped and picked one of them up. Inside the thin, translucent texture of the shard, there slumbered a deep, bloody glow.

Ronnie wanted to yell out about his find to his brother up ahead; but something unfathomable restrained him. No physical circumstance should have prevented him from doing this, for his oxygen helmet, and the oxygen helmets of all the other space suits belonging to the expedition, were equipped with radio receivers and transmitters.

Nevertheless, for some eerie and unknown reason, Ronnie held his tongue. It was as though, somewhere, beyond and yet within himself, a hidden entity was considering the situation cautiously, in an effort to determine the very best way to cope with it, with the least chance of making a mistake.

Master Iverness did not quite realize this at once, however. His own feelings were strange. He stood for a long moment, the red shard clutched in his gloved hand, his brows, his lips, and his freckled nose puckered in vague puzzlement. During that moment a subtle web of intangible but very real power ensnared his faculties. Ancient Ceres, barren, burnt out, and seemingly lifeless, still harbored magic of which man had no inkling.

Presently Ronnie felt a peculiar tingling sensation in the hand which held the glassy fragment. The sensation warned him

that the piece of red mineral was probably not entirely safe to hold onto. But when he decided to drop the thing, he was surprised and frightened to discover that his fingers did not respond to his will!

Just then he heard his brother's voice shouting in his earphones: "Hurry up, Ronnie! Where are you anyway?"

The kid really wanted to answer his brother this time, for he was badly scared. He wanted to forget everything that had just happened, and go bounding over the ridge which now hid his companions and the space ship from view. Words formed in his mind automatically, but there they stayed! They couldn't get past his tongue and vocal cords!

It was the same with his sturdy legs. They refused to obey the commands of his brain! It was as though somebody else had suddenly taken possession of his entire body! And Ronnie, with a youngster's quick intuition, knew that the wicked red shard he clutched and couldn't let go of was somehow responsible.

This knowledge did him no good, however.

Now he spoke, and though the words were undoubtedly copied from his memory in some manner, still he had no wilful part in their utterance. Their tone was cunningly calm.

"Be with you in a minute, Dave," he said into his microphone. "Just wait up for me."

Then, impelled once more by a weird and irresistible impulse which seemed to originate in the substanceless ether surrounding Ceres, he selected more of the shards from the ground about him with his free hand, and stuffed them into the pouch that was part of his equipment.

THOUGH he did not realize it, he now had fourteen of the mysterious fragments, besides the one which he held tightly in his right hand.

Perhaps this was just a coincidence; but then again, perhaps, it was not, for there were fourteen men in the Farnsworth Expedition.

Now he proceeded toward the ridge, his movements entirely beyond his control. He crossed the ridge and descended into the little valley where the *Antares* rested. With a cunning not his own he scanned the group of men beside the ship. The entire company—fourteen—was in sight. Those who had not gone afield were busy excavating a shallow pit in the hard crust of Ceres, their purpose being to obtain samples of the minerals beneath the surface.

Ronnie's actions, now that he had an audience, were deceptively normal.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Everybody! I found something!"

The men turned to look at him as he bounded clumsily into their midst.

"What's the matter?" Dave Iverness questioned.

"I've got some red stuff, like pieces of glass!" Ronnie's voice piped. "I found 'em over the ridge. Look!"

He held up the fragment which his right hand clutched in a viselike grip.

Dave Iverness scrutinized his kid brother closely. He saw that the youngster's face was pale behind the glass front of his oxygen helmet; but this might only be the natural result of excitement.

"Let's have a look at the thing," Dave Iverness invited, extending his hand.

"No!" Ronnie's guiding entity replied. "This one's mine! But I've got a lot of other pieces in my pouch. One for everybody. Wait!"

It was a bad moment for Ronnie Iverness. He alone had an idea of what was about to happen; but in spite of his tremendous inner struggle, he could not so much as give a tiny squeak of warning. His will was an impotent nothing imprisoned in a body not his own.

As though he were watching the actions of another person, he saw himself remove the baleful shards from his pouch, and pass them around, one to each of his companions, Dave and Professor Farnsworth among them.

What followed was as strange as the dark wisdom that produced it. A subtle spell of unearthly wizardry conquered the men as easily as it had conquered the boy. By the time that each individual knew that all was not well, it was too late. Fingers clutched the shards in grips that no human will could break. The channels between brain and muscle were seemingly severed, and something invisible and intangible assumed complete control.

Nevertheless, the activity of each human brain went on unhampered. Thoughts of fear and dread and wonder were not checked. The men were scientists; this being so, each of them tried to construct a theory which might explain the weird miracle. All of them must have arrived at approximately the same conclusions.

The shards were composed of a material which acted as the receiver for some eerie neuron control, perhaps propagated through space by a form of etheric impulse. These impulses, when received, acted upon nerve tissue, probably first contacting the nerves of the fingers that held the shards, and traveling thence to the spinal cords and brains of each individual. The strength of the impulses was sufficient to dominate completely the normal neuron messages by which a man guides the movements of his body.

CLEARLY, what had happened was the work of an intelligent agent with a definite purpose. The red fragments must have been planted beside the cleft in the hope that they would trap unsuspecting space wanderers.

Professor Farnsworth was now the first

human marionette to respond to the silent commands of the hidden unknown. While the others waited stiffly, he entered the *Antares* and proceeded to the radio room. There he sent out a call to Earth in code:

Marvelous discovery on Ceres. Organize large expedition and dispatch to Ceres at once. Arnold Farnsworth.

He learned then that not only his body, but his memory as well, was a slave to the unknown. The glassy red fragment he held was not merely a receiver of commands. It could be used to probe his mentality as well. Else the message in English could never have been composed.

He could guess, too, the sinister purpose of the radiogram. More human beings were wanted here on Ceres. As slaves? For food? Only time would tell.

Unable to resist the guiding compulsion that gripped him, he left the *Antares* and joined his company. Then the trek toward some cryptic destination began. In single file the fifteen members of the expedition marched back over the ridge. No one spoke. No one could speak. Minds still could function; but they were as impotent as if sealed in blocks of metal.

The party reached the cleft that Ronnie had discovered. They clambered down into its gloomy shadows. There was a rough-cut tunnel there, leading steeply down toward the bowels of Ceres. They began their descent.

In a matter of minutes complete darkness enveloped them. But presently this was relieved a little by light which luminous lumps of radioactive ore in the walls of the passage emitted.

For weary hours the descent continued. Slight though the gravity of the asteroid was, still the task of clambering down a passage in many places almost vertical, made serious inroads on the energies of the adventurers.

Professor Farnsworth felt the effect most, for he was old. Yet he could not stop to rest. The insidious power that had mastered him forced him on as no lash could ever have done.

At last a huge metal door was reached. Ponderously it opened to admit the men. They entered a narrow chamber which must have had the function of an airlock, for in its opposite wall there was a second door, similar to the first, which had now closed.

The second portal swung inward. Brilliant light, like that of the sun, stabbed by as it moved. Automatically the members of the Farnsworth Expedition entered the tremendous cavern beyond it.

Far up toward its roof an incandescent sphere shone brilliantly, giving abundant artificial light to this strange place. The floor of the cavern was covered with odd, luxuriant vegetation, planted in orderly plots. This was farm land, then, buried within the heart of dead Ceres.

And now the men saw what manner of creatures inhabited this artificial world. From out of the shadows of spidery, grotesque trees, loaded with green fruit, came a group of furry, spheroidal monsters with thick legs and delicate, tentacular arms. Their mouths were toothless orifices in their globular bodies. Their eyes, set close to their mouths, were cruel and keen. That intelligence looked out through those orbs could not be questioned.

Each creature wore a harness decorated with fragments of the red substance which had been the undoing of the Earthmen, and odd, pistol like weapons dangled in holsters fastened to those harnesses.

THE Cereans allowed the Earthmen to advance along the road which led across the cavern floor. Then they fell in behind them, like a military escort.

Finally the huge cave was crossed. A short tunnel was traversed. Now the humans found themselves in a second cavern, smaller

than the first. The air throbbed with the smooth vibration of colossal, gleaming engines. Molten metal hissed and cascaded from vast retorts. Cereans were everywhere, engaged in intricate work which only a high order of intelligence could have directed. Each of them wore a harness richly decorated with the mysterious Red Shards.

They glanced briefly at the Earthmen. Their curiosity seemed small; but in their cold, lidless eyes there was a promise of death, or worse.

Ronnie and Dave Iverness walked behind Professor Farnsworth, who was close to the head of the column. Like the rest of the group, they could not converse, they could not even turn their eyes to look at each other. Their muscles could only do what the guiding force that held them prisoner directed.

But their minds worked unhampered. Dave Iverness was still trying to devise some plan for escape, though he could see how hopeless their position was. Even if the spell which had enslaved them could be broken, there were still the Cereans.

Ronnie was scared. What had happened was his fault, he was sure. If he had not found the shards, all would have been well. But this feeling of responsibility must have sharpened his wits. The kid was made of that kind of stuff.

Professor Farnsworth felt weak and faint after the exertion of the long descent. Specks of color flitted before his gaze. But the scientist in him persisted in trying to understand the inexplicable. He was still observing keenly everything that passed within his line of vision.

The party traversed the cave of machines, and entered a third cavern, smaller than the others, but still of gigantic size. It was thronged with hundreds of Cereans facing its center in ranks arranged like the spokes of a wheel. There was no artificial light here—only a sullen, reddish glow originating from

something in an open space at the center of the packed ranks of monsters.

Slowly, down an open lane, the Terrestrials were forced to approach the thing. Then they saw what it was—some hellish form of life. It grew in a bowl-like hollow in the floor. It seemed at first glance to be only a semi_liquid mass of phosphorescent pulp. But then one saw the countless fine, nerverlike filaments that traversed it in every direction, and the glowing nuclei of the myriad, oversized cells that composed it. The effect of a close scrutiny was disturbing. Presently and inevitably one realized that here in this mass of alien protoplasm resided deific wisdom, and an intellect that never wearied.

The ghoulish pulp heaved and moved suggestively, thrusting up hungry pseudopods. From the latter, translucent, reddish flakes broke away and dropped to the floor around the pit. These were the Red Shards. They were a natural product of the devilish thing, perhaps originally exuded as a liquid, from its substance, just as a mollusc exudes the liquid which hardens to form its shell.

A number of Cereans were around the pit. Some were gathering the shards in metal baskets. Others, stripped of all their ornaments except a sort of belt made of interlocking shard fragments, stood in line, waiting to perform what seemed a fanatical act of devotion to their hideous god.

ONE by one they were easing themselves gently into the pit whose glowing, pulpy contents folded over them, and began to absorb their still living flesh.

And now the Earthmen could begin to guess their own fate. With cool deliberation, their hands went to work removing their space armor, clothing, and other equipment. The air around them, now, was cool and fresh. They too were to be food for the monster—a strange delicacy which it longed to taste!

A man named Rogers was the first

victim. Still retaining his grip on the red, glassy fragment that Ronnie Iverness had given him, he lowered himself into the pit with the same outward calm that the Cereans were showing. He moved very slowly, as if to avoid injuring the abhorrent mass of jelly that craved his flesh. Pseudopods enveloped him, and he sank into the mass of glowing cells. His body writhed a little, and then was still. Its substance began to dwindle.

Hansen, the engineer, was next....

Behind him, just ahead of Ronnie, was Professor Farnsworth. The sickening experience of watching the ends of two of his loyal henchmen had done almost as much to reduce the stamina of his old body as the exertion of the descent into this realm of horror. He knew that he was going to swoon before his limbs could carry him into the slimy clutches of the monster; and at last he thought he understood the strange and ghastly mystery of Ceres.

He took one more step toward the pit. Then his knees buckled. He could no longer respond to the commands of whatever it was that controlled him. Blackness closed in around him. His ears were roaring. As he fell, he stumbled against the small figure of Ronnie Iverness, close behind him. The weird crystal of evil was knocked from his numbed hand. The boy and the savant sprawled together.

For a fleeting fragment of time, while a dim shred of consciousness still remained to him, Professor Farnsworth was once more his own master. And he acted quickly and surely. With stiff fingers he groped for Ronnie's right hand and struck it a fierce blow. A second shard of evil went skittering and tinkling across the floor.

Then with a final, tremendous effort the old scientist rasped out instructions: "Throw something at that—devil. Something heavy. Kill—it— Get the—the fragment away from— Dave—"

The savant lapsed into limp

unconsciousness. But a quick young body was free, now, to act under the direction of a quick young mind. Ronnie no longer held the glassy fragment, and temporarily at least his slavery was at an end. Cereans were rushing toward him, but for the moment he was free.

His gaze fell on a discarded space suit. Here at the heart of Ceres its weight was very small, but its large mass remained unchanged. He seized it, hoisted it easily above his head, and threw it with all his might.

It landed in the center of the slimy mass that filled the pit. The effect was something like that of hurling a heavy stone into soft mud. The hard metal of the armor was not like the soft living flesh of the victims, and it was hurled with considerable force. The monstrous thing in the pit heaved and throbbed with the shock of pain.

THEN Ronnie darted toward his brother. No one hindered him. The Cereans who were leaping in his direction stopped in their tracks. The other natives stood like grotesque statues, seemingly too surprised to act. But it was not surprise which held them spellbound; it was something far more bizarre.

Ronnie kicked the shard from his brother's hand. At once Dave went into action. A second space suit went crashing into the pulpy mass of glowing jelly. The elder Iverness was a powerful man.

This time the effect on the Cereans was more definite. Their hideous, furry bodies swayed. Many of them crumpled to the floor, and writhed and kicked aimlessly there.

There were no weapons among the Earthmen, but Dave rushed to one of the fallen natives and jerked from its harness the pistol like device with which it was armed. Sensing that the ghoulish horror would quickly recover from the shock of the missiles, he directed the muzzle of the weapon toward the pit, and pressed the button which was evidently the trigger.

A sheet of killing flame leaped forth. Dave did not release pressure on the trigger until all of the slimy thing was blasted and seared into nothingness. A reeking, steamy vapor filled the cavern.

Panting, Dave looked about. A little light was afforded by the now incandescent stone at the bottom of the pit. The Cereans all lay inert except for feeble, pointless twitchings. The Earthmen regained control of their bodies, discarding the Red Shards.

"That, somehow, seems to be that," Iverness commented with a puzzled grimace. "Good work, Ronnie!"

Several minutes later, under the ministrations of his henchmen, Professor Farnsworth regained his senses. He looked about, and then smiled in wan satisfaction.

"I think none of our alien friends are in a position to cause us any more trouble," he said.

"How so?" someone asked.

"You all saw that each of them is wearing fragments of the red, glassy substance," the savant replied. "Even those about to sacrifice themselves retained a string of the pieces. This gave me a clue. Those fragments afforded a means of contact between the ruling entity of Ceres, and his subjects. They were the detectors for his commands, which were emanated from his substance in the form of a kind of etheric impulse or wave.

"Symbiosis—that was what it was: A state in which two diverse forms of life exist together, usually to each other's mutual benefit. The relationship of the ants, and the aphids, or plant lice, of Earth, is an example. The ants care for the aphids much as human beings care for and protect domestic animals. In return the aphids exude a sweet juice which the ants like; thus both kinds of insect are benefited.

"The thing in the pit was not just a huge, senseless mass of jelly, of which the

Cereans made a god. It was the brains of the whole system! The more manlike creatures were controlled by it just as it controlled us—through the agency of the red flakes which it produced. Without the master's guidance, they are inert, as you see. They have not enough intellect of their own to remain on their feet. The ruling entity saw through their eyes, and worked with their tentacles, inventing and building marvelous machines. Now that the entity is dead they will starve, for they have not the sense to feed themselves.

“BARRING violence, the master of Ceres was probably immortal; for, in spite of his wisdom, he had no complex organs to wear out. A few cells in his structure would die, but they would be replaced by the splitting of other cells.

“The entity was very old, and probably had seen much in his time. He and the lesser Cereans must have evolved on another greater planet, where their symbiotic relationship began, for Ceres is too small to have produced a native life of its own. Its gravity is too slight to retain external atmosphere and water. Perhaps that greater planet was destroyed by an explosion. Perhaps thus the asteroids were formed. If this is true, the entity's science was already far advanced; he built this comfortable underworld. That, I think, is about as far as human guesswork can go.”

There was a moment of silence after

the Professor finished. Ronnie broke it.

“The Cereans in the other caverns—they won't bother us either?”

“I'm sure they won't, lad,” Farnsworth replied.

“Two space suits are gone,” the boy persisted pessimistically. “Burned up in the monster's hole!”

“We won't need those suits,” the scientist reminded him. “There's still enough to go around. Rogers and Hansen are dead, remember. We'll be able to blast and climb our way out of here, I think.”

“Then everything's okay?” Ronnie questioned, casting a scared glance about the shadowy cavern. “I mean—about what I did—finding that red stuff.”

“Forget it, Ronnie,” the savant laughed. “If I had found the shards I would have done just as you did. Someone would have found them eventually, I'm sure; for we were making a fairly complete survey of the substances that compose Ceres. The result would have been the same, no matter who the discoverer happened to be.”

Dave Iverness patted his young brother's shoulder.

“You're a real space man, kid!” he reassured him.

And Ronnie Iverness' freckled face registered a grin of relief.