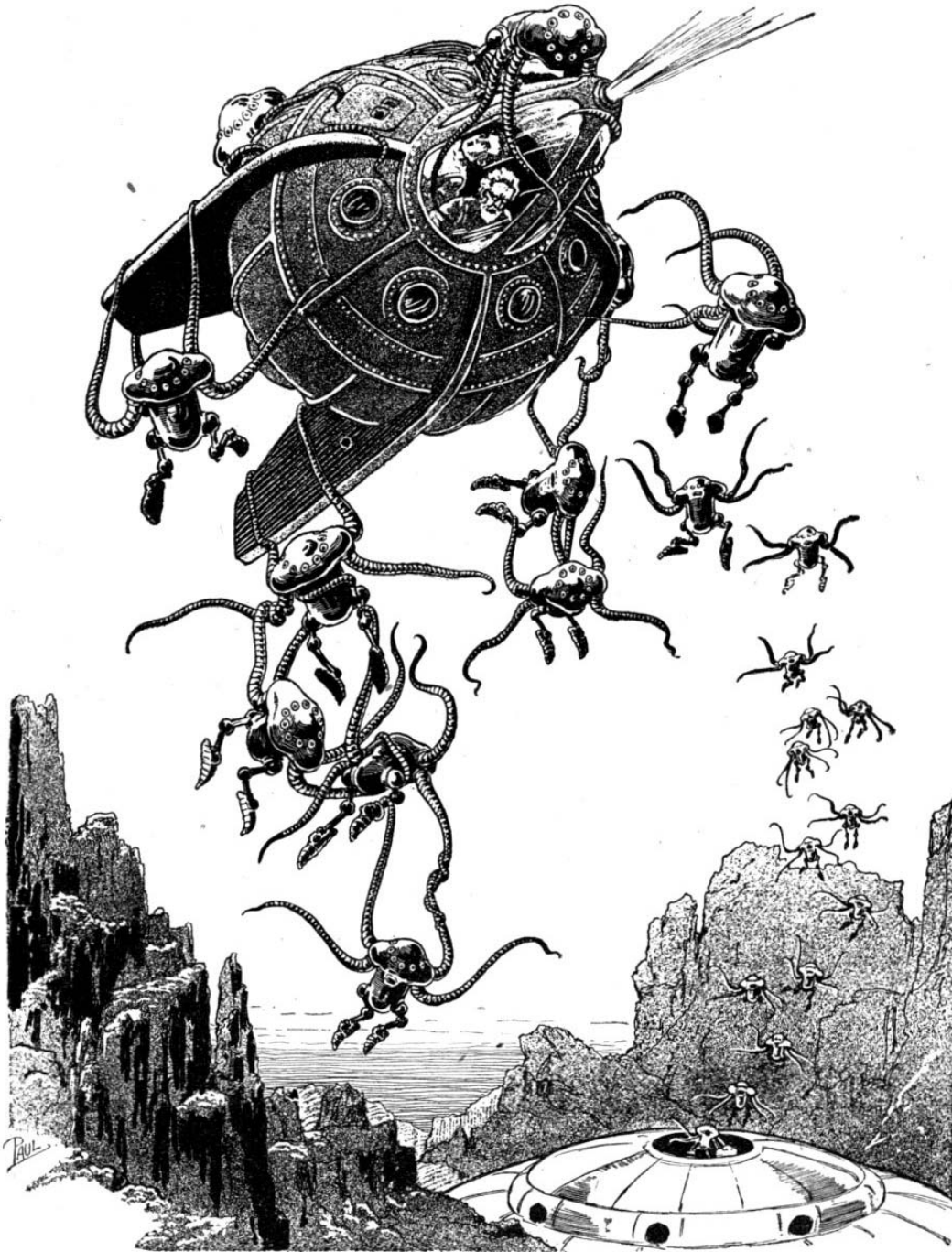


An Adventure on Eros

By J. Harvey Haggard



(Illustration by Paul)

Soon the twining metal-sheathed tentacles were wound about the ship as more and more of the creatures added their weight to the vessel.

“PROFESSOR, there’s something wrong with these controls! They’re fighting back and won’t respond to my guidance. At present we are for some unaccountable reason drifting toward Eros!”

The Professor did not answer. I had been making swift manipulations upon the levers of the control board for some moments, but our space sphere floated steadily onward, with the rocky disc of Eros inflating like a balloon as we approached. I was rapidly growing alarmed. “Professor!” I called. “Professor!”

I turned around in my seat and scanned the single room of the tiny bubble which was our space sphere. Merely a tiny observation sphere. Professor D Four-Ten had enlisted my assistance for a small space excursion of several hours. We had embarked from the roof of the Earthron University and floated out into space with the intention of studying the spectric reflection of the earth as seen from the unobstructed visualization of open space. As a brilliant student in astrophysics I had become Professor D Four-Ten’s favorite. It had been for this reason that he had asked me to accompany him.

Through a small transparent spaceport a Giggins telescope to which our spectroscope of immense power was attached, stared toward the earth. But Professor D Four-Ten, who had kept close to the eyepiece since the beginning of our trip, was not there. He had lurched up against the televisoset, and his eyes were strained and horrible. In his hand he clutched a small square of blue paper which I instantly recognized as a spacegram.

Something of a contorted horror in his features were communicated instantly to me. Something was vitally wrong, that was sure.

“Professor D. Four-Ten!” I cried in alarm, momentarily forgetting the inexplicable ailment of our sphere’s controls. “For God’s sake, sir, what is the matter?”

He had buried his eyes in his hands and was still leaning upon the spherical wall of the space-sphere for support. My cries eventually aroused him and he lurched forward, his hair awry and his staring eyes wild.

“K Two!” he gasp-ed in a tone full of horror. “K Two! Did you say that the ship has lost control!”

I remembered my own trouble and turned to the controls.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “See for yourself. I can’t imagine what is wrong. Our anti-gravitational screens should be functioning perfectly. Is anything the matter?”

He had seized the controls from me with a violence unwonted to his usually mild nature, and now stood staring wildly at the broadening disc of Eros looming close, while the controls responded to his touch with futile lurches which did not in any way affect our steady acceleration toward Eros.

“My God!” screamed Professor D Four-Ten suddenly. His tone was filled with utter horror. “It’s coming! It’s coming!”

HE flung his arms before his face in a protective gesture, while his fear-tortured features fastened themselves upon some object in the broad face of Eros.

“What’s coming?” I cried leaping to my feet. My words appeared to calm him to some extent. The placid calmness of resignation to fate replaced the fire in his eyes. Then with a strange calm, he placed a fatherly arm about my shoulders.

“K Two,” he said. “Are you afraid to die?”

For a moment I stared at him. Wildly! Without comprehension! And I read the truth in his calm old eyes. Courage there—against death itself! Death! Was I afraid to die?

Visions passed through my subconscious mind, as they do through any man’s brain who suddenly faces death. Half-

formed pictures of my mother, a girl I had fancied, the Earthron University! And now Death! It was horrible!

“Surely, sir!” I cried, seizing the thin old arm in my agitated hands. “Surely—not that—”

But he interrupted me, took my trembling hands from his arms and pushed forward the blue square of crinkled paper. I stared at it, swiftly perused it for some explanation to the horror.

DEC 2012

INTERPLANETARY EARTHPORT
IMPORTANT STOP DETAIN ALL
SPACECRAFT LEAVING EARTH WITHIN
TWENTY-FOUR HOURS STOP CLOUD
OF STRANGE ELECTRO METEORITES
BRUSHED PAST EROS CAUSING
VIOLENT ELECTRICAL DISPLAY STOP
SPACE CRUISER VALONDINE
REFUELING AT EROS WITHIN THE
HOUR AND LEAVING FOR EARTH

COMMANDER

MARSPORT

Aeons seemed to pass swiftly as I read the missive, ages whirled swiftly about the void, leaving me lifeless in the vortex. I was dimly aware of D Four-Ten talking, in a monotone which ground slowly but steadily into my consciousness like the steady rasping of a grist mill.

“Eros disturbed by an electrical display due to a cloud of meteorites! And the space Cruiser *Valondine* will be charged by contact! Don’t you see my boy, a simple problem of static electricity! And even now the cruiser *Valondine* is coming closer—always closer!”

The first coma of realization of death, the lethargy which had seized me, now passed, leaving me weak but possessed of a strange calmness and resignation to death akin to the scientist’s own.

“Sir,” I cried staunchly. “If death must

be, it must be, and I am glad to die with one who is not afraid of Fate!”

We gripped hands in that fierce manner which expresses so much emotion.

“Yes,” cried Professor, his eyes suddenly with a frantic joy. “Death! We know it will come! And I shall welcome it in this manner—welcome it as a gift from the Science at whose feet I have placed my life.

“But see—it approaches!”

I had fallen rather weakly to the control desk, but I followed his pointing finger out into the broad disc of Eros. A tiny dot was growing in its heart. The *Valondine*! Charged with static electricity!

“Don’t you see,” said Professor D Four-Ten. “A simple problem in physics!” For a moment I thought he was crazy. My own brain, yet revolving inwardly, could not so readily accept this calmness. Fears swept me, regrets, and the love of life. Surely this calm old fool was crazy. But his voice droned on and on.

“A simple problem in physics. The cloud of meteorites charged the great lava-basalt sphere, which is Eros, to its very full. The *Valondine*, landing on Eros for refueling, became charged. Now it will attract us, sweep us to our death! The Martian Commander realized this and spacegrammed to earth. But it was too late, too late!”

MY horrified eyes were fastened upon the small dot which had swiftly enlarged to the miniature outlines of a space cruiser, approaching swiftly. A great object in the vacuum, charged with electricity, attracting, attracting...

“You must realize,” said Professor D Four-Ten, “that the simplest principles are the ones which we must combat the hardest. In your experiments you have seen pithballs charged with electricity which attract others against the pull of gravity. Very well, that is exactly what we are now. That great cruiser

Valondine is a pithball, full of electricity, and we are another, being pulled in by its attraction!”

“But I don’t want to die!” I shouted suddenly. “I don’t want to die!” I struggled to arise but his hands pushed me down. Seizing the controls I futilely endeavored to swing the ship about. It was useless. There was a steady vibration of the ship—of accelerating speed! Swinging swiftly toward the *Valondine*! Electric sparks were flying from my hands to the walls of the sphere. My hair was straight upright due to the electric condition of our sphere, induced by the charged body of the cruiser.

“Death!” Professor D Four-Ten was whispering it over my shoulder. “Death! With science! Magnificent! Glorious. Another moment—it will be over!”

Like an avalanche of fate the great cruiser was now swinging down upon us. So swiftly did it approach that it appeared to inflate, like a balloon, to suddenly fill the entire vista. And the strange fears and emotions which swept me were suddenly brought to their climax, surging and tearing through my soul as that great charged body leapt at us.

Crash! There was a vivid flash! Our ship lurched, rushed mightily through space; entered a mad falling arc of acceleration! I was dazed; for a moment I could not believe my senses. We had survived!

“Saved!” ejaculated Professor D Four-Ten delightedly. “Saved! The charge of electricity neutralized by jumping across in a spark! Don’t you see, the rarefied air of this little planet enabled the surplus electrons of the electric charge to jump through space! Saved!”

“I’m not so sure of that Professor,” I put in, noticing something below the ship. He followed my pointing finger. From the rocky surface of the planet below the weird metallic inhabitants of Eros were floating upward—

creatures with a tiny ring of eyes about the upper portion of the cylindrical body. A vast squadron of the creatures were materializing from a series of what looked like ant mounds, and they maneuvered swiftly upward.

“I can’t understand!” murmured Professor D Four-Ten in perplexity. “The metal people of Eros have always been so peaceful!”

For almost half a century the Earth-Mars Space Line had maintained a refueling station on Eros, unhindered by the peaceable metal men, who went their own way quietly. Now, however, they looked decidedly vicious and the little eyes in the strange shapes changed to angry colors like semaphores. Never before had they been known to offer battle!

“There is but one thing we can do!” cried D Four-Ten. “That is to prepare for battle. Perhaps with our ray disintegrators we can make some headway!”

Now that we faced a tangible danger which could be measured with our own capabilities we fell to with a common will. The breathless moments just past were forgotten, and I swiftly got one of the disintegration controls ready. I stood at a control at the front of the sphere near the pilot’s seat, and the Professor ran to the rear of the sphere where another ray machine was stationed.

As the long flight of metal figures approached from below, the tentacles from their middles unwrapped and stretched forward in anticipation!

“Ready!” called the Professor coolly.

“Quite ready,” I replied.

“Very well,” he ordered. “Wait till they are about a hundred feet below. I will give the word and we shall fire. And, by the way, I’ve arrived at an explanation for their sudden hostility. You see they are of metal and they have become charged with electricity which affected the planet Eros. Doubtless this

charge affects their irritability! Ready! Then fire!”

I pulled the release lever, and stared stupidly downward at the metal creatures who floated swiftly upward. No ray of destruction was forthcoming from the exterior ray nozzle. I heard an exclamation from behind.

“Wrecked!” cried the Professor. “Hopelessly fused by the spark of electricity which leaped from the *Valondine*.”

Then, working madly at the disintegrator, realizing it was out of commission, I really knew despair! The bodies of dully scintillant metal approached swiftly and their tentacles wrapped about our sphere. The malevolent eyes glared in at us. Soon the twining metal-sheathed tentacles were wound about the ship as more and more of the creatures added their weight to our vessel. Through the spaceports their thickly twining tentacles were visible, shutting so much light out that we were in partial shadow. Then our sphere began once more to sink.

We were being dragged down to Eros, by a cloud of passing meteorites.

Our sphere fell swiftly; I could see the broad rock expanse looming close; saw a great rock upon which we were landing. The tentacles writhed and tugged. Closer and closer! What would they do to us? Never had the metal men of Eros been previously aroused.

Then we touched the rock!

I don't know which was the more surprised; the metal men or the Professor and myself. Have you ever seen a comb charged by electricity by rubbing through the hair pick up bits of paper. The paper clings a moment, then leaps away with a snap. That is exactly what happened to our space sphere. It touched the surface of Eros. In a moment our space sphere had been charged with the same charge of electricity which permeated Eros. Now, it is a common fact that like charges repel each other. Therefore our space sphere was

suddenly sent hurtling back into space after being charged with electricity.

I had a sudden vision as the sphere leaped upward—of metal men being sent sprawling as our ship shot up like a bullet from a gun, and the broad expanse of Eros became a gigantic disc which filled the sky and quickly receded to a small orange as we were flung into space.

Then I lost consciousness. My body had been hurled against a transparent space port in the bottom of the sphere, and my momentary impressions had thus been gained. Then a wave of dark oblivion seemed to engulf me. Pain shot through my head—and I knew no more.

* * * *

I awoke; opened my eyes. Where was I? The remembrance of my recent experiences flooded my mentality; I looked about. The pain had completely left my head; and—I was back in the laboratory—back in the schoolroom of the astrophysics class of the Earthron laboratory.

Dully I felt for my temples; they were throbbing! The pads of a headphone came off into my hands. I turned wondering eyes about as a step approached.

The kindly old face of Professor D Four-Ten was approaching. He was smiling.

“Well, my boy,” he said. “You have had your lesson. Are you ready for recitation?”

“Why,” I gasped. “Why—I thought—for a moment ...”

“I know,” he said understandingly. “You thought that you were actually living those experiences. The Telepation Instructor sent artificial nerve irritations to the brain through the brush-pad contacts at your temple. By thus actually experiencing—or seeming to experience your lesson in space navigation it has branded its theme indelibly into your brain.”

I looked with new respect at the

intricate Telepadion instructor, which was enclosed in a cabinet very similar to that of a radio. My entire adventure had come from a long celluloid strip record which moved slowly, under a needle. The thought impressions were carried from the needle to my brain center, just as if I had actually lived them. "Golly, Professor," I said. "Have you

got any more good Records? Mars—or Venus or something."

"Plenty, my boy, plenty! But I have to keep them locked up to prevent some students from studying all the time. Now, however, it is test hour, and I'm afraid your interstellar ventures must cease."