

THE GREAT ILLUSION



In his heavy space-suit, he leaped toward the unrailed edge.

**The Earth Is Held in Cosmic Bondage Until One Man
Unleashes Its Mighty Shackles!**

By WILL GARTH

Author of "The Bloodless Peril," "Rays of Blindness," etc.

THEY were the first men who had ever stepped off Earth. Their stubby beryllium-alloy rocket that for days had been flying out into space was man's first challenge to the infinite. Yet these two men crouching in the windowed nose of the rocket were still at odds.

Strange time and place for discord! The window before them framed the unplumbed black vault, hung with the

time, remote pinpoints of the stars. Kenneth Dain was staring ahead at a silver speck of light amid the starry hosts, his thin, dark face and tired eyes a weary and dogged mask. Young Ross Ormond was looking at him, his clean, blond face flushed with exasperation.

"I still say it's crazy!" Ormond burst out. "You didn't dare tell me where we were heading before we started. You

told me, you told everyone, that this first space flight would be to the moon."

"I had to say that," Kenneth Dain answered tightly. "I needed you and knew you wouldn't come if you knew our real destination. But I never had any idea of heading for the moon. What good would it do to reach it—a ball of lifeless, airless rock."

"We could have tried for one of the planets, then," Ross Ormond said wrathfully. "Venus or Mars—"

"Venus is a world without oxygen, uninhabitable, and Mars is a frigid desert," Dain said flatly. "The planets beyond are mere frozen spheres. And beyond them, nothing but space and the stars—so many light years away they can never be reached."

"But why Eros?" Ormond insisted. "In the name of heaven, why head for that planetoid, that little mass of barren rock?"

He gestured angrily toward the silver speck of light that for days had grown steadily brighter.

"Because I don't believe Eros is just barren rock, nor even a real planetoid," Dain said firmly. "There's something queer about Eros—a great mystery waiting for us to solve." He paused for a moment, then said earnestly:

"Years ago, back in nineteen-thirty-six, astronomers of Harvard Observatory discovered that Eros is unlike any other celestial body in shape. They found it is shaped like a cylinder, rounded at the ends, twenty-two miles long and seven miles in diameter. That's stuck in my mind ever since. Think of the strangeness of it—a planetoid with an artificial symmetrical shape, utterly unnatural."

Ross Ormond's jaw dropped. "You can't for a minute think that Eros is some kind of artificial—"

"I think nothing," Dain said quietly, "except that this strangely shaped little planetoid that comes closer Earth than any other body but the moon is the greatest mystery in the Solar System. A mystery that we are going to solve."

YOUNG ORMOND stared at him, indignation gone, strange wonder and a touch of awe in his eyes. That

awe increased in the following hours, as the little rocket silently drifted closer to the silvery blob of the mysterious planetoid.

For now they could clearly see that Eros was indeed a huge, symmetrical cylinder, its ends smoothly rounded as by a Titan lathe. A shining, cylindrical mystery, forging through space in its orbit about the sun.

At last, circling around the strange planetoid in a decreasing spiral the little rocket glided toward the curved back of the giant cylinder. The gravitational pull of the enigmatic thing was so feeble that the rocket alighted with the merest jar, bounced, skidded a little, scraped to a stop. Dain and Ormond stared out at the starlit surface of Eros.

"It's metal," said Dain in a strange voice. "The whole surface is smooth metal." He was trembling violently with excitement as he whispered: "You understand what that means? This giant, symmetrical metal cylinder—Eros is a ship! A huge space-ship from somewhere that has been drifting around the sun for ages! A derelict, maybe drifted into our Solar System from outside— God, what this may mean to humanity! Creatures that could build a ship like this must have had enormous knowledge! Ross, we've got to get inside it!"

Feverishly, he clawed the two metal space-suits out of their locker. Ormond's young face bewildered.

"But we don't know anything about this thing. We ought to go slow."

"Slow?" cried Dain, struggling into his suit. "Down in this great cylinder may lie the past wisdom of a race, superhuman powers for man. And you can talk of going slow!"

Ross Ormond put on his own suit, screwed down the glass-fronted helmet, touched the valve of his oxygen tank. Dain was already helmeted and snapping in the telephone cord between the two suits.

"Come on, Ross!"

Their two bulky figures jammed the air-lock of the little rocket. The inner door scraped Ormond's arm as it closed. Then the outer door gaped, air whisked out, and the two men stepped

out. A floating stride, and their lead-soled shoes clicked on Eros' metal surface.

Ormond's spirit quailed at the un-earthliness of the scene. They stood in black space beneath the cynical, distant stare of the stars. Under them was the polished, unbroken gray metal of the great cylinder's back. It stretched away from them in a vague, unreal plain, a smooth little world whose horizons were curiously close.

Suddenly Ormond pointed toward the distant end of the mighty cylinder. A dark, slender thing like a stubby rod projected at an oblique angle from the rounded end. It was pointing back through the gloom of space.

"Looks like a finger," Ormond whispered. "Pointing at the sun."

Dain caught his breath sharply. "Sun power? Is that how the creatures who built this huge ship operated it? We've got to look at that!"

They started back along the vast cylinder in a slow, floating walk, their lead soles clicking on the metal. The dry taste of fear in Ormond's mouth was new and strange. He had never much feared anything human, but this—

THEY had gone less than a mile when abruptly before them yawned an oblong pit of black shadow, more than two hundred feet long. They peered down into it. About forty feet deep, it had a metal floor and was quite empty—an oblong recess in the back of the Titan cylinder.

"It may be a way inside!" Dain's voice mounted in excitement. "It looks like an air-lock of some kind!"

Dropping to his knees, he crawled along the edge of the recess until his groping, metal-gloved fingers found a series of heavy eyelets imbedded along the edge. But their purpose, like all else here, was incalculable. Without wasting time in speculation, Dain untied the little coil of super-light chain that hung from the belt of his suit, and tied the end to one of the eyelets.

With a quick word to his companion, he slid down the chain into the recess. Ormond followed, felt his sliding fall checked by the thump of his lead soles

on the floor of the oblong well of deep shadow.

"There ought to be some way inside from here, if this is an air-lock," muttered Dain. "Controls somewhere, if they still operate after all the time this ship must have been floating, a derelict."

He was reaching for the little lamp at his belt when both men froze as though struck by the cold of space.

With a low, muffled vibration, a broad metal cover was sliding shut over their heads; closed steadily, pulling a black curtain across the stars. Then they were in absolute blackness. The murmur of vibration abruptly ceased.

"We're trapped!" Ormond's voice was a strangled whisper. "Dain, there's something still in this ship!"

"No!" Kenneth Dain gripped his metal-clad arm. "I think I know what happened. Somehow we touched off the control of the outer door of this air-lock, made it close. Wait till I get my light going."

"Ken, listen!"

Breathlessly listening, they heard a hissing sound, faint at first, but growing louder each second.

"Ken, that sounds—like air being released into this lock!"

"It can't be. For ages this ship has—"

Abruptly the hissing sound had stopped. A section of the air-lock's wall was sliding open. And from the interior of the enormous ship, light poured into the dark lock! Hazy light that showed the blank metal walls of their trap, the weird helmeted forms, stiff with amazement, looking through that opened door into the interior of the giant ship.

Dain and Ormond saw a dimly lit chamber of large size, metal-walled. Great towering things were in it that could hardly be defined in the hazy light. But Ormond and Dain hardly saw them. Their startled eyes had leaped toward the moving, the living things before them!

The creatures numbered a half dozen, shudderingly unterrestrial. Each was a soft, bulbous white mass, some eighteen inches across, from which de-

pended eight long, thin, trailing white tendrils. The creatures did not stand nor move upon these tendrils. Each bulbous white mass that was both head and body floated in the air, trailing the tendrils beneath it.

DAIN AND ORMOND were frozen statues as the weird creatures floated toward them. Now Kenneth Dain numbly saw that in the floating white body of each creature was a ragged, glistening spot that might be an eye. And that two of the floaters held small instruments, like tiny harps, in their tendrils.

Motionless, two space-suited, helmeted Earth men stared wildly as the white floaters entered the air-lock. One raised a thin tendril and pointed toward the interior of the ship. The meaning was clear.

"No!" cried Ross Ormond, his voice a high-pitched yell inside his helmet. "No!"

He whirled and plunged clumsily backward. Swiftly as thought, one of the floaters raised his harplike instrument. A thread of light flicked from it and struck Ormond, then was gone.

Ormond screamed, a raw and appalling shout of agony, torn from him by the exquisite pain that for an instant throbbled through every nerve. He stood then, shaking, sick, unable to move. And again the foremost floater pointed into the ship.

"We've got to go!" Ormond sobbed. "God, they can wrench your heart out with pain somehow! They've got us."

He moved forward drunkenly. And Kenneth Dain's leaden steps were almost as unsteady as he followed.

"They've been in here, some of them, in all the ages this thing has been circling the sun," Dain whispered hoarsely. "But that can't be possible!"

But it was possible! For here was incredible reality. One of the weird floaters glided ahead, its tendrils grotesquely trailing like a woman's train. The others followed, harp-weapons raised alertly. In dreadful silence the Earth adventurers stumbled through one hazy, mysterious room after another, at last entering a long, blank-walled

corridor.

Far ahead, a brilliant splash of dazzling white light lay across the corridor. Dain and Ormond paused in stupefaction as they reached it. One side of the corridor was open, without wall or rail, and they looked down as from a giddy catwalk into an immense space that was a colossal room occupying a great part of the giant cylinder. They could not tell how distant were the walls of the vast chamber, their eyes were so blinded by the thing blazing at its center.

It was a stupendous tetrahedron of pure white light, poised with apex uppermost, hanging weightlessly down above the floor of the vast chamber. All around it, in a circle of which the dazzling tetrahedron was the center, stood a ring of huge glass spheres. Each sphere was filled with curdled white light or force, and from each a thin stream of light jetted inward to feed the central tetrahedron.

Kenneth Dain peered awedly down at one of the huge glass spheres almost directly beneath. Inspiration flashed over him.

"Ross, these spheres are reservoirs of force!" he cried. "They collect force from the sun and store it somehow in the spheres to keep the tetrahedron going. But what's it all for?"

"It's a bad dream we're having," Ross Ormond muttered thickly.

The floaters behind motioned them ahead, raised their tiny harps warningly. Hastily Ormond and Dain stumbled on. They passed along the corridor a great distance, then through more chambers. They met only two more of the floating creatures on the way—it seemed the huge ship held but few.

WHOO and what where they? Dain wondered stupefiedly. What had they been doing here in this artificial planetoid for ages? Then arrival at their destination cut short his wild thoughts.

It was a small, round, bare metal room. At its center hung another of the floating creatures, poised motionless, with thin tendrils hanging as though lifeless. The glistening patch

of his eye contemplated the two Earth men. The captors spoke to this solitary creature with subtle rippings and stirrings of their tendrils that Kenneth Dain knew must be speech.

The solitary floater fixed that blank, unhuman eye upon the two captives, grotesque in their heavy space-suits. Then his tendrils rippled briefly. In answer to the command, one of the creatures floated out of the room, and soon returned with a square, boxlike thing mounted on a slender pedestal. A switch was touched. A yellow spark flashed atop the box and instantly expanded into a glow that filled the round room.

"What are they doing?" faltered Ormond.

His words froze on his lips. And Kenneth Dain went rigid. Each was hearing a voice that seemed to speak inside his own brain, in his own language and accent.

"So the sons of Latma go forth from their world and invade space again!" spoke the inner voice. "We see well now how wise were our ancestors when they set up the great illusion."

"Ken!" Ormond's whisper was husky. "Ken, did you hear—inside you? It's that creature there, talking to us somehow—"

"Understandable enough," jerked Dain, though his face was like marble. "That box sets up a zone inside which makes thought transmission possible."

"You are right, son of Latma," said the inner voice in his brain. "Long ago we of Altor used such a device to speak to your forefathers. Aye, long ago, when your world of Latma warred upon our world of Altor, before we conquered you and prisoned your race forever with the great illusion."

Kenneth Dain spoke with an effort. He knew that the creature before him could not understand, could not even hear his words. But in speaking them he was thinking them, and the creature should be able to understand his thoughts.

"We do not understand," he said with forced steadiness. "We came from Earth, which you call Latma, not expecting to find any life here. We did not believe that any life existed in the Solar

System except on Earth."

"There is no life in your Solar System except on your own world," was the unexpected reply. "Our world Altor does not lie inside this system. It is a planet of one of the nearer stars, and every three of your years some of us come from Altor to relieve those who have been operating this station."

"Every three years?" gasped Dain. "But that's impossible! Nothing could reach here from even the nearest star in three years, so distant are all the stars."

"That," came the Altorian's thought, "is where you are deceived. You and all your race, deceived for ages by the great illusion."

"The great illusion?" repeated Dain. "I cannot understand you. What is this illusion?"

THE Altorian's answer came slowly, almost sadly, and at the first thought in it, both men started.

"Sons of Latma, you must both die. It is not our wish to destroy you, but you have come to the one place in the Solar System that holds our secret, our hidden defense against your race. You must die, lest you carry back to your people the secret that would release them to invade our world again some day. Yet before you are destroyed, it may a little ease your end to learn that which none of your race, for long ages, has known; to look through the veil of cosmic illusion that for ages has hemmed your world.

"You think that the other stars are unthinkable far from your own Solar System, so distant that they can never be reached. That is the great illusion! For the truth is that the stars are hundreds of times nearer your System than you and your scientists believe. So near are they, indeed, that it would not be hard for you to reach them in craft similar to the one that brought you here."

"That can't be!" exclaimed Kenneth Dain incredulously. "Why, our astronomers have for years measured the stars' distances, by every delicate method. We know that even the nearest star is countless billions of miles away."

"It is the purpose of the great illusion to make you think just that," the Altorian informed him. "As long as we maintain the illusion, you of Latma will believe the other stars too distant ever to reach, and so you will never try to invade our world again."

"So long as you maintain it?" repeated Dain. "Do you mean to claim that you—"

"Yes, we Altorians created and for ages have maintained the illusion," replied the thing with cold, passionless finality. "Long ages ago, the people of our world rose to great power and knowledge, greater far than you have now. They built space-ships and ventured first to the planets of your own System, then out to the nearer stars. For there was no illusion existing then. They discovered Altor, revolving about one of those stars, invaded it and tried to conquer us.

"After tremendous struggle, we forced them back to their own System and world, smashed their proud civilization to bits, and well-nigh destroyed all their race. But we could not wholly destroy them, and we knew that some day they would rise again to power and scientific wisdom and would invade our world once more. To prevent that, we decided to prison them forever in their own system, by setting up an eternal illusion that the stars were too unthinkably distant for them ever to reach.

"We built this great ship, and all it contains, and towed it here into an orbit about your sun. It draws power from your sun, power which is stored in spherical condensers and fed ceaselessly into the shining tetrahedron. That tetrahedron emits a force that maintains a constant sphere of interference around your Solar System, a shell of energy that refracts and bends all light entering this System from the outer Universe. It so distorts and diminishes the lightbeams from the outer stars that from inside the System those stars appear fearfully remote. Aye, and so cunningly that even to the most delicate instruments of your world the stars still appear remote.

"We had at first thought of making all the planets in your own System, in-

cluding this ship-planetoid, also appear inconceivably far. But then you would have seen the inner planets in transit across the sun, and would have realized you were somehow deluded. And we knew that after a few fruitless trips to the lifeless planets of your System, you would give up space-travel, thinking the other stars too far away ever to reach. And you alone of your people have been allowed to learn our secret—before you die."

"Dain, they're going to do it," Ross Ormond said thickly. "They're going to kill us."

"We do not wish to." The thought-voice of the Altorian was almost sympathetic. "But you cannot be allowed to endanger the maintenance of the illusion which is our world's safety."

KENNETH DAIN'S brain was staggered by the incredible revelation, this cosmic deception that for ages had been practised. Earth men believing the stars so unthinkably far—

A wild thought flashed across Dain's brain—and he instantly suppressed it. Then he laughed jarringly.

"This place—your whole illusion—are already doomed," he said grimly. "Before we landed here, we flashed back word to our world that Eros appeared to be of artificial construction and that we were landing to investigate. We may not return, but that message will bring others here. They will keep coming, until they have penetrated your secret. The illusion will be destroyed!"

The Altorian's tendrils rippled suddenly in a tremor of excitement. Then they quieted.

"In that case," came the creature's cold thought, "you yourselves shall remove the danger in which you have placed us. You shall return to your craft and send another message saying that this is a poisoned, radioactive mass that kills all life and that you yourselves are dying. That will keep others from coming here, ever." And the thing added suspiciously: "But do not think that you can escape when you reach your ship or can send any different message. Some of us will go with

you into your craft, with this thought-transmission device, so that we can read your message in your mind as you send it. And at the first wrong word you send, or the first move to escape, you will die in awful agony, instead of dying easily."

"You can kill us but you can't make us—" Dain broke off with a scream of pain. One of the Altorians had raised his harplike weapon, and as a shining thread darted toward Dain, he felt heart-freezing agony twist every nerve in his body.

"Stop—we'll do it!" he choked. And as the agony ceased, he staggered, eyes distended and face contorted.

"We go, now," the Altorian told him.

The yellow glow from the thought-box was turned off, and one of the creatures lifted the mechanism in his tendrils. Others floated silently forward around Dain and Ormond as they stumbled out of the room. The harp-weapons of the two guards covered the earth men.

They passed back through the hazy chambers and the long corridor, again saw the dazzling splash of light from the blazing tetrahedron that maintained the great illusion.

"Ken, what are you trying to do?" asked Ormond hoarsely. "We have no radio. And it will do us no good just to get back into the rocket. We've no chance to escape these things."

"We can't escape, no," Dain answered, his face pale and taut. "But before we die we can destroy the work of these devils; if we're lucky, can destroy the illusion that otherwise will prison men forever inside the Solar System"

"But how?" Ormond asked dully. "There's nothing in the rocket—"

Kenneth Dain's voice was low, his eyes gleaming strangely. "We have one chance."

SURREPTITIOUSLY he un-snapped the cord that connected his space-suit to Ormond's as the weird party reached the portion of the corridor where the wall was cut away to give vision down into that vast chamber of the tetrahedron. Down

there pulsed the dazzling brilliance of the unearthly thing that maintained a cosmic deception, the glassy spheres of curdled force that fed it glowing in a huge circle around it.

And suddenly Kenneth Dain acted! With a terrific effort, in his heavy space-suit, he leaped toward the un-railed edge of the corridor, through the floating Altorians beside him. And with a wild, muffled shout, he plunged over the edge, down into the great chamber, leaping straight down toward one of the huge glassy spheres of force.

Threads of destroying light shot from the Altorians' harp-weapons at his falling body—but too late. For Dain's metal-clad body was already crashing down into the huge sphere. Its glassy substance cracked, then shattered under his crashing impact. And the terrific sunpower stored within it burst out in a destroying flare of blinding, raging force. That wave of released and raving energy cracked and broke the other spheres instantly. Within a heart-beat of Dain's plunge, the giant cylinder of Eros and everything within it was a flaring, fusing wreck.

* * *

The astronomer on duty in that California observatory stretched his back painfully, straightening from the eyepiece of the great reflector as his relief approached.

"Anything yet?" the approaching man asked hopefully.

The astronomer shook his head discouragedly. "Not a sign. They were supposed to set off a magnesium flare if they landed on the moon, and where is it? It's days late, too. Dain and Ormond are lost."

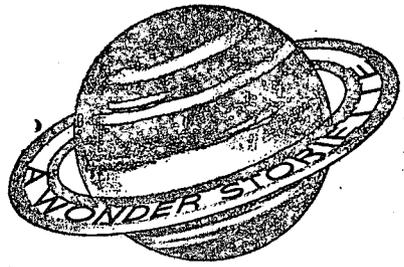
He walked out of the observatory and stopped where a little knot of his colleagues stood on the steps. They were looking at the crescent of the moon, beginning to decline westward amid the tiny points of the stars.

"Nothing yet," he said in answer to their question. "Something happened to them. It must have."

He reached in his pocket for his pipe, mechanically looking at the star-sown sky. Then—it happened!

(Concluded on page 129)

Time On My Hands



Wanted: A Perpetual Motion Machine!

By MORT WEISINGER

Author of "The Nth Degree," "The Price of Peace," etc.

I CLICKED the teledisc shut and as the image faded slowly from the screen I pressed the photobeam button. The door slid open, and Dr. Cartier came striding in. He was a big, husky chap. I'd seen him on television a couple of times, and recognized him instantly.

Two weeks after Nicholas Lansdowne was drowned in a trans-ocean rocket crash, I was appointed chief executor of the Lansdowne millions. Since then scientific birds have been parking on my doorstep day after day. Requests for various endowments, solicitations for subscriptions to scientific projects—they all wanted part of the Lansdowne green. Old man Lansdowne hadn't left a relative or friend in the world. He'd left a dozen millions, though, that he wanted donated to "worthy" scientific projects.

Eccentric? You said it. Lansdowne wouldn't give a cent to the New World Hospital. The Floating Museum couldn't squeeze a dime out of the old duck, either. But just come up to Lansdowne with plans for a perpetual motion machine and you could write your own check. Lansdowne had backed everything from a suction-compression device that was supposed to wring gold ingots out of sea water to an ultrashort wave transmitter that the inventor claimed would make organic flesh invisible. The only thing it ever made invisible was the cash Lansdowne gave the faker.

Now that there was plenty of dough in the old reserve, with me alone to

decide when to give it out, it was a different story. If some guy approached me with plans for a fourth-dimensional windmill he had to show me how it worked before I'd sign on the dotted line. So far I haven't seen one of these things that could work. Come into my office some day and I'll show you plans for gravity-nullifiers, death rays, atom smashers and thinking robots. But none of them is practical.

Dr. Cartier was one of those cool chaps. The moment he entered he came right to the point.

"Mr. Wayne," he said, "I'm here to demonstrate a time-traveling machine. I've got a model outside. And it works."

He said it simply, and I guess he meant it. As he stood before my desk I turned pages inside my brain wondering in what connection I'd heard of the chap. Then I remembered. Dr. Cartier was assistant to Professor Ivan Deteroff, perfecter of the three-dimensional movies.

A TIME-MACHINE, huh? I'd have to consult my files. It seemed to me I had a few in the house.

"If you've got the stuff, skipper," I told him, "Larry Wayne is your Midas touch. Wheel her in."

Doc Cartier nodded sharply.

"The machine's out in my car. I'll be back in a minute."

I watched him leave the room. He was much younger than I had thought. As soon as the door slid shut I grabbed