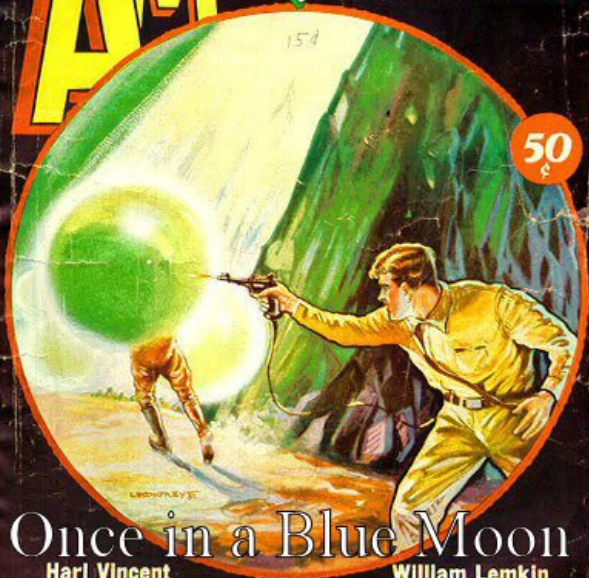


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Once in a Blue Moon

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Once in a Blue Moon

by Harl Vincent

Harl Vincent was the pen name of Harold Vincent Schoepflin (1893 - 1968) a mechanical engineer employed by Westinghouse. When Hugo Gernsback launched the first science fiction magazine in 1926, Vincent began writing and submitting stories, publishing his first one, "The Golden Girl of Munan", in the June 1928 issue of *Amazing Stories*. Vincent was one of the most prolific of the early magazine science fiction writers, publishing over seventy stories between 1928 and 1942. All of his early stories have entered the public domain, and have begun appearing online in two places: at Project Gutenberg, and on this blog.

Most of Vincent's stories have never appeared anywhere but the science fiction pulp magazines where they were first published. One of the few exceptions is "Once in a Blue Moon", a story which first appeared in the Winter 1932 issue of *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, and was eventually reprinted in the 2001 anthology *Rainbow Fantasia*, edited by Forrest J. Ackerman and Anne Hardin.

And now, "Once in a Blue Moon" will appear for a third time in the Johnny Pez blog. As always, the story will be presented in a blog-friendly multi-part format. And now, without further ado, the Johnny Pez blog presents:

Once in a Blue Moon

part 1

Like the alchemists of ancient days who sought to transmute baser metals into gold and silver, our scientists of the twenty-first century have labored for three decades in the hope of producing lunium in their crucibles. They have analyzed the metal with infinite care and precision and have mixed its constituent elements under every conceivable combination of pressure and temperature. Yet their efforts have met with failure. The natural alloy found on Earth's moon seems impossible of duplication in their laboratories.

The remarkable properties of the moon metal were brought to light in 2017, after Philip Meta returned from that first rocket trip which was sponsored by the Smithsonian Institute. He brought with him a sample of the strange blue metal and, quite by accident, experimenters discovered that certain high-frequency electrical impulses imparted to it the powerful gravity force which has since been used in lifting and propelling our vessels of air and of space. Then followed the rapid broadening of man's knowledge and attainments that came with the contacts he was enabled to establish with other inhabited planets.

There is no need that the men of science produce synthetic lunium; the mining of the natural substance has now become a well-organized industry, and vast quantities of the material are daily removed from the so-called rays of the moon's surface and transported to Earth, Mars, and Venus in huge freighters of the ether whose construction was made possible by the use of the blue metal.

But the early adventurers and prospectors faced great hardship and untold danger in making the trip from Earth in the crude rocket ships of the day. Many of those who reached the moon did not return to tell of their experiences; many others missed their destination entirely

and were lost in the trackless void of outer space.

And we, who so calmly enjoy the benefits brought to mankind by the universal use of the moon metal, are prone to forget the difficulties which beset those early pioneers. There were strange tales that came to our ears, conflicting stories and most of them incredible. In the increasing rush of modern civilization we gave them little heed. And returning voyagers soon ceased speaking of their adventures.

There came the time when the moon presented to us an entirely new face, the satellite having turned completely over on its axis during a single night. It was a nine days' wonder to the layman, but scientists were glib in explaining the phenomenon by natural causes, although there were many dissenting opinions among them. This, too, was forgotten in a short time, and the world went merrily on. It was far more interesting to speculate on the financial and educational gains to be realized from the contemplated alliances with the peoples of other worlds.

The true story of what happened in the ancient hidden world of Luna has never before been told and is only made public at this time through the finding of the diary written by one of the terrestrial participants who recently died. In its essentials the story has been confirmed by other survivors of the expedition. Whether the diarist was strictly accurate in his account is of little moment; the tale makes good reading, and the fact remains that Luna did, on June 6, 2019, completely reverse her position in the heavens with respect to earth. And, be it known, astronomers are yet disagreeing as to the precise nature of the disturbance which brought about that change. It is the way of scientists.

This, the diary's story, likely will leave them still at odds.

* * *

Moon Rocket IV lay just south of the great crater of Tycho, within less than a half mile of the broad ray of lunium, which extended to the southeast in the direction of the Doerfel Mountains. Her main cargo compartments were nearly filled with huge ingots of the blue metal that was so greatly desired by a world gone suddenly mad over the idea of interplanetary travel. Those who had financed the vessel's construction were sure to reap handsome profits on this, her second voyage.

Captain Wallace James was at the eye-piece of the telescope in the observation dome at the vessel's nose. The glass was trained on the great white-mottled green globe that hung now in the lunar sky. Earth! A quarter of a million miles away; infinitely remote it seemed and at the moment so utterly desirable a berth for the Rocket IV. A wave of nostalgia gripped the captain and he vowed under his breath that this was his last voyage outside the atmosphere of Terra.

"Reporting the approach of Rocket VII, sir." Clark Peters, his optophone operator and auxiliary pilot, broke in on his meditations.

"Close by, Pete?" The captain turned guiltily away from the eye-piece of the refractor, making desperate efforts to compose his features.

"A thousand miles out and coming in fast. Too fast, I'd say."

Young Peters, wiry, lanky Kansan, with huge hands and feet, stood there awkwardly with thumbs hooked in his suspenders. Deep concern was in his long, solemn countenance.

"How fast?" The captain drew in a quick breath; this was to be another case of a hopeless rescue attempt, he feared.

Pete, though hardly past thirty, was the veteran of a half dozen South

American revolutions and of many times that number of hairbreadth escapes from sudden and horrible death. Easy-going and fearless, he was ordinarily unmoved in the face of danger of any sort. But he was sick of digging mangled, exploded remains of his compatriots from the twisted wreckage of rockets. They all were.

"Well, I don't know now," the operator drawled, his tense look relaxing somewhat. "They should be in sight by this time. And maybe it isn't as bad as I thought."

Captain James swung the telescope around and searched the heavens in the direction indicated by Peters. "Who's the master of the vessel?" he mumbled.

"Their optophone man didn't say. And a funny thing, too, no image came through on the disc. Transmitting operator said his image projector was out of whack--generator burned out or something."

"You think they were hiding something?" The captain did not look up from the eye-piece, but his voice was brittle.

Moon Rocket VII had been constructed and launched by a group of shady financiers, he well knew.

"Don't know as I'd go so far as to say that," Peters replied with calm deliberation. "But--"

"Here she comes!" the captain exclaimed excitedly. "Rocket-tubes flaming, but hardly slowing her down. Plug in the opto, Pete."

Whatever the doubt regarding the Rocket VII, she was a ship in distress and their duty was clear.

The optophone purred gently as Pete closed the switch, then emitted the hollow, empty sound of an open ether wave. "Ahoy, Rocket VII!"

he called into the disc. "Rocket IV asking if you are in need of help."

"What in the devil could you do if we were?" the optophone snarled in return.

"Well, I don't know now," Pete commenced slowly.

"To hell with them!" the captain roared, interrupting. "If that's the way they feel." He turned jerkily from the telescope and his face was purple when he glared into the disc of the opto.

No image was there to return his savage stare.

Clark Peters smiled his slow, disarming smile. When Pete grinned that way, Captain James knew he was riled, and riled plenty.

And then they saw the Rocket VII through the thick glass of the observation port. Streaking across the black velvet of the heavens she was, and heading northwest over Tycho, the great lunar crater, in the direction of Theophilus. Her forward rocket tubes were belching yellow flame, yet she hurtled on as if the reaction against the expanding gases was of no avail.

"With your permission, sir, I'd like to follow them," Pete offered. He switched off the optophone as he spoke, and his grin had crystallized into an ominous thing that had no mirth in it.

Captain James looked out over the earth-lit lunar landscape in the direction the unfriendly vessel had taken. He hated to risk the lives of any of his crew, Pete's especially. But the strange actions of Rocket VII demanded investigation.

"Very well, Pete," he agreed finally. "But the miners are all out working the ray. You'll have to take the kid along--Downey, I mean. And old Saunders, though I'm afraid he'll not be much good to you."

"Okay, sir; they'll do." Pete nodded grimly and was gone.

part 2

Moon Rocket IV was the first of her kind to be equipped with a lunium-hulled tender. It was the only form of light craft which could navigate over the moon's surface. Airplanes and helicopter planes were useless on account of the absence of an atmosphere. But the slender, torpedo-bodied blue ship, provided by the owners of Rocket IV, could rise swiftly above the tallest lunar spire when her lunium plates were negatively energized and made speedy progress forward under the tremendous blasts from her single swiveled rocket-tube astern.

Clark Peters had conceived a deep affection for the little vessel and had christened her the Hornet when first he heard the spiteful, high-pitched hum of her frequency converters. The name had stuck.

Pete faced Morton Saunders in the airlock that berthed the Hornet. Saunders was a character and not at all as useless as the captain had indicated. Probably fifty or fifty-five years of age, he was totally bald, but his square face was set off with remarkable bristling brows and mustache of unbelievably deep red hue. A conceited ass in the eyes of the miners, but he'd been places and seen things in his day. And he was a crackerjack electrician.

"Mort," Pete was saying, "Cap is sending us out after a ship that only now came in from home. Rocket VII. She went overhead like a streak and was lost in the direction of Theophilus."

"Huh," Saunders exclaimed with a grimace. "Another crackup?"

"Don't know as I'd go so far as to say that," Pete answered slowly. "Maybe yes, maybe no. She's a queer bird, Mort; turned us down when we hailed her. And the optophone man didn't show his face."

"Huh! Nice, friendly folks, I'd say. We'll have to put 'em in their place. You and I, Pete--"

"You sent for me, Mr. Peters?" a respectful voice broke in from the inner door of the lock.

"Slim" Downey, a light-haired lad in his early twenties, stood there uncertainly, and Pete eyed him contemptuously. One didn't address any man as "mister" on board the Rocket IV--excepting the captain. Downey was a stowaway and there was considerable mystery as to the history of his immediate past. General opinion in the miners' mess had it that he was a fugitive from justice. "Yellow Kid," they called him. Certain it was that he acted jumpy, scared of everything and everybody. But at times there would come into his mild blue eyes a gleam of intense feeling that belied his meek demeanor.

"I did," Pete snapped. "Bolt home the inner door, kid."

"We--we're going out in the Hornet, Mr. Peters?" the lad faltered, paling swiftly.

"Right. What's wrong with you--no guts? And listen, I'm not Mister Peters either--get that?" Pete glowered, baiting the lad.

Downey flushed as swiftly as he had paled and a fierce glitter shot out from beneath his quickly narrowed brows. "I get you--Pete," he said in edgy tones. And then he turned jerkily to the bolts of the door clamps.

Pete hooked his thumbs in his suspenders and grinned at Saunders. "May make a man of him, Mort--this expedition," he whispered.

"Huh!" Saunders sniffed disdainfully and tugged at his fiery mustache. "In my humble opinion, the boy is a--"

But Downey had finished his task and now whirled to face the two older men. "I'm with you," he said unexpectedly. "Let's go."

Pete stared in amazement. The flush still mantled the youngster's smooth cheeks and his chin was raised. But the cold fire was dying out of the pale blue eyes. They were mild once more and dropped before the fixity of Pete's regard.

"All right, kid, we go," Pete growled. "And make it snappy." His gaze, puzzled now, did not leave the slim figure as the Yellow Kid scrambled through the entrance port of the Hornet.

With the Hornet's atomic motors running at full speed, the turning gear that projected from her nose made quick work of unscrewing the circular outer port of the airlock. There was the swift hiss of escaping air as the hinged door swung outward, the shrill note of the frequency-converters within, and the little vessel raised lightly from her cradle. Pete pressed the rocket-tube control and, with the staccato barking of the blasts astern, they shot out into the frigidity and semi-darkness of the long lunar night.

Slim Downey crouched by one of the floor ports of the control room as Pete drove the Hornet out over the huge crater of Tycho at top speed. He was utterly appalled by the altitude and by the swift rush into the desolate wastes of the cold satellite, Pete thought. Mort Saunders was in the motor compartment, starting their oxygen apparatus.

They lunged out over the towering serrated rim at the far edge of the crater and drove along above the mile-wide streak of cobalt blue--that was a lode of pure lunium--the great moon ray that extended the entire distance from Tycho to Theophilus. What enormous wealth would be his who might convey but a small fraction of that vast

deposit to Earth!

Pete searched the horizon with the telescope, but could make out nothing to indicate where the Rocket VII had landed, if indeed it had landed. In the mellow earth-light the moon's rugged contours stood out against the diamond-studded ebony of the firmament in sharp relief, barren and forbidding, yet softened somehow by the thick dust of ages that lay like a vast blanket over all.

Pockmarked and scarred, lonely and mysterious as a graveyard, cooled to a temperature one hundred degrees below zero during the long night of more than fourteen earth-days, and heated to near the boiling point during the equally long lunar day, there were still optimists of Terra who made bold to predict that the godforsaken satellite would one day become a vast hive of industry and be peopled by hundreds of thousands of Earth's workers. Clark Peters was not one who believed them. A prospecting trip was one thing, with every hope of a quick return to civilization; permanent residence was quite another matter.

A grotesque dark blot spread along the rim of a small crater ahead of them, then was lost astern as they sped past directly overhead, all that was left of Moon Rocket III! Pete saw that young Downey had risen from his crouching position at the floor port and was eyeing him intently. The lad was chalky white and his lips trembled.

"Tha-that was a wreck, wasn't it?" he babbled.

"Well, I don't know, now," Pete drawled. "Seems to me it's better called a tomb. Used to be Rocket III, that mess, and there are some ninety-odd corpses spread around down there."

"Good Lord!" Downey fell gloomily silent for a moment, then turned on the pilot in a sudden panic. "Where are we headed?" he

demanded.

Pete grinned. "Who knows?" he replied with aggravating calm. "Perhaps for another such tomb. At any rate, we're hunting another ship--Rocket VII. She came over from home ten minutes before we set out."

Downey yelled in what seemed like utter demoralization. "No, no!" he screeched. "Not that, man! You don't know--" And then he wound his slender fingers around Pete's wrist, fingers that gripped like steel.

Astonished, the pilot loosed the controls and tore his arm free.

"What the devil!" he roared. "You yellow cur--"

And then Clark Peters found he had a young wildcat on his hands.

"You can't!" Downey was jabbering. "Not Rocket VII. You can't--I won't let you."

A sharp-knuckled fist caught Peters behind the ear with painful force. The frantic youth squirmed in under Pete's arms before the amazed pilot was able to stop him. The lad was tugging at the controls, snarling like an animal at bay, staring wild-eyed. There was but one thing to do and Pete did it.

Lashing out with a huge fist, he doubled the boy up with a swift blow to the solar plexus. Not his usual hard-driven punch, but enough. The Yellow Kid slumped to the floor plates, moaning and gasping.

Careering violently, the Hornet headed madly toward the surface. Pete dove for the controls and endeavored to right her. But in that instant they swooped down into the deep chasm of a rill. Pete caught a momentary glimpse of this vast gulf that was swallowing them up, a yawning abyss into whose depths the Hornet plunged. Murky

blackness enveloped them.

And the motors stopped with a despairing, trailing whine.

part 3

Mort Saunders blundered into the control room. "Huh!" he exploded. "Machinery's dead. I swear I did everything, Pete; no one could--"

He broke off grunting as he collided with the wriggling, whimpering thing that was Slim Downey. Pete heard him swear softly in the hollow silence and Stygian gloom.

The emergency lights flashed on then, illuminating the control room with their dim soft glow. Their batteries, at least, had not failed them. And Pete switched on the forward searchlight, sending forth its dazzling beam into the blackness of the pit.

Slim Downey yelled then, coughing painfully. "No, Pete, not the lights! They'll see us. Turn them off."

"You shut up," the pilot snapped. Pete had thought there was a moving mass down there in the depths.

"Oh, God!--you've got to listen." Downey was dragging himself to his knees; his teeth chattered uncontrollably.

Pete growled savagely, continuing his search of the depths. The Hornet was dropping with swift acceleration into a seemingly bottomless pit that was fully a half mile across. Utterly helpless she was, her atomic motors paralyzed by some strange force that surrounded them.

"In my opinion," Saunders was saying, "the boy knows something. I'd do as he says, Pete."

"I'll say he knows something!" Pete had caught the gleam of a huge

steel cylinder down there; Rocket VII, without a doubt. And the big rocket ship was dropping even faster than they. He pulled on the switch and once more darkness closed in about them.

He reached for Slim Downey, saw a violent corona discharge crackling as his fingers closed in on the trembling arm. The very air of the control room was electrified.

The youngster moaned as Pete's grip dug into his yielding flesh. "Let up, Pete," he whined. "I do know something."

"Spit it out then!" Pete relaxed his grip somewhat.

"It's a--a big job of Aleck Carter's. His men were here before on the first trip of Rocket VI. There's a world inside here, Pete, and it's peopled with ghastly little devils that Carter wants to hook up with. Keep the lights off, for God's sake. We may get away."

"A hidden world!" Pete gasped. "How do you know?"

"Never mind. I know, all right--" Slim blubbered as Pete's fingers dug deeper. "Carter put me on Rocket IV," he moaned then. "I won't do his dirty work, though--damned if I will. You're the boss, Pete. I'll do anything you say, see if I don't."

"I'll see that you do," Pete grated, shoving the lad away in disgust. So Aleck Carter was mixed up in this thing! His minions had found their way even here and were planning some new devilry that would involve humanity still deeper in his toils. Carter, with his billions in wealth, would buy an entire civilization, good or bad, to serve his own ends.

"Huh!" Saunders blurted out of the darkness. "A likely story. You and I, Pete, will get at the truth of it when we--"

"When we crash? You're optimistic, Mort."

"There won't be any crash," Slim broke in eagerly. "This force of the pit will--"

And then, as if to belie his words, the Hornet struck heavily on the starboard side amidships. She rolled over and pitched the three men in a scrambling heap, then slid nose down along a gentle declivity, bouncing and careening over the rough surface. There was a ripping screech below as her landing gear was torn loose and she pitched over on her nose, coming to rest at an angle of about forty-five degrees.

"Well, I don't know now," Pere drawled. "This seems almost like a crash to me."

His cheek was pressed to the icy glass of one of the floor ports and the wriggling weight of Mort Saunders lay across his shoulders. But there was no hiss of escaping air; the lunium hull of the staunch vessel was unpunctured.

* * *

Rosy light streamed in through the ports and they saw they were in an enormous cavern where Rocket VII stood solidly on her base, nose skyward and unharmed. The Hornet lay on a slope several hundred yards away, partly submerged in the powdery surface and hidden from the lower portion of the great rocket ship.

Mort Saunders pointed to the instrument panel. "We're ten miles below the surface, Pete," he exclaimed. "And, in my humble opinion, the pit has an atmosphere of some sort. Look at the manometer."

The outside pressure was indicated at about seventeen inches of mercury, not much lower than that on the mountain tops of Terra. If

this was air in the pit, they would be able to venture outside without their bulky Metz suits and oxygen helmets. The temperature was much higher than on the surface, showing as 48 degrees Fahrenheit.

Pete whistled. "This will be something to write home about," he remarked. "What next, I wonder?"

"You--you're not leaving the Hornet?" Slim Downey asked.

"Nothing else but," he said cheerfully, "and you're coming with us, my boy. Here, Mort, we'll have to use the lead boots."

He had started toward the airlock where the heavy equipment needed in the moon's low gravity was stowed, when there came the gentle rising purr of the atomic motors. The paralyzing effect of the pit had been released or "turned off." Quickly Pete threw the starting lever forward and the purring died off into silence.

"You could leave at once--" Slim Downey began.

"Not on your life! We'll see this thing through, now we're here. Step lively, boy."

"You're the boss," the lad replied meekly. But his eyes did not meet those of the big man who stood menacingly over him.

With the lead-soled boots strapped to their feet, they dragged themselves out from the artificial earth-gravity of the Hornet's interior, dropping one at a time to the thick dust of the lunar cavern floor. A sound of clanking machinery and the shouting of many voices came from beyond the knoll where the rocket ship reared its great bulk.

A curious sense of light-headedness came to Clark Peters with the breathing in of the thin, sharp air. His vision was distorted in the wavering roseate light. Young Downey had slipped to his knees and

was wriggling his way to the top of the knoll.

"Stay where you are," Pete called out cautiously. "And no signals to your friends, either." Suddenly it had come to him that there was more to the Yellow Kid than he had thought.

The young fellow halted, crouching, and grinned over his shoulder. "You're the boss, Pete," he replied. But there was a new courage in his slightly superior smile, the courage of desperation and of a dark knowledge that was his.

Pete fingered the cold tube of the bullet projector he carried. He had taken care that only Mort and himself were thus armed, and with more than a hundred rounds of the ultranite ammunition in the possession of each, he was confident of their ability to cope with almost any situation. But he was darkly suspicious of young Downey.

Scrambling to the side of the strangely metamorphosed youngster, he raised his head to peer out over the vast floor of the cavern. Mort Saunders, with much puffing and grunting, drew himself alongside.

A scene of intense activity centered about the five massive pillars of Rocket VII's base. Queer, stunted creatures, thousands of them it appeared, were clustering there before a massive mechanism that was being lowered from the crane arm of the rocket ship. Impossible pigmy beings that stood erect on two legs, bodies covered with iridescent scales, long arms dangling. Globular, hairless heads of chalky white, with bulging eyes and cavernous, scarlet mouths. And twenty or thirty Terrestrials in this midst, fraternizing with the ugly monstrosities!

"A rummy lot, in my opinion. Huh!" There was utter loathing in Mort Saunders' much-used exclamation. That "huh" of his was capable of expressing his every mood and reaction.

Pete's blood froze in his veins at the sound of a demonical shriek that rose unexpectedly from the lips of Slim Downey. He clapped an enormous paw over the crazy youngster's mouth and shook him violently.

"Idiot!" he hissed. "You'll have them on us like a pack of wolves."

Things happened at once when Slim's yell rang out in the huge open space at the pit bottom. There was a bedlam of shouting over by the rocket ship, unintelligible, gulping screeches of the moon-men and hoarse curses in vivid English. A muffled explosion sounded from behind the great vessel and a swirling cloud of faintly luminous green vapor rose swiftly, forming itself into an immense shimmering bubble that closed down over the scene. Rocket VII and the polyglot pack at its base were completely enclosed.

And Slim Downey developed muscles of steel and the agility of a cat. Like a coiled spring suddenly released, he popped out from beneath Pete's swiftly flung bulk, leaving the amazed pilot to sprawl in the thick dust. And then he was sprinting toward the shining green bubble.

"Damned little rat!" Saunders snarled. "That's enough for you." He raised his bullet projector and fired from the hip.

"Mort, don't!" Pete struck upward at the slender weapon, his arm deflecting the tube just as the propelling ray spat forth.

The explosive bullet went wide of its mark and an appalling crash echoed in the pit as its energy was expended harmlessly on the rubbery surface of the green vapor dome. The mighty force of the ultranite charge would have shattered a monolith, yet the gleaming bubble merely shivered under the impact, changing its smooth contour not at all.

Slim Downey tossed back a tantalizing laugh.

And now three globular objects burst out from the hemisphere of green; solid metallic shapes, apparently about four feet in diameter, drifting unsupported through the rare air of the lunar pit, coming swiftly in the direction of the knoll and floating waist high above the cavern floor. Still laughing crazily, young Downey flung himself on the nearest of the spheres and was immediately absorbed into the body of the uncanny thing. Just melted into its embrace and was swallowed up bodily as if the thing were a ball of jelly.

It might have been the disappearing act of a vaudeville magician. The weird globe changed not one whit in size or appearance, but halted its progress and hovered there in midair as if awaiting its fellows, which continued in their deliberate movement toward the remaining two Terrestrials.

Mort Saunders went berserk, firing rapidly from his bullet projector. Ear-shattering reverberations echoed in the cavern as ultranite charges exploded in swift succession against the spheres. But the drifting globes only came on the faster, their surfaces unmarred and undeterred in their ghastly purpose.

"Run for it, Mort!" Pete shouted, wheeling about to suit his own action to the words. "Quit shooting; they're too close."

He groaned as Saunders staggered and fell. One of the spheres was upon the older man in an instant. With a sucking, whistling sound the sturdy body was merged with its mysterious substance. Gone; vanished, Mort had, as Slim had vanished. Like water absorbed by a sponge.

Unreasoning fear had Pete in its grip. It was as if his feet were rooted to the spot. A nightmare! His voice, when he essayed a yell of

unalloyed terror, died chokingly in his parched throat. Then the clammy metal of the third sphere enwrapped him.

The rosy light of the cavern was dimmed. Flame-shot blackness was in Pete's vision. Frigid, unyielding metal congealed about him. Icy fingers of steel twisted in his vitals and he knew no more.

part 4

Consciousness returned swiftly and painlessly. Clark Peters sat up on the hard floor he found under him and took in his surroundings with unbelieving eyes. He was in a great circular hall of many tall columns and with a high arched ceiling that glowed with the rosy light they had seen in the pit bottom. The air was fresh and warm. Mort Saunders lay close by, still unconscious, but breathing normally and with good color in his cheeks.

A quick search appraised Pete of the fact that they were without their weapons.

"You companion will recover shortly," a voice sounded in his ears. No, it was not a voice; a mental impression more accurately. There had been no sound in the chamber.

Looking swiftly around him, Pete saw one of the spheres like those which had captured them. Certainly they were made of gleaming blue-white metal, yet they were possessed of miraculous powers of locomotion and of other qualities that made it certain they were not ordinary mechanisms of human manufacture. These things had brains. This one was resting on a tripod made of a multicolored translucent material like stained glass.

"I suppose that's what talked to me," Pete muttered foolishly.

"You have guessed the truth, Earth-man," came the quick mental response. "And you may speak freely that which is in your mind. Or speak not at all, if you choose. We may communicate regardless. And the Great Ones of Luna have commanded me to enlighten you."

Pete hooked his thumbs in his suspenders and regarded the metal

globe curiously. After this experience, nothing he might see within this mad satellite or on its surface would surprise him.

"There are still more surprising things," the mental reply flashed back. The eerie globe needed only his thoughts, not his speech.

And thought-images flickered across Pete's mind in swift succession, after the fashion of a panoramic motion picture. Rather they flashed as shimmering light-images on the surface of the mysterious sphere. He saw that Mort Saunders had drawn himself erect and was staring goggle-eyed, plucking nervously at the bristles of his red mustache. Mort was seeing the same things, getting the same reactions as was Pete.

Under the sphere's strange telepathic influence, the hall of the many columns faded away in blue mists and was gone. It seemed they were drifting freely in space then, Pete and Mort and the shimmering globe, hovering in the enormity of a cosmos where three other objects, three suns of indigo hue, bathed them in eerie light that altered all things in their perceptions.

They were deep in the moon's interior, their minds were informed, hundreds of miles below the surface. Earth's satellite was hollow! And the three suns lighting the blue realm were huge masses of lunium, charged with the sub-electronic forces and mind-energies of ancient Luna, possessed of powers far greater than those of the insignificant Lesser One which had been detailed as the mentor and guard of the Earth-men. The Terrestrials were in the presence of the Great Ones of a blue moon, in a realm unknown to the science of Earth.

Many puzzling things were made clear to Pete and Mort. The old uncertainty of astronomers as to why the moon always presented the same side to the mother planet was explained away. The hollowed-

out heart of Luna, a cavity some twelve hundred miles in diameter, is concentric with the outer surface. But the Great Ones, enormous gravity masses in the Earth-moon system, hovered constantly near the huge lunium deposits in the inner wall that was nearest the mother planet. Luna's center of gravity being thus offset a considerable distance from its mathematical center, Earth's powerful attraction acted more strongly on the heavy side, keeping the same face of the satellite always in view. As a round-bottom, weight-loaded toy stands erect, so the moon maintained its position with respect to earth.

Millions of years older than Earth's civilization, the original inhabitants of Luna had taken to their inner region when the atmosphere outside thinned out and had escaped. Evolution through subsequent ages made of them the complex, atomic structure now represented by the spheres which seemed to the Terrestrials only like globes of polished metal. These metal balls, the true Lunarians, were capable of existence without an atmosphere and without food. But there were the pigmy folk, cave-dwellers primarily and much lower in the evolutionary scale, and the Great Ones had decreed that these be cared for until the end of time. The Lesser Ones were their guardians and protectors.

And then had come the minions of Aleck Carter, stumbling accidentally into the great shaft which connected with the inner regions. The omniscient Great Ones envisioned their coming and sent the sub-electronic energies into the pit to break their fall. And there at the bottom of the pit, the pigmy folk had made friends with the first Terrestrials they had ever seen.

But the Great Ones and the Lesser Ones were suspicious of these visitors who had come to trade the bounty of the mother planet for their own vast deposits of lunium.

"Trade!" Pete blurted out the unnecessary words. "What can Aleck Carter offer in trade? How can he hope to acquire a monopoly of the metal which is so plentiful on the moon's surface?"

If a smooth metallic sphere can shrug its shoulders, this Lesser One did that very thing--mentally.

"You shall judge for yourselves," its unspoken message came. "We go to the abode of the pigmies."

* * *

Again there was the confusing sense of change. The blue mists came and advanced before them in tiny weaving wisps, then coalescing into shapes that were gigantic yet familiar in form. An endless vista of blue columns appeared before them, and they set foot on solid ground again. The Lesser One drifted before them as they walked.

"Are we awake, Mort?" Pete whispered.

"In my humble opinion we're not," Saunders returned. "Or else we are both quite hopelessly dotty. This business with the big ones and the little ones is too much--"

"No, Mort, look! There's Aleck Carter himself."

The avenue of the blue pillars had opened out into a great amphitheatre where hundreds of the pigmy folk were gathered about the machine which had been taken from Rocket VII. And in their midst was Carter, the man who was possessed of more ill-gotten wealth and vicious commercial influence than any man in the history of Earth--bossing a gang of Terrestrials, riggers and mechanics, as if he were an ordinary foreman!

It all came to Pete then in a flash of understanding. Carter was reaching out for new worlds to conquer. If he could manipulate matters so as to obtain exclusive control of the supply of lunium, he alone of all humans would be able to traffic with the Martians and Venerians and with whatever races there might be found on other planets of the solar system. But to have risked the rocket trip itself; it was incredible.

"Huh!" Saunders grunted. "The old boy has let himself in for something this time. Look at him; his chest is puffing up like a pouter pigeon's. And he's yelling himself hoarse."

"This Terrestrial plans to move Luna to Earth and has promised the pigmy folk everything which is available there," came the mental advice of their attending sphere. "Everything, comfortable homes, fresh air in abundance for their weakened lungs, food for their primitive stomachs."

"What!" Pete shouted. "He's crazy. It can't be done; the tides of Earth would submerge the land. There would be--"

"Only too well are these things known to the Great Ones." There was dignity and patience in the unspoken voice of the Lesser One. "A vast cataclysm would result were this Terrestrial to succeed in his mad purpose. His own scientists should be able to tell him these things."

"Certainly, certainly," Saunders sputtered. "I myself, with my--huh--extensive knowledge of electricity and other natural forces might enlighten him. If he would listen."

"Electricity?" The mental reaction of the sphere was questioning. "That is the force the Terrestrial is using. It is unfamiliar to us and we would know of its nature."

Mort Saunders floundered hopelessly in the effort to explain. But it was apparent that the Lesser One gathered from his chaotic thoughts that which his rebellious tongue was unable to put into words.

"An elementary form of energy we have not developed," the sphere commented wordlessly. "Our own sub-electronic energy is greatly superior. But there are possibilities in this force, and we would guard against the evil that might arise from these possibilities."

"Then why not step in and put a stop to the thing?" the query rose to Pete's lips. "Surely the Great Ones are powerful enough."

"Yes," the Lesser One assented. "But you forget, Earth-man. The pigmies have their own minds in the matter. It is not permitted that we interfere with them or assist them unless they call upon us for help."

"It might be too late when they do," Pete growled. He had no idea as to what devilry Carter was planning, but he knew from past performance that it boded no good to the strange inhabitants of Luna--nor to his own world.

"That is true, Earth-man, and is the reason we have brought you here with your friend. The Great Ones approve of you and bid me work to the end that you might be enlisted in their service."

"You--you mean to try and forestall Carter's plans?" Pete asked incredulously.

"That is the plea of the Great Ones."

Plea! These incomprehensible brain machines and energy sources of the blue realm were capable of forcing their will on Earth, man and

pigmy alike. They had superhuman power over ordinary matter and were disseminators of unknown forces that could be as destructive as ten thunderbolts in one, yet they chose to plead with him and Mort. Pete could not bring himself to believe his senses.

"Huh!" Mort Saunders exclaimed. "We can do it, Pete. We'll show Carter and his gang. We'll--"

"Don't know as I'd go so far as to say that," Pete drawled. "You have an exalted opinion of yourself, Mort, and of me. But we can try."

Some unexplainable force radiated by the expectant Lesser One was permeating his being, buoying him up. Fantastic as were his surroundings, mysterious as were the activities of the Lunarians and of Carter, his old Earth spirits and courage were returning. In Aleck Carter and his gang of hirelings there was a tangible inimical force; these could be fought with their own guile and weapons. And in the Great Ones and the Lesser Ones there were powerful friends.

"We can try," Pete repeated softly. And the light of battle was in his eyes.

Mort Saunders grinned and tweaked his mustache apologetically.

A bright glow illuminated the surface of the Lesser One. In its approving telepathic reply there was exultation. And, quite as if the sphere had reached out with invisible arms to hand them over, their bullet projectors were restored to their hands. The Terrestrials gaped in amazement.

But the feel of the cold tube was comforting in Pete's hands. He fingered the weapon lovingly.

"You will likewise learn of the Dark Ones of Luna," came from the sphere. And there was sinister meaning in the telepathic flash.

Pete thought instantly of Slim Downey.

"No," came from the Lesser One. "The Dark Ones are of our own realm. The Terrestrial youth was returned to his fellows. His thoughts were not wholly good, although at first the Great Ones were inclined to approve of him. And so he was sent to rejoin his former associates."

With that information imparted, their attending sphere melted into the blue shadows of the great pillars and was gone. Pete and Mort stood there alone, gazing each into the puzzled eyes of the other.

* * *

"Illusions?" Mort whispered hesitantly.

"No, siree. Brain cases, these spheres, and real; impregnable housings of the most remarkable intellects in the universe. Superhuman minds with godlike emotions, and endowed with supernatural powers. All-seeing, all-knowing, all... oh, dammit, I'm talking like a preacher. You know what I mean."

"Yes." Mort Saunders turned toward the amphitheatre as in a daze. "But there's nothing supernatural about them," he argued. "It's only that they know of forces we can't comprehend. They--"

A whirling sound rose up from Carter's mechanism and they saw the pigmy folk scatter and draw away from the devil-machine of the Earth-men. Mort and Pete ran swiftly down the sloping floor into the arena.

Unnoticed by Carter and his crew, and unmolested by the excited pigmy folk, they wormed their way through the press and drew near to the scene of action. And then they saw that the floor was of

transparent crystal. Beneath them yawned the great cavity of the blue realm, infinitely vast and mysterious. The enormous globes that were the Great Ones hovered over there in all their majesty and silent watchfulness like heavenly bodies in a cosmos within this strange world of ancient Luna. Living, thinking mechanisms of slumbering potentialities.

Carter's machine rested on skids that partly bridged the crystal floor. It was a ponderous thing and incorporated a mighty atomic power plant and two huge beam transmitters. There were frequency converters as well, like those of the Hornet, but vastly larger than hers.

"Lord!" Pete gasped, "the fool means it. He intends to energize the main lunium deposit."

"No--see there!" Mort returned. "The projectors are trained on the Great Ones themselves."

It was true; Carter's crew was preparing to send twin beams of ionized air across the gulf to carry the energizing frequencies to the very bodies of the Great Ones.

Thunderstruck, Pete stood undecided. They were in the shelter of a column where blue light from below struck up to mingle with the rosy illumination of the high arches above. Of course they might ruin Carter's machine with their ultralite bullets--easily. But their own lives would then be forfeit. Even if they could overcome Carter's gang there were the pigmies to be dealt with. Thousands of them would stream in from the labyrinth of passageways; tens of thousands. And besides, Pete wasn't sure of his ground; he saw Mason and Thornhill over there by the machine, and Zimmerman--three of Earth's greatest men of science, whom Carter's gold had bought. Surely these men could not be contemplating a move that meant disaster

on Earth.

His indecision was ended by a warning cry from Mort; a strangling horror-filled yell that caused Pete to whirl suddenly, crouching with his bullet projector in hand.

Behind them, a monstrous, black creature stood staring with red saucer-eyes; an object like a huge football poised on a single support that was more like the stem of a plant than the limb of an animal. Yet this thing was undoubtedly of the animal class--and intelligent.

One of the Dark Ones of Luna!

Pete pressed the release of his bullet projector, but, even as the propelling ray sped forth, the creature was covered with a shroud of green vapor such as that which had enclosed Rocket VII. The ultranite charge exploded with a deafening crash, but made no impression on the green armor. And a quavering wail of terror rose up from the throats of the thousands of pigmies. The great amphitheatre was in instant confusion.

A sharp mental command came then from out of the green cloud; an order that carried with it the compulsion of a nameless force. Pete's grip on the bullet projector was loosened, struggle though he might, and the weapon clattered to the floor. He was rooted to the spot, his limbs trembling and muscles paralyzed. Mort Saunders had slumped to the base of the column, a quivering nerveless heap in the blast of energy that radiated from the Dark One.

With a twang like that of a snapped violin string, the green vapor disrupted, and the Dark One trailed off silently across the arena, its single supporting member drawing up within the mass of the black ovoid as a terrapin withdraws its limbs into its shell. Drifting in mid-

air as the Lesser Ones did, the weird shape hovered in the midst of Carter's crew when it came to rest.

Others of the eerie creatures converged on the scene and the shoutings of the pigmy multitude rose high and menacing. Aleck Carter had leagued himself with the Dark Ones of Luna.

Desperately Pete set his will to the task of unbending his cramped fingers. Muscles refused his bidding and his knees gave way beneath his stiffened body. He crumpled helplessly to lie on his face, staring into the depths of the blue moon, his numbed lips framing wordless supplications to the Great Ones.

And everywhere about him were the pigmies; cold scaly hands pawed at him and rolled him over. Vacant bulging eyes peered into his own; cavernous mouths of scarlet jabbered. He struck out feebly and to no avail. There was not the strength of an infant in his puny blows.

It was all over; they were carrying him and Mort to the center of the arena, to Aleck Carter and the Dark Ones.

part 5

Taking the Rocket IV's tender, the Hornet, the three men are north of Tycho Crater when Peters mentions to Downey that they are searching for the Rocket VII. Downey becomes frantic and tries to sieze control of the Hornet, and the tender dives into a deep chasm, then loses power. The Hornet comes to rest on the floor of a vast cavern ten miles below the lunar surface, near where the Rocket VII has landed. Downey admits that he was placed on board the Rocket IV by billionaire Aleck Carter, who has discovered an underground lunar civilization. While investigating, the three men are captured by a featureless green sphere.

Peters and Saunders learn via telepathy that the moon is hollow, and inhabited by three vast blue spheres known as the Great Ones, rulers of an ancient lunar civilization. In addition, there are the Lesser Ones, much smaller spheres that serve the Great Ones; the Dark Ones, enemies of the Great Ones; and the pigmies, stunted humanoids in the care of the Lesser Ones. Carter has promised the pigmies that he will move the moon onto the Earth's surface and allow them to plunder its wealth. The Lesser One in communication with them implores Peters and Saunders to put a stop to Carter's plan.

Making their way to Carter's base, Peters and Saunders realize that Carter's real plan is to destroy the Great Ones and sieze control of the moon. The two men encounter one of the Dark Ones, and are captured and led to Carter...

* * *

Next they knew they were lying bound before a small rostrum near which Carter's machine had been set up. From it they could see that tier upon tier of balconies surrounded the arena, mounting into the

high arches of the amphitheatre as far as the eye could follow. And these balconies groaned under the weight of the pigmy folk that crowded them.

It was a place of ceremonial; a temple. And Aleck Carter was in his element as he faced the multitude from the rostrum, one of the Dark Ones hovering at his side. The eyes of a world were upon him.

Pete knew that his strength was returning. His muscles answered to his bidding once more, but the bonds of the pigmies held fast.

"Huh," he heard Mort Saunders whisper. "Old Carter's putting on quite a show."

Pete grinned. Saunders was all right, and so was he. If only they could free themselves. Carter had paid them scant attention; he was too deeply engrossed in the matter at hand, and confident that his bodyguard could handle these interfering snoopers if the pigmies and the Dark Ones could not. He was secure in his newly established position of power.

Silence fell in the huge gathering place when a mental message of the ugly swaying mass, that seemed to be the leader of the Dark Ones, swept out over the assemblage.

"The power of the Great Ones is at an end," it conveyed. "The gods of Terra have kept their word and have brought their chief god with his machine to carry the ancient world of Luna to the land of happiness and plenty--"

"It's a lie!" a voice screamed from near the machine.

"Thornhill!" Pete gasped. "He's rebelling."

The scientist, purple of face, was struggling with one of Carter's

huskies, trying to make his way to the platform. They saw his arms raised high, and his clenched fists threatening the man whose dominance of so much of Earth's enterprise, was now reaching out here into the depths of the blue moon.

Aleck Carter's flabby jowls quivered with rage; his basilisk eyes flashed fire. "Away with him!" he roared. "We'll have no traitors alive here."

They saw the gray-haired scientist go down. There was a flash and a report, the gunmen drawing back as the disintegrating charge of an atomic projector found its mark. The body of Earth's most renowned physicist, who had made the mistake of bowing to the will of Aleck Carter, was a squirming, bloated thing on the crystal floor. Then, in a puff of incandescent vapor, it had vanished.

But Carter was shaken; his ponderous frame sagged as the gulping yells of the pigmies rolled out over the arena a vast screaming roar of amazed protest. The god-beings of Terra were not invulnerable.

"Thus perish those who oppose the chief god of our benefactors," the Dark One's voiceless message came instantly. "Keep to your places, pigmy folk, and observe the overthrow of the Great Ones."

Carter brightened and raised his arm in a signal to his men as the Babel of pigmy voices was stilled in superstitious awe. And a shrill note of vibrant energy rose up from the throbbing machine.

Looking down into the blue cosmos, Pete saw the streaking light-pencils that stabbed out from the beam transmitters. Hundreds of miles beneath them a vast halo of white brilliance closed in on the Great Ones and caused them to draw together in a swift huddle. The crystal floor vibrated madly under the energy reaction and Luna's outer shell was set quivering.

Succeeding events came with confusing swiftness.

* * *

The Great Ones, each a sphere of about seventy-five miles diameter, sent out long streamers of indigo flame and backed away from the man-made energy that attacked them.

Carter was shouting like a gleeful fiend; dancing like a lunatic there on the rostrum. And the telepathic voices of the Dark Ones were ghoulishly exultant. The Great Ones were retreating before the blasts of the Earth-gods' machine.

A whining chant came up from the pigmy folk, a mad cadence of superstitious, religious fervor. The sound was awe-inspiring in its immensity, ghastly in its triumphant emotion.

And then, as the Great Ones battled ineffectually against Aleck Carter's forces, the blue abyss beneath the crystal floor became alive with swirling forms that gleamed blue-white in the darkening realm. The Lesser Ones, legion in number, darting hither and yon in a panic of uncertainty.

A slender figure detached itself from the group at the machine and came running swiftly to the captives.

"Slim!" exclaimed Pete. "Slim Downey."

"Yes," the lad sobbed. "I couldn't stand it. Know what this means? Carter's figuring on throwing the whole damn moon out into space where Earth's rockets can't reach it. He's energizing the Great Ones themselves--they're mostly lunium--and the major deposits of the raw metal, to force the moon out from Earth's attraction."

"What!" Pete yelled. Slim was working at his bonds with a knife and one arm was free. "Out, you say?"

"Yes, out. Not in toward Earth, as he told the Dark Ones and the pigmies--he's too smart for that. Out. He'll control all the lunium then, and be able to deal with the other planets without competition. Don't you see? He was going to kill all of you on Rocket IV; I was his spy there. And the pigmies, he'll kill. Pete, I'm afraid; I don't want to be shot into space--God knows where. He's crazy."

"I'll say he is." Pete stretched and worked his arms and legs to limber them up. "Here, give me that knife."

He took it from the trembling lad and sawed rapidly at Mort's bonds. "Get that, Mort?" he whispered.

"Sure did; the kid's coming clean." Mort was free in a moment.

"W-what are you going to do?" Slim was blubbing.

"You do it!" Pete demanded. His eyes bored into Slim's.

White-faced and trembling, the boy stared. Then, quick as a flash, he streaked away toward the machine and flung himself into the main control switch--bodily. Pete and Mort ran after him, yelling.

There was a bellow of rage from Carter. Agonized cries from the pigmy folk. And despairing mental outbursts from the Dark Ones. Pete was fighting Carter's gang now, back to back with Mort. Desperately slugging, unmindful of the consequences. And the high reaches overhead were suddenly filled with gleaming forms of the Lesser Ones, doing battle with flashing energies as the Dark Ones sought to get away.

Pandemonium broke loose in the balconies. Luna lurched sidewise

and threw the combatants in milling, struggling heaps.

The rest was confusion. Pete saw Otto Zimmerman scramble to the rostrum and jump astride Aleck Carter's shoulders, throttling him with his hairy paws grimly and efficiently. The German scientist was one more rebel--a game one.

He saw Mort, dragged away from him, fighting like a demon--saw him pick up one of Carter's huskies bodily and fling him into the mob. Slim Downey's body was smouldering over there in the flaming switch of the frequency converter. But the great machine still sang its song of vast energies unleashed; on a different note now--Slim's sacrifice had changed the characteristic of the emanations.

All was chaos in the blue abyss. The Great Ones were swinging around in a wide arc that was carrying them ever nearer. Overhead, the Lesser Ones were victorious. One by one the Dark ones vanished in blue vapor puffs until all were destroyed. In the balconies, the pigmy folk were kneeling; a new chant had arisen, and in its wailing note was supplication, and dread of the wrath of the Great Ones. Their ages-old faith had returned.

Otto Zimmerman had joined Pete now. Together they beat off a half dozen of Carter's maddened brutes. Mort flung himself into the tangle, cursing vividly. Blindly, desperately, the three fought.

And then there was a new lurching of Earth's satellite, a general swaying and crunching and grinding of the space about them. Only half conscious of what transpired, Peters knew there were many of the Lesser Ones about them. They were rushed out of dark passages and through rose-lit vistas of blue columns, hustled from the melee by the spheres.

Now they were again in the pit bottom where Rocket VII and the

Hornet lay waiting. There was much activity of the Lesser Ones, and a flow of liquid blue metal came in to close off the opening which led to the inner realm. Dozens of the blue-white globes converged on the great rocket ship, invisible energies crackling in their midst, and she melted down swiftly to join the blue torrent which already was congealing to seal off the ancient world within.

Urged on and assisted by the friendly Lesser Ones, they boarded the Hornet and soon were rising speedily out of the pit. And all was darkness and mystery beneath them.

But a majestic voice came out of the depths, a voice that was strong in the consciousness though it sounded not in the ears. It told them all was well in the blue realm; told them the conspirators were no more; told them Luna's surface was free to those of Earth who might come in search of its treasures. They, the Great Ones, the Lesser Ones, and the pigmy folk, would remain inside until the end of time. The adventure was ended.

Clark Peters sucked in his breath sharply when the Hornet shot up out of the pit and over the crater's rim. The blazing sun greeted them. It was a wonderful thing to see.

"Himmel!" Otto Zimmerman exclaimed, "Earth iss gone; der sun iss here. Id vos Downey's act. Hiss body shorted der energy, made it negatiff. Ven der Great Vuns mofed der shall followed, und der moon turned completely ofer, nicht wahr? Now ve always see der odder side from Earth--always."

Mort Saunders wrinkled his brow and tugged at his fiery lip ornament. Figuring it out, Mort was. Pete laughed, then sobered on the instant.

"We'll not speak of the Great Ones," he breathed. "Or of any of it--

about the blue realm, I mean."

The others agreed vociferously. No one would believe them, not in a million years. And besides, there was something--perhaps that majestic voice; perhaps Slim's deed--which bid them keep silence. And so the story has been a secret these many years, coming to light only with the unearthing of Clark Peters' diary.

Peters will be remembered as the hero of the Hyperionic disaster a year ago. He it was who saved eighteen passengers of the ill-fated space liner from certain death in the lava pools of Mercury ere he succumbed to his own burns and injuries. Of him no more need be said.

Otto Zimmerman is an old, old man who smiles and nods agreement when asked to confirm the tale of the diary.

But Mort Saunders, older still, and his once fiery hirsute adornments now white as driven snow, is more specific. Certain of the personal details about Pete that the diarist omitted, he will be perfectly willing to tell.

"Huh!" he has said. "Pete didn't record the half. In my humble opinion, it was he who saved the Great Ones. True? Of course it's true; go ahead and print it if you want to. Nobody will take any stock in it but Captain Wallace James.

"And he won't believe it either."

THE END

(borrowed from Johnny Pez blog <http://johnnypez9.blogspot.com/>)