

VIA MERCURY

First of a New Series

By GORDON A. GILES

Author of "The Flight of the Starshell," "Via Venus," etc.



Ling hurled our last bomb at the monstrous beast

Expedition Number One Dares the Fiery Menace of the Solar System's Inferno—Where All the Horrors of Hell Stalk Earth's Puny Spawn!

HELLO, Earth!

Mercury Expedition Number One reporting by etherline code radio, Operator Gillway at the keys. Fifty-fifth day since leaving Earth.

Karsen, our rocket man, found it easy to plan our landing from the Martian data. Mercury's gravity is a little less than Mars', about two-fifths of Earth's. Tarnay, at the pilot board, spiraled us down on a broad flat stretch of smooth material that looks like cooled lava. We haven't stepped out yet, till we see about temperature and air.

Well, here we are on Mercury, the smallest of the nine planets. Two of Jupiter's moons—Ganymede and Callisto—are actually larger, Markers tells us. And Saturn's satellite, Titan,



**CAPTAIN
ATWELL**

is as large. Mercury also has the distinction of being nearest to the Sun, only thirty-six million miles away on the average. We have our Sunward ports shuttered, otherwise we'd be blinded.

The view from our other ports shows a world not only utterly weird, but decidedly inhospitable—tumbled, flinty rock fields, a jagged mountain range off to the side, smooth lava plateaus. No signs of life, not even a tuft of moss or a single hardy cactus. Only rock, of a thousand varieties. The horizon is short, but evidently Mercury is a barren rock. We expected that, but hoped against it.

We hardly know whether to be glad we're here. Fifty-five days in black, monotonous space is bad enough. But the Mercury environment looks just as unpleasant.

However, we're here for scientific studies. In four months, when Mercury swings swiftly around the Sun and again catches up with slower Earth, we'll leave. I think we're looking forward to that already.

Within five minutes of our landing, Captain Atwell called us together.

"Men," he said, "I'm determined this time not to let some little thing maroon us and take lives, as on Mars and Venus. We're going to plan ahead cautiously. Keep on our toes. understand?"

We all nodded. Besides Captain Atwell, three of us are veterans of the Mars and Venus Expeditions—Parletti, Markers and myself. Two are veterans of the Venus Expedition alone—Tarney and Karsen. Four are new men, to make up our full ten—Robertson, von Zell, Ling and Swin-

erton—official archeologist, chemist, physicist and biologist respectively.

Captain Atwell really spoke to the four new, unseasoned men. Sensing this, Ling spoke for them.

"We will be careful, Captain." And then, in his soft voice, he added: "Honorable Chinese proverb say, 'Fool see danger but laugh—last time'."

Just received the message from Mars Expedition Number Two, relayed through Earth. Thanks for your congratulations, Mars. And for giving us all the credit for your safe landing there, through our pioneering. We're glad to have done our bit.

Will resume tomorrow. Batteries low from space flight.

FIFTY-SIXTH Day.

Chemist von Zell found a thin atmosphere outside our ship. We had been speculating all through the space trip whether there would be any more than on the Moon. Since there is, Markers' theory probably holds. On the Night Side are vast amounts of frozen gases, circulating somewhat on the Day Side.

We are in the Twilight Zone, of course, named that in imaginative literature for the past century. Mercury does not rotate. It is a unique experience for us. One side eternally faces the blazing Sun. The other has been shrouded in darkness for countless ages. The narrow strip in between, where supernal day blends into absolute night, is in perpetual dusk. It is the only possible zone we could have landed in. At our left is hell-heat, at our right, frightful cold.

We stepped out today, with air helmets. Mercury's air is unbreathable, loaded with hot, poisonous vapors. Captain Atwell has had the unparalleled honor of being the first human to set foot on three planets—Mars, Venus and Mercury. He deserves it, as I think our precious chronicles have proved. He planted the Earth flag in loose shale.

Ling had warned us in advance of the temperature, one hundred and seventy-seven degrees, Fahrenheit. But so dry and wispy is the atmosphere that we felt no extreme discom-

fort. We wore white suits of light cloth, to keep the burning rays off our skins.

We tested our jumping powers, finding we could easily soar up twenty feet. The new members got more of a kick out of it than we veterans. We had had the first thrill of light gravity on Mars.

The visors of our helmets are equipped with darkened glass, cutting down the glare. We were able to look briefly at the Sun. It is a gigantic yellow-red globe, hanging half below the horizon. It dangles there motionlessly, as it has for eons of time. It grips you to think that nothing here has changed, while on Earth all evolution took place.

"It is like realizing at last what eternity means!" Ling put it. His tiny voice, through the helmet radio, was solemn.

But we were wrong. There is change. While we watched, we saw an astounding phenomenon. A range of mountains between us and the Sun is slowly melting down! Yes, the tips gradually ran down the slopes as a watery tide. But it wasn't water. It was lead, Parletti told us—metallic lead, melting under the Sun's fierce heat. Luckily only slanting, weaker rays come to us in the Twilight Zone.

PARLETTI expanded his theory. There has been little weathering on Mercury, with its wispy atmosphere. Most metallic deposits are in virgin form, just as they cooled millions of years ago. Lead melted here, beyond the edge of the Twilight Zone. Out farther, the blistered Day Side must be a literal inferno of molten metal lakes of bismuth, tin, gallium and all the easily melting metals.

Parletti estimates peak temperatures as seven hundred degrees out there. We can't think of exploring it. Man might never explore Mercury's exposed Day Side, except perhaps in specially equipped ships. Mercury, then, according to Parletti's explanation, is not mainly rock, but a vast store house of metal!

Tarnay suddenly let out a yelp. And then we all felt it. The solid ground

under our feet was heaving. What we had thought was rock was metal, and it was beginning to melt.

Captain Atwell herded us into the ship. With a blast of the rear rockets, we rolled fifty miles toward the Night Side. Looking back, we saw the section we had quitted slowly heave, bubble, and finally move sluggishly away, seeking its level. We were safe where we were. Cooling drafts of air from the Night Side protected us. The plateau was probably gallium, a metal melting at less than the boiling point of water.

That was our first day's experience on Mercury. We began to wonder if we could ever feel safe. At any moment the metal ground under our feet might turn to liquid and flow away.

FIFTY-SEVENTH Day.

Last night—our arbitrary "night" of twelve hours—it hailed. And the hail was composed of metallic bismuth. Parletti and Markers sat down to figure out what it meant. After an all-day discussion, and octant reading of the Sun, they explained. Mercury has a libration. That is, it wobbles a little. It presents a little more than half its face to the Sun during one revolution. Because of this rocking back and forth, the Twilight Zone shifts constantly.

Each forty-four days, half the revolution period, the Zone crawls a hundred miles Sunward, then a hundred miles spaceward. But there is an overlap of ten miles. So this narrow ten-mile strip was the safest area, unaffected by the advancing heat and the returning cold.

Parletti assured us we were now in that strip of safety. We could stay here four months, without danger of something melting under our feet, or the alternate cold wave. Bismuth vapor from the blistered mountains blew toward the Night Side. Meeting cooler air, it precipitated. It was no different, in principle, than the rains of water on Earth.

Captain Atwell heaved a sigh of relief. We could stay, after all, in that ten-mile strip without constantly fleeing from molten floods. Here we bur-



ied our fuel, as originally planned. We found a depression nearby and stacked our drums in it. We covered it with a tarpaulin, and then with loose clumps of the metal rocks.

Don't picture Mercury's surface as smooth sheets of metal. There are, after all, plenty of non-metals. These have combined with some of the metals, forming detached lumps and gravels, mostly oxides and sulfides.

Finally our cached fuel supply was safe from all accident, and particularly from heat. We had worked all day, but hardly felt it in the light gravity. Our skins, wherever exposed, are more deeply browned than ever, though we took the precautionary tanning periods out in space before arriving.

Thanks for the special musical program. It came through clear as a bell. My seleno-cells charge easily, in this constant sunlight, even better than on Mars. I've shut off the Sun power mirror entirely, having more current than I need.

FIFTY-EIGHTH Day.

We are not attempting to set up any camp outside the ship. We will be here only four months, and can stand the cramped ship quarters for that short time. On Mars and Venus, facing respectively two years and fourteen months of stay, we needed roomier habitations.

Our position seems secure. We have food, water and tanked air supplies for more than the four months. Captain Atwell has given the signal to go ahead with scientific studies.

Parletti has been wandering within a radius of a mile, with his indefatig-

able pick, shovel and electroscope. On Mars he found gold-impregnated sand, on Venus, radioactive deposits. Here he comes back with a knapsack loaded with gold, platinum, thallium, and all the precious metals. They lie around for the picking. Mercury, he predicts, will eventually become the mining center of interplanetary exploitation.

Markers has set up his telescope and is searching for long-specified Vulcan, the planet that might have an orbit closer than Mercury. Trying all sorts of glare filters, he is methodically sweeping the area around the Sun. If he finds it, he says he will be more surprised than anyone. He is trying to prove it *isn't* there, once and for all.

Tarnay and Karsen, in collaboration, are taking seismographic records of Mercury's crust. They are sending sonic signals down, and interpreting them in terms of density strata. They are trying to account for the libration by proving one hemisphere heavier than the other, since there are no ocean tides.

Von Zell, with true Germanic patience, is listing all the queer, jumbled, natural alloys of the ground beneath us, forged in Nature's laboratory. He hopes to discover some that would benefit Earth industry.

Ling is measuring the invisible waves of electrons that shower down from the Sun spots. These Sun spot barrages disturb radio communication on Earth, and create the Aurora Borealis. On Mercury, they surround every mountain tip with incredibly beautiful color effects. These are invisible to the naked eye, in the Sun's strong glare. But Ling is taking pictures with special color filters.

Paul Swinerton is as zealous a biologist as his brothers, Charles and Richard Swinerton, were. They gave their lives on the expeditions to Mars and Venus. But they at least had something to study, in the way of life-forms, before the end. Here, Paul Swinerton raves bitterly, there isn't even a microbe.

Robertson, the archeologist, is still worse off. If there aren't even plants

or insects, there were never any higher life-forms—no rational creatures, no lost civilizations. Just a while ago, as we ate together, he suddenly asked a question, sharply.

“Where are the pyramids?”

We all realize what is lacking. We found pyramids on Mars and Venus, built by the ancient Martians. Records vaguely told of their presence on Mercury. We would be startled *not* to find them here.

Robertson begged Captain Atwell to let him explore beyond sight of our ship. Atwell pursed his lips, but gave no definite answer. In keeping with his policy of caution, he is probably not yet ready to risk an exploration to unknown parts. He wants to bring us all back to Earth alive.

Hello, Mars Expedition Two! Received your relayed message. Glad to hear you stopped an attack of the warrior ants with the light cannon you have along. Wish we had had them. We wouldn't have lost Proolett and Cruishank. If you locate their graves, with the Earth flag painted on boulders, say a word for us. They died heroes.

FIFTY-NINTH Day.

Startling news, Earth! Two big surprises. No, just one, because after all we expected the pyramid. The other is—life.

Captain Atwell consented to an exploration this morning, at the insistence of both Robertson and Swinerton. He went along with them, to balance their inexperience with his veteran sagacity.

They went parallel to our latitude, inside the Twilight Zone, covering fifty miles in five hours. You can move on Mercury like a fast kangaroo. They found the pyramid perched on a hill, limned against the bright sky. Coming on it suddenly around a boulder, Robertson gasped and then ran for it like a demon. To his credit, he stopped when Captain Atwell sharply called him back. They approached it cautiously. One can never tell what danger lurks—our cardinal rule.

But there was no danger. The pyramid was deserted, ancient. Robertson

looked at it almost reverently. It reared like a symbol out of time's mists. The Martians have been here before us. Twenty thousand years ago, Robertson estimates.

Again the strange mystery of it brooded over the scene. Halloway and his experts, on Earth, have partially deciphered the crypt records of both Mars and Venus. We know now that the Martians colonized and roamed through the Solar System, as late as ten thousand years ago. But what happened to them? Why did they abruptly vanish from the scene, to leave only their almost eternal pyramids?

The answer might lie within this one. But Atwell pulled Robertson away. Another time for that, since they were on rationed air for their helmets. At that moment, Swinerton let out a wild yell, which I heard through connection with his helmet radio.

Walking around the pyramid, they had come on something else, beyond it—a long sunken valley, so deep that it was in full shadow. At the edges were algae. Swinerton knelt and cuddled them in his hands. The first signs of life on this incredibly barren planet! The rest of us don't wonder that he nearly went crazy with excitement.

They looked down only long enough to see a sort of mist lying throughout the valley. Denser air, Swinerton surmises, and water vapor. A general green color promised much more plant-life below, though they could see no detail. Swinerton swears he saw something move.

Then Captain Atwell forced Swinerton away, almost at the point of a gun. He herded Robertson past the pyramid, and they returned. We are all too excited to sleep now. Indigenous life on Mercury. But what kind, on a planet whose soil can only be heavily loaded with metals? And the pyramid link to the enigmatic past. . . .

We were proud to receive that broadcast from Polaris. We've never heard the song, “Hail, Men of Space!” rendered better than by the Antarctic choir. Antarctica was the last frontier on Earth, before we went into space. Thanks.

SIXTIETH Day.

This morning a party of five made the trip again. The lure of mystery—both of life and the pyramid—was there. Robertson and Parletti examined the pyramid. Captain Atwell went on with Swinerton and Ling, down into the valley.

To report briefly on the pyramid, Robertson and Parletti found no immediate entrance. So they contented themselves with taking measurements. Also, they took photos of the inscriptions around the base.

Captain Atwell and his party cautiously descended the slope of the valley, guns ready. The lower they went, the more life appeared, from algae, to moss, to rudimentary ferns and clumps of bushes. Finally, toward the center ten miles along, grew a forest of reeds fully two hundred feet high. In Mercury's light gravity, the thin stems can support a tremendous height of foliage.

Swinerton kept up a running fire of disjointed conjecture. Ages ago, Mercury rotated, he said, and supported a flowering life in what would correspond to our arctic and antarctic, here equatorial. When the rotation finally ceased, this withered away. Only a remnant survives now in the narrow strip of the Twilight Zone. Sunken valleys protect it from the blistering Day Side and from the deathly cold of the Night Side.

Swinerton wondered how much of the animal life had survived. Watching and wandering, they saw. Insects buzzed about, amazingly large ones, the size of song birds. Birds, in turn, were all bigger than eagles, snapping up the huge insects as Earth birds snap up gnats. Mammals were winged. Flying wolflike creatures lumbered by, seeking prey in the universal rule of life.

One great bearlike creature, with a membranous wing spread of thirty feet, hovered over them as though contemplating attack. Then it flapped away grotesquely. It pounced on a turkey-sized bird, rended it with its claws, and savagely gobbled it down—all in mid-air. As on Mars, despite thin air, life had adopted the skies be-

cause of the light gravity. And the lifeforms are big because of one rule. The smaller the planet, the bigger is its life. Gravity is the sole yardstick of size.

It was strange and pathetic. These monsters represented the last of a planet's evolution, bound to a tiny strip of territory circling Mercury. That ring of stubborn life is eternally menaced by extremes of heat and cold on both sides.

Markers just made a remarkable discovery, back here at camp. He found no sign of the mythical planet Vulcan. But he did spot a new body. Mercury has a moon!

Earth telescopes could never resolve it, because Mercury is unfavorably situated for observation, so close to the Sun's glare. Markers estimates it as only a few miles in diameter, smaller even than Mars' two tiny moons. But still it is a moon.

It revolves rapidly, within five thousand miles, hugging Mercury closely lest the Sun's enormous gravitation pull it away. Markers suggests Phaeton as its name, the chariot driver of the Sun. Obviously no planetary body wheels closer to the Sun, except now and then a comet.

To continue the valley exploration — *Sput*—

SIXTY-FIRST Day.

Continuing today. My ether-damping unit burned out yesterday. Von Zell, when I told him, said it is probably a new Sun spot that suddenly deluged my unit with a barrage of electrons. I repaired it and added a shield.

Atwell, Swinerton and Ling saw something still more amazing, before they returned. In an open patch among the huge reeds, they suddenly came face to face with a truly monstrous creature. Scaly and winged, large as a dinosaur, it seemed curiously familiar. When a steamy breath came from its nostrils, Ling recognized it.

"It's a dragon!" he yelled. "Run!"

Ling himself ran. But Swinerton, paralyzed, just stared. When he did turn to run, he stumbled and fell. Cap-

tain Atwell stood over him as the monster charged, and pumped shock at it. It swerved, ran past them, gaining speed. It launched itself into the air. Ponderously it flapped its mighty wings. Rising like a great airplane, it soared out of the valley and turned toward the Sun.

Atwell and Swinerton watched, amazed. Their bullets had merely scared it away. And it vanished in the distance, over the Day Side. Did it live somewhere out in that inferno?

On their return, we speculated about this incredible creature. Swinerton displayed chips that the bullets had knocked off the scales. They were flinty horn, and Von Zell labeled them as silicic in composition.

Silicic life, Swinerton surmises from that—carbonaceous tissue, replaced by the analogous siliceous tissue. It would be able to withstand terrific temperatures. He wildly assumes that it forages mainly out on the blazing Day Side, among other silicon life-forms. He pictures it wading through pools of molten metal, perching on mountain-tops, exposed to incandescent heat.

Fantastic? Swinerton went a step further. He says its metabolism must be chemically fierce, perhaps actual combustion, with live steam powering its muscles. In brief, a living steam engine! He hardly knows whether to take himself seriously or not. Ling does.

"The fire-breathing dragon of Chinese mythology," he said moodily. "Either the Martians once brought some to Earth, or told stories of it to aboriginal man, as a threat."

"Is that why you ran from it?" von Zell asked cuttingly. "Race memory, eh?" He laughed as though Ling had presented a poor excuse for cowardice.

Ling said nothing, but the rest of us felt von Zell had spoken out of turn. There is probably just a trace of chauvinism left in von Zell, from his Germanic ancestry of the previous century. He should remember that the wars of the white race on the yellow are over. There had been a little bad feeling between Ling and

von Zell before, on the space trip.

Hello, Mars Expedition Two! Just received your signal, that you've found our clay house. We lived two years in it. Almost like home to us. Parletti says to look around for a dime he lost. What he was hoping to buy with a dime on Mars, I don't know.

SIXTY-SECOND Day.

Captain Atwell is worried. Mars was quiet and menacing. Venus was tempestuous and menacing. Mercury is unexpected and menacing.

Last night a storm broke, waking us all. First a violent wind roared from the Day Side, so hot that we had to turn on the refrigeration unit. Then came a counter-blow from the Night Side, with peltings of metal hail. Our outside thermometer swung from two hundred degrees above to one hundred below, in the space of an hour. The metallic rain churned against our hull till we thought it would be sand-papered thin. It lasted ten hours. Suddenly all was calm and serene again.

Libration effects, of course, Parletti and Markers explained. Periodically the heat drafts and cold drafts clashed, from their respective hemispheres. Where they met, not ten miles from us, hot metallic vapors cooled and dropped their brushing rain. Luckily, in our overlapping zone, full day and night never come. So only the tailings of these storms are ever felt.

"The unexpected," Captain Atwell muttered. "That's our danger. Life when we didn't expect it. Mountains melting down. Storms without warning. We've escaped so far. Forewarned, we can guard against what we've encountered. But watch for the unexpected, men. We don't want to lose a life to that."

Suddenly we didn't feel so secure. What lurks around the next corner? This is the question we face during our four months on Mercury.

Our morale is high, however. Karsen noted that hours before the storm came, the thermometer fluctuated from its mean of one-seventy-seven. We can anticipate other storms, so no

one will be caught out in one. Tarnay kept watch of the molten metal flows from the Day Side, and says no tongue of them has reached closer than five miles. Swinerton says the giant dragon probably wouldn't consider us food, and will leave us alone if we don't annoy it. We have only the unexpected to deal with.

In the meantime, our scientific work is going on. Markers is observing his moon constantly, like a loving father. Parletti and Robertson, at the pyramid, are methodically circling and climbing, step by step, looking for an entrance. Tarnay is measuring the height of the atmosphere. Von Zell is still listing the metals. He finds that some, rare on Earth, like gallium and indium, are more plentiful than iron. Karsen is cheerfully mapping the Sun spots, though at this close range they are numberless.

Swinerton, examining specimens of the plant-life he brought back, finds them loaded with metallo-organic compounds, poisonous to us. Ling, we're a little troubled about. He is moody, doing little. Perhaps he feels there is race discrimination against him because of von Zell's remark. Captain Atwell slapped Ling on the back once.

"Buck up, kid. We know your skin is yellow, nothing else." We wonder if Atwell meant it.

We've just had dinner and would like some music. Can you send us some?

SIXTY-THIRD Day.

Trouble has come—not from an unexpected quarter, but from the dragon. Four men are trapped by it, at the top of the pyramid. This morning, the four went together. Parletti and Robertson as usual stopped at the pyramid. Tarnay and Swinerton descended into the valley. Swinerton was in search of more data about the valley life. Tarnay went along for safety's sake. No man goes anywhere alone.

As Swinerton just reported it via helmet radio, they came on one of the dragon-creatures, apparently dozing. Why it should be in the valley—arctic

to it—was a puzzle. It might have been driven by food scarcity in its normal haunts. At any rate, Swinerton conceived the idea of putting a bullet through one eye into its brain. Later he meant to dissect this amazing new kind of life. Tarnay's protests to the contrary, he tried it. He should have asked Captain Atwell first, by radio.

Swinerton didn't miss. The eye shattered, almost with a crystalline sound. But the brain behind it seemed unaffected by the slug. Perhaps a flintlike bone turned it aside. Enraged, the beast came after them. Further bullets had no effect.

Running desperately, slipping among the vast reeds, Swinerton and Tarnay managed to keep out of the blundering behemoth's reach. It was handicapped by the loss of one eye. Using the power of their Earth muscles to the full, the two men got out of the valley. They scrambled up the pyramid, helped by Robertson and Parletti.

And there they are now, all four. The dragon sits at the base, waiting, bellowing its anger. It clumsily tried to climb the pyramid, but gave up. Once it lumbered into the air, trying to peck at them from above. But the men crouched against the stone safely. Thereafter it waited below.

They emptied their guns at it, without effect. Its chitonous scales are bullet-proof. The other eye was too small a target to hit at that distance. When they try to sneak down the other side of the pyramid, it spies them and moves to meet them. No Earth bear could be more tenacious with a treed victim.

All this was reported by Swinerton through his helmet radio an hour ago. Captain Atwell first grabbed up our sub-machine-gun, and then lowered it helplessly. Even if he could get within range, it still would not destroy that armored colossus.

The situation of the trapped men is frankly grim. In a few hours their individual air-tanks will be exhausted. They can't breathe the rarefied air of Mercury loaded with metallic vapors.

Captain Atwell and the rest of us are discussing all possibilities of driv-

ing the monster away. We even think of charging it with the space ship. But von Zell reminds us that if it can live out in the fiery Day Side, it can withstand our rocket blasts. Besides, with its steam-driven muscles, it might actually batter our ship and damage it! We can't afford to underestimate this formidable form of life that turns away bullets and breathes fire.

Thanks for your musical broadcast. I rebroadcast it through my set to the helmet radios of the four trapped men. It helped keep up their spirits. We've promised to rescue them. We don't know how.

SIXTY-FOURTH Day.

The four men are safe! They are returning now. We owe a vote of thanks to the men on Mars Expedition Two. Their suggestion worked, or a variation of it. It's strange to think of four men on Mercury being saved by advice from men on Mars, across a hundred million miles of space.

We had been about to run the ship over there, and take our chances of damaging it. Then their suggestion came—to make bombs of our fuel. We made three, packing pints of fuel in thermos containers with fulminate caps that von Zell quickly made with his chemical kit.

Captain Atwell, Markers and von Zell went out with them. Karsen, Ling and I were to stay with the ship. Karsen has only one hand. I had to keep three-way radio communication open through the ship's relay system. Ling— Well, I could see he took it hard, being told to stay back. He had run once from the dragon.

It wasn't till an hour later that Karsen and I noticed Ling wasn't with us. He had quietly sneaked out, waving his air helmet. When Captain Atwell reported being within sight of the pyramid, he gasped suddenly.

"Ling, you here? But—" After a moment he finished tersely: "All right. Keep close to us."

Captain Atwell reported his moves. The four of them crept up from the opposite side of the pyramid, out of sight of the beast. The men above, to

keep its attention, waved their arms and yelled. Clambering up, Atwell and his men worked their way high enough to be out of reach of sudden attack. At last they came around to the beast's side. The crucial moment had arrived.

As the beast reared up suspiciously, they threw down the first bomb, under its feet. The impact of landing touched off the fulminate and fuel. The beast rocked back, but when the smoke cleared, it bellowed angrily and scrambled at the base of the pyramid, as though to climb. Captain Atwell hastily yet carefully tossed the second bomb. It exploded against the side of the pyramid, chipping off rock and hurling the beast back by concussion.

But it was unhurt! Any Earth beast, even the mightiest dinosaur, would have been mortally wounded. This Mercurian monster had lost only a few scales. We all realized for the first time how really impregnable it was. In a sense it was mineral life. Beside it, organic life was soft jelly, and their weapons and forces little puffs of nothingness. It had spawned and lived where furnace heat and volcanic forces reigned.

One bomb was left. If that failed, all eight men would be marooned. Some could get away by separating, but only at the loss of other lives.

Back in the ship, Karsen and I could hear the beast's roar through the helmet radio system. It sounded like the deep-throated blast of an ocean liner's steam whistle. And then we heard a new sound—dull, heavy thumps that rattled the radio speaker!

CAPTAIN ATWELL reported that these were caused by the beast. Now utterly berserk, it threw its titanic body against the pyramid, trying to batter it down. And it might. None of us was skeptical of that. Swinerton's voice breathed in awe:

"Being literally an animate steam engine, it probably develops a thousand-horse-power!"

Robertson made an additional comment.

"The Martian inscriptions at the base include this beast, represented

with mathematical symbols and an outline of its dragon shape. They show it being destroyed, by blasting its head away completely. The ancient Martians must have set up big guns to do it."

There was a sharp exclamation suddenly, from Captain Atwell.

"Swinerton!" he called. "You fool—"

"Let go!" Swinerton yelled. "Only hope. The rest of you can escape. I caused all this."

But several of the others grabbed Swinerton and held him back. Sacrificing a life would be done only as a last resort.

Karsen and I held our breaths. We heard Ling's voice murmur softly.

"Blowing its head away—"

Ling was already scrambling down the pyramid steps, while the rest were still struggling with the almost insane Swinerton. Ling carried the last bomb! Captain Atwell shouted, but there was no answer from Ling. It was too late to catch him.

Captain Atwell described Ling calmly descending toward the beast. It had launched its tremendous bulk again at the structure, shaking its foundations. Then it spied the tiny mite and stretched its serpentine neck toward him.

Ling faced the dragon, a lone man against a mighty beast. What kind of courage that took, we can't guess. The dragon had been his childhood terror.

Von Zell's choked voice came from his helmet radio.

"And I called him a coward!"

Ling's idea was sublimely simple. He waited till the ferocious saw-edged jaws lunged for him. The dragon's live-steam breath snorted out at him. He threw the bomb straight between those gaping jaws. The first touch of hot steam within would set off the sensitive fulminate. The dragon's head would be blown apart—and Ling with it. . . .

Karsen and I heard the muffled explosion in our radio. It was followed by a curious sound, almost like the breaking of dishes. It was the creature's hard, silicic tissue flying to shreds. Then there was silence.

"Well," came Captain Atwell's low voice, "that did the dragon in, all right."

"Ling, too," murmured von Zell. "Brave Ling."

And all of us, at that moment, knew we had done the quiet, soft-voiced Chinese a deep injustice. He had conquered more than the beast. He had conquered fear. Captain Atwell spoke again, in bitter self-reproach.

"A life lost, after all—" But he was interrupted.

"Ling!" It was a startled exclamation from all of them. Ling's voice came, panting from the climb.

"Well, let's get back to the ship. Confucius has said: 'He who leaps fast, lives to leap again.'"

Ling had had about three seconds to scuttle away along the pyramid ledge, before the explosion. Crouching against the stone, he had been untouched, except for a pelting of silicic chips. The men hadn't seen him crouching out of sight.

We're all overjoyed that he escaped, Captain Atwell particularly.

"Well, men," he said, with more feeling than his voice betrayed. "We haven't lost a life yet on Mercury. And we're not going to, as long as we watch out for the unexpected."

SIXTY-FOURTH Day (noon).

The unexpected came!

The men went a mile from the pyramid, toward the ship, and then suddenly ran back. Captain Atwell told us why. A pouring flood of what seemed to be molten metal thundered down from the side. Barely reaching the pyramid in time, they once more scrambled up and watched. All the regions around them was filling like a lake.

But it wasn't molten metal—just mercury. A whole glacier of it had been frozen solid five miles away, touching the frigid Night Side. As the slow libration exposed it to the warmer rays of the Sun, it assumed the liquid form.

Picture it as we see it. Cubic miles of silvery metal are flooding all the region around us—almost an ocean of it. Atwell and his seven men are once

again trapped on the pyramid, watching the level slowly rise.

Of all things unexpected, it is ironic that the namesake metal of Mercury should threaten us!

It's a real threat. The flowing mercury surrounded our ship. All ordinary metals float on Mercury, with its high density. Thus our ship was picked up like a cork and whirled off. Karsen and I felt as though we were on the stormiest sea ever known.

The mercury flood carried us out toward the Day Side, miles and miles. It has just beached us, high and dry, on a metal hillside. We have the refrigeration unit going full blast. We're a hundred miles apart. Atwell and the others are on the pyramid, Karsen and I on the blazing Day Side. Our problem is to get together.

The engine was damaged by the violent knocking around. Karsen is looking it over frantically. I have a broken arm. As soon as possible, we'll make

repairs and fly the ship to the pyramid, so we can at least be together.

There is one disturbing thought. Our buried fuel reserves are under that lake of mercury! How will we ever get it out, for our return trip to Earth?

THIS will be our final contact. Your last signal came through so faintly, I doubt whether this is reaching you. We will send the usual high-powered click signal twice a day, noon and midnight, Greenwich Earth time.

We will resume contact in three months, if all is well. If we have somehow rescued our cached fuel, we'll make the return at that conjunction. Our only consolation is that we haven't lost a life—yet.

Good luck, Mars Expedition Two! Hope you haven't had any trouble. Au revoir, Earth!

Mercury Expedition Number One signing off.

Announcing THE CHICAGO 1940 WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION



Time: 10 A.M., Sunday and Monday, September 1st and 2nd, 1940.

Place: Hotel Chicagoan, Madison Street, Chicago, Ill.

EVENTS

Do you want to meet the nation's outstanding science fiction authors, hear what such men as Eando Binder, Robert Moore Williams, Edward Elmer Smith, Ph.D., Ralph Milne Farley, and many others have to say regarding the future of fantasy?

Do you want to attend the "Science Fiction Masquerade," a gala affair in which fans, authors, artists, and editors will dress up in s-f costumes as characters out of famous fantasy stories?

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