

SPECIAL FICTION ISSUE

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o "COSMIC COUNTERFEIT" o
o by o
o Raymond Van Houten o
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Old Burkes, Captain Terrestrial Space Marines, retired, loved to tell us stories. His reservoir of whoppers seemed never to be exhausted, and as he personified the romantic days of old in space roving, we never tired of hearing his yarns of those never-to-be-forgotten days of the pioneers.

One night we had all gathered outside the barracks in the hot summer evening, with Old Burkes in the center of the group, and we pestered him for another story.

"It's too blamed hot!" he had objected, but the chorus of denials and urgings had prevailed.

"Well," he began, settling down and puffing up a good head of steam in his brier, "this heat reminds me of a story. I knew the fellow I'm going to tell you about well. In fact, we were buddies in training school."

"He was a lieutenant when this happened, and had earned his rating as a first-class specimen. He had been detailed with one companion to explore a certain sector of space a few billion miles outside the System, which was suspected of being a meteor bed.

"They started out in their little cruiser all right and reached their objective without mishap. In those days it took a whopping big ship to carry gravity detectors and meteor screens that were worth a damn, and sooner or later you could bet your boots that any small ship was going to get clipped.

"In Bertie's case, it happened to be sooner. They hadn't been out in the meteor field a day before one of a ton or so stove in the underside of their ship and left them in a fine pickle. If they had been near the lanes, or even near one of the inhabited planets, it wouldn't have been so bad. But out where they were, 3 billion miles or more outside Ultima's orbit, pickle ain't the word for it!

"Temporary patches kept them from losing their air, and gave them a fighting chance, if they could only limp back to someplace where they could land and do the job right. It would be nip and tuck all the way, but we were men in those days, and they made ready to blast back to the base on Ultima.

"Well, they hadn't got fairly started when deed ahead of them loomed the Counterfeit. It looked from the distance at which they first saw it like a planet about the size of Mercury, and it showed a very high albedo, shining like a big ball of silver.

"They breathed sighs of rapture, and thanked their particular gods for the incredible luck which had placed this uncharted body in their vicinity, and adjusted their course for a landing.

"Then Bertie Parker, that's my friend's name, stopped what he was doing at the time, checking course, I think, and scratched his head. In heading for the unknown planet, they moved in the general direction of the sun. They would see any planet which was near their sun-line as a very small crescent. Yet --- yet this planet showed a full disc! They scrambled to the telescope --- ships weren't equipped with the electron screen then --- and took a long, slow, careful look, then sat down on the floor and chewed off a finger-nail. It was true, the

planet showed a full disc!

"They were very close by this time, too close to heave to, retard for an examination, so they were committed to whatever fate this paradoxical planet had in store for them. However, an unknown danger is one thing that the human animal will do anything to avert, and they decided to risk splitting their ship into splinters by trying to sheer off and skim the surface, and continue on their course back to the System if necessary. It was a long chance all right, but they would rather die that way than face the unfathomable mystery of a planet which showed a lit face away from the sun.

"They got closer and closer, working frantically with side blasts from their erosive rockets to swing their ship out of line, but it became more and more apparent that they weren't going to make it. But such is the spaceman's makeup that he will buck impossible odds even when all hope is gone.

"The damaged hull grated and groaned under the torque, threatening every second to burst into fragments and leave them to the harsh mercies of frigid space. As a precautionary measure they donned space suits, hoping against hope that somebody would pick them up after their ship had disintegrated from around them.

"They were only a few hundred thousand miles from the body by this time, and were giving the ship all the twist it would take, but it was no use. A crash landing on an unexplored, uncharted body was inevitable. They had burned out two tubes on their space radio souping it up for their SOS calls, and it had given up the ghost.

"Closer and closer they approached. The two shook hands, knowing that their last moments had come. A spaceman's death in a splash of light as their ship plunged thru the atmosphere and struck the surface was some consolation. At least they'd leave their impression!

"They were headed for a point close to the rim of the luminous orb, and their speed was not low enough to give them a hope of a light landing. They took turns at the telescope in watching the surface of the planet rush at them. It had a peculiar flat, featureless tone, seeming perfectly smooth and unmarred by vegetation, projecting rocks, and human---or other---structures. A curious soft aspect to it, as if it were a huge ball of yellow plush, puzzled them.

"Then the climax arrived. Distance dwindled to a mere thousand miles, and in a few seconds, to five hundred. A heartbeat later it was three hundred---two hundred---one hundred! They braced themselves for the killing shock of impact.

"Thru the port-holes they suddenly saw swirling masses of shining vapor, taking the place of the sparkling black of space. A steady deceleration threw them to the floor, and intolerable heat threatened to cook them in their metal cans. A weaving motion of their damaged ship shook them, and rattled them around the control room like dice in a box.

"Then they shot out into blackness again!

"They gazed dumbly at each other, wondering what sort of miracle had happened, when the familiar clanging of magnetic grapples sounded against their hull. A few minutes later the stunned pair saw the inside port roll slowly open, and there---there stood a Lieutenant of the Terrestrial Space Marines, with a half-dozen men at his back!"

Old Burkes stopped and relit his pipe with an air of finality.

"Well, it doesn't end there does it?" asked one of the boys. "Did they get back? How come they met that ship just at that time? Who was it?"

"It was me!" said Old Burkes. "I had been on patrol duty between Pluto and Ultima when I picked up their SOS with a directional finder. We high-tailed out there just in time to see them bust out of a big ball of gaseous phosphorus, with a fine coat of luminous paint!"