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FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

FANTASTIC

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STORY MAGAZINE

featuring:
THE LAWS OF CHANCE
A Novel
by Murray Leinster
**THE CAVERN OF
THE SHINING POOL**
by Arthur Leo Zagat
SPRING 25c



PUBLICATION

FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

VOL. 7, No. 1
SPRING ISSUE

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N. L. PINES, Publisher; ED ROFHEART, Art Director
SAMUEL MINES, Editor; PAT JONES, Assistant Editor

FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE published quarterly and copyright 1954 by Best Books, Inc., 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Subscription: (12 issues), \$3.00; single copies, \$.25; foreign postage extra. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Kokomo, Ind. Material is submitted at risk of the sender and must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All characters in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Spring, 1954. Printed in the U.S.A.



Illustration by
PAUL ORBAN

CARGO TO MARS

By **WALTER H. MULSTAY**

*Only the waiting colonists
on Mars knew why the
courageous space captain
didn't abandon his ship*

GOOD evening System viewers! This is your trideo reporter, Danny Patter, again bringing you the latest news of the entire System. And tonight, from the tiny base on Eros comes the fragmentary story of disaster in space. Survivors tell the tale of a cargo ship, the *Reliance*, and its captain, Terence Hector. In the short time since the story

broke your reporter has fitted the pieces together and the result is another Danny Patter space scoop. We'll keep you posted as the facts come in.

"As far as we now know, an ancient cargo ship, the *Reliance*, ran into an uncharted swarm of meteorites on its return trip from Earth to Mars. All drive rockets were smashed beyond repair and the ship was punctured in over a hundred places. No section escaped severe damage except the reinforced hold where cargo was stored. Amazingly enough, no casualties were suffered in the initial collision. All hands climbed into space gear and at Captain Hector's command manned the lifeboats. At this time nine of the thirteen boats have made a safe landing at Eros base, and it is expected that the remaining four will arrive there shortly without incident.

"However, although all concerned are relieved at the escape operation's success, the remarkable fact stands out that Captain Hector himself has not left the ship. Despite the almost complete destruction of the *Reliance*—experts claim the ship itself would not be worth salvage—Captain Terence Hector has elected to stay at the controls of his ship, a throwback to the ancient but time-honored tradition of Earth's own water-going skippers.

"With high respect for the courage of Captain Hector, your System reporter cannot shake the feeling that there is something deeper than meets the eye in this action. In this advanced age a captain does not go down with his ship. We have discovered that Captain Hector has not completely abandoned chance of escape. One lifeboat was left behind for him when and if he decides to leave the *Reliance*. Taking this into consideration, and recognizing the *Reliance* for the derelict it is, it would seem that the cargo must be of extremely high value to cause such a risk of life on Captain Hector's part. As of now your reporter does not know what that cargo is, but he will endeavor to discover its nature before the next broadcast.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, watch your screens as we take you to Eros where 'Operation Search' is underway for the four missing lifeboats. You will see on your screen. . . .

THE *Reliance* hung pitted and dead, a black blemish on the cold brilliance of space. The shattered hulk swung on a long, slow orbit around the bloodshot orb of Mars half a million miles away. In time, unless the ship were salvaged, the orbit would change—a fraction of a degree at a time—until the *Reliance* either swung with increasing acceleration towards the Sun or plummeted into the corroded red dirt of the ancient planet itself.

Captain Hector, bleary-eyed with weariness after a thirty-six hour battle to seal the control room airtight, rested a moment before tackling the intricate and painstaking task of rewiring the micro-wave transmitter, ripped and torn by a cloud of pea-sized particles that had swept the *Reliance's* bow.

The lines of his face were deep with tiredness, and in the dim light of the emergency torch he looked much older than his fifty years. It was a young man's game, hauling cargo in space. Even with new ships and protective screens it was still for the sturdy elasticity of youthful bodies and Captain Hector knew it.

Long ago the *Reliance's* high-carbon steel girders should have been melted down to form the firm foundation of a newer craft; and the slowing, middle-aged body of Captain Hector should have been relaxed on the shore of some tiny paradise of an Earthlake, where the yellow sun warmed by day and the stars twinkled by night.

But the asteroids furnished ore for steel in abundance and there was no need for scrap; and Captain Hector had transplanted to Mars when the first pioneers snapped the bond of Earth and swarmed like tiny motes throughout the System, seeking treasure, adventure and romance. There were those who could

not return to Earth, for the atmosphere of the mother planet, thick and absorbing, robbed them of the intimacy of space which drugged with its cold beauty. Captain Hector was one of them.

Now there was no time to reminisce, had he wanted to, of what should have been. There was no rancor in his mind over decisions of the past. The plastic blister on Mars was his home until natural death ended his spatial life. The resolve to make his last days free of self-reproach was stronger now than it had been in those terrifying moments when the meteor swarm battered the ship. He had a promise to fulfill, a promise to the colonists of Mars who had spent the savings from exhausting labors to make his trip possible. While there was oxygen to breathe he must do everything humanly possible to carry the cargo to colonists who hid their yearning and waited.

The long apprenticeship under Pete Cable guided his fingers through the maze of wires, snipping, splicing, soldering.

"Memorize," Pete had hammered at him week after week. "Know your ship by heart from stem to stern. The day may come when time will not allow the study of books and diagrams, and the pictures in your brain will be all that's left between success and failure, or life and death."

Slowly the maze dissolved into neatness and new tubes replaced those shattered in the collision. The tubes drew power from the emergency generator and glowed warmly in the dim light, and he lifted the microphone to his lips.

"Calling Lunar Station. The *Reliance* calling Lunar Station. Waiting."

The sharp, directional beam probed through space and in seconds an answering one flashed back.

"Lunar Station receiving the *Reliance*. Go ahead."

"Captain Terence Hector to Captain Peter Cable, Lunar Salvage. Waiting."

WHILE the contact was being put through he pondered upon the favor

he must ask of Pete and at the same time gave a prayer of thanks that Pete was the one to whom he could turn. Pete and his great tug *Samson*. Any salvage operation in space was a costly one, but rescue of the *Reliance* would bring—could bring—no profit for Lunar Salvage. The last dollars of Mars' aging colonists had paid in advance for the voyage and its cargo. There were no dollars left to pay for salvage, while the cargo, so precious to them, was worthless anywhere else in the System. Yet Pete would help him if it were possible, if the *Samson* could be brought out in time. The long years of working the planets, side by side at the controls, had created a bond of the deepest respect and admiration stronger than the ties of kinship. Pete would help, if there were time. . . .

"Lunar Station calling the *Reliance*. Waiting."

"Go ahead, Lunar Station."

"Contact Captain Peter Cable direct; repeated, contact Captain Peter Cable direct. Tug *Samson* now in sector five, one hundred thousand miles your station. Acknowledge. Waiting."

"Acknowledged. *Reliance* breaking off with Lunar Station."

Captain Hector chuckled with pleasure. He should have known Pete wouldn't sit around waiting to be asked.

With firm hands he swung the antenna. Hardly had the call left his lips when the speaker boomed.

"Terence, you old spacedog! How many times have I told you to stay out of messes like this? Never would listen to me. How are you besides scared stiff?"

"It's about time you got here with that heap," Hector flung back. "Gathering stardust again, I'll bet. It's a miracle you're still solvent."

"People like you keep me that way," said Cable. "What you hauling in that sieve?"

Hector told him and for a moment there was silence. Then Cable came back, seriously. "Can you hold out?"

"Yes."

"Good. We'll save her, Terence. See you at 1900."

Hector glanced at his chronometer. Three hours. Well, if anyone could do it Pete was the one. Patiently he checked the mass of temporary patches on the control room bulkheads. Not until he was satisfied that they were as tight as he could make them did he fasten the plastic helmet and oxygen tank to his spacesuit and move into the airlock which separated the room from the rest of the ship. With a new sense of security he climbed back into the cargo hold to examine the precious crates.

SOMEHOW it would all be taken to Mars. The positive promise of the *Samson's* great bulk hurtling through space a few thousand miles away made that hope possible. Captain Hector did not think of himself and Pete as two old men battling the forces of space to bring a kernel of happiness to other old men. He did not think that the two aging men could have been seated in comfortable homes vicariously enjoying the heroic exploits of younger men through the realistic medium of trideo screens. . . .

"Good evening System viewers! This is your trideo reporter, Danny Patter, bringing you the latest reports on the *Reliance* which only two days ago collided with a meteor swarm and was smashed into a drifting derelict.

"At 1900 tonight, only 30 minutes from now, the powerful tug *Samson*, piloted by the able space master, Captain Peter Cable, will reach the disabled *Reliance*. Immediately an attempt will be made to take the *Reliance* in tow by means of the magnetic-field grapple recently perfected by Captain Cable.

"Under the old magnetic grappling method it was necessary to fasten the heavy towing cable directly to the disabled ship. This resulted in wrenching and straining of the hull. A ship as severely weakened as the *Reliance* probably would not have survived rescue attempts.

"However, using the newly-developed

field method, it is now possible to build a strong towline of magnetic force between the two ships with little or no strain at all. This is accomplished by building the towline of force bit by bit while the ships gradually adjust themselves to each other's influence. When this operation is completed, the *Reliance* will be towed to Eros, where, because of the planetoid's minute gravitation, a landing can safely be made.

The question still remains: *why is this operation taking place?* Your reporter has been met with blank faces and tight lips whenever the question of the *Reliance's* cargo has been raised. The only logical answer, that it's plutonium to run the Mars colony's gigantic power plants is, unfortunately, not substantiated by informed sources. Experts agree that there is enough plutonium on Mars to continue generating power beyond the lifetime of the present colonists. And, as we know, there have been no new settlers on Mars for the past half century.

"The colonists of Mars have all the possible conveniences of life with which to enjoy a quiet, comfortable old age. Atomic power has given them food, clothing, and shelter. Intelligent use of the atom has given them green fields, flowers, and forests which flourish beneath the thousand square mile bubble protecting the entire colony against the vacuum of space.

"Whatever the reason behind it, we wish captains Hector and Cable success in their heroic salvage operations. Your System reporter also wishes to remind viewers that a special broadcast is being prepared to bring you first hand the landing of the *Samson* and *Reliance* on Eros.

"We hope also at that time to be able to present to you the courageous captains of the two ships in a direct broadcast to Earth.

"Now, once more to Eros base where air network experts will outline the technical aspects of the landing. It is an extremely delicate operation. . . ."

"Ready, Terence?"

"Ready, Pete."

"All right, here goes the power."

The control room deck trembled slightly as the magnetic beam slowly focused on the bow of the *Reliance*.

"Feel it?" asked Captain Cable.

"Like the caress of a mother's hand, Pete."

"The same. Might as well relax, now. It will be some time before we can build up enough for the tow. Give me a call if anything goes wrong."

WHILE the magnetic bond between the two ships strengthened, Captain Hector watched Mars turning slowly on its axis, the sun glinting on the massive bubble. A round, green emerald vivid against the reddish sand, it had grown, through the decades, from a tiny encampment of explorers' huts to a fertile continent thriving on the transmuted elements of the solid sea around it.

Dimly, he remembered the colony as he had first seen it—twenty years after the struggling settlement had been erected—a large, clear roof of strong, resilient plastic (only a fraction of its present size) covering the bare, dry soil. He recalled the individual hemispheres of varied colors, like a boy's collection of aggies half covered in a box of sand; the colonists called them "home." He remembered, too, the great, gaping hole gouged in the planet's surface where foundations for the immense atomic center had been under construction.

They were all young, then, with the enthusiasm and strength of youth to match their high ideals. Mars, not Earth, would be the center of trade in the Solar System. With its lesser gravity and thin atmosphere, the colony spaceport would become great. Perhaps, in time, it might even be the stepping stone to the stars themselves. And then the final crushing blow without warning. That same lack of atmosphere which could make Mars the home of the largest trading fleet ever known to man banished once and for all the deeply etched hopes of those who

sought the freedom of space.

The enigma of cosmic rays. Deadly, invisible bullets passed effortlessly through the thin-skinned ships, battered the unprotected planet, thrust deep into the bodies of men and women canceling the genes of future life.

They had gone on because there was nothing left to do. There were no bridges over which to return to the promise of Earth. Those who had faced the menace of space with devil-may-care optimism to fill the System with the noise of trade, the hum of life, the cry of children at play, sank beneath the heavy gloom of their own reversed hopes. There would be no children. There would be no sons for whom to work, build, die.

And when they were at the deepest ebb of disappointment, the crushing blow fell. From the cloudbanks of Earth swept a fleet of ships, proud and swift, slashing through space with the high velocity of atomic-powered jets and boasting screens which flipped aside the deadly cosmic rays.

There was no longer any need for a base on Mars.

With only the spectacle of space for company, space which clutched at them with unrelenting hands, they settled down to make the slowly passing years as comfortable as they were able.

"Let us create a paradise on Mars," they cried, "which will be the envy of Earth!"

Each gave all that he had in time, sweat and savings. The great atomic center was completed and the colony expanded hopefully once more.

"Room for all" became the byword, and the bubble widened until it encompassed a thousand square miles. A powerful protective screen went up and they laughed—too late—at cosmic particles. Gardens, green fields, forests, gemlike lakes—all luxuriant in the clear, exactly-controlled atmosphere.

But there were limits to what atomic power could do—and the treasury dripped away the last dollars; dollars which could not be replenished for there

was no trade and few tourists. Paradise created not envy but sympathy.

"Come back to Earth and we will entertain you," the people of the Mother Planet said, "but do not expect us to waste time with that which life itself scorns."

That had been long ago. Finally there came the great meeting and the colonists pressed the cherished, worn dollars, saved for the rainy day which could never come, into Captain Hector's palm, not even attempting to conceal the pleading in their eyes.

"Godspeed, and bring your cargo to us safely," they whispered.

NOW they waited, a paltry half-million miles away, for the treasure that the space they loved had nearly snatched from their grasp.

Captain Hector turned his eyes from the planet and pressed the microphone button.

"How's it going, Pete?"

"We've been underway for the last ten minutes, you old day-dreamer. Look out the forward plate."

A thousand yards ahead the *Samson's* stern jets glowed faintly, at first, then brighter with increased power. Hector's hand rested more firmly against the steel rim of the bow viewplate as each second added weight to his body. Again there was nothing for him to do except pray that Pete's expert judgement kept the situation under control.

Hours later he heard the welcome words.

"Eros dead ahead, Terence."

Sunlight flashed on the planetoid and Hector crossed his fingers. The coming hour would tell. In the next instant the *Reliance's* bow pitched wildly and he clutched at handholds to keep from being thrown against the steel deck.

"Terence, are you all right?"

"Okay here. What happened?"

"Meteorite disrupted the towline. I cut the power to ease the shock. Is she holding together?"

"She'll hold," said Hector, grimly.

"What now, Pete?"

"You're swinging in a wide loop back towards Mars. I'm already on your tail."

"Can you right us?"

"We'll try. Better put your suit on."

Hector climbed clumsily into the spacesuit and replaced the oxygen tank with a fresh one. He glimpsed the *Samson* as it lumbered by to starboard and moments later the *Reliance* bucked under the groping magnetic field. Air hissed rapidly from the control room as new seams opened and Hector snapped shut his helmet.

There was nothing he could do in the bow; he passed through the now useless airlock into the hold and flashed the beam of light from the torch along the rows of plastic cases. With the deck unsteady beneath his feet he began checking the air supply of each.

The *Reliance* and *Samson* nestled bow to stern on the immense landing apron of Eros base. Trucks ran back and forth in a steady stream between the two ships, transferring the *Reliance's* precious cargo to the *Samson's* storage rooms. From the broad window of the base's control tower, Captains Hector and Cable watched the operation rapidly approaching completion below. Behind them Danny Patter exhorted technicians to speed the synchronization of the tri-di cameras, anxiously checking and re-checking his chronometer as the minutes ticked away and broadcast time neared.

"All right, gentlemen," he said, calling to the two captains. "Two minutes to go. Will you take your places, please?"

CAPTAIN CABLE turned from the window and Hector followed him. Both took seats side by side at the table containing models of the *Samson* and the *Reliance*. Danny Patter sat slightly apart from them, but within the camera's field of view. He glanced again at his chronometer and signaled the technicians as he began:

"Good evening System viewers! This is your trideo reporter, Danny Patter,

who is privileged tonight to present, on my right, Captain Terence Hector, courageous skipper of the disabled cargo ship *Reliance* and, seated beside him, Captain Peter Cable, in command of the space-tug *Samson*, whose brilliant rescue of Captain Hector's ship will go down in the annals of space history.

"Captain Hector, I'm sure the System viewers would be highly interested in your story of what happened to you and your ship off Mars only a few days ago."

Hector quietly outlined the events of those dangerous hours up to and including the *Samson's* arrival on the scene.

"Thank you, Captain Terence Hector. Now, Captain Cable, perhaps you could demonstrate to the System viewers how you accomplished the rescue of the *Reliance*, especially after that critical moment when a meteorite cut the magnetic towline between the two ships."

Captain Cable, as matter-of-fact as Hector had been, demonstrated the rescue operation with scaled models.

"Thank you, Captain Peter Cable. Thank both of you for your first-hand reports of what actually happened to the *Reliance* out there in space."

Danny Patter glanced casually at the chronometer strapped to his wrist.

"We have a few moments left, gentlemen."

He lowered his voice and said, confidentially, "There has been considerable speculation as to the cargo the *Reliance* was carrying. It must be of immense value to have been worth your courageous rescue. Naturally, we don't expect you to break a confidence, but could you, gentlemen, give us some idea of what that valuable cargo is? Plutonium, platinum, rare gems for the colonists of Mars?"

Captains Cable and Hector looked at each other and simultaneously broke

into broad grins.

"Butterflies," murmured Cable.

Danny Patter was speechless.

"Bees," smiled Hector.

Danny Patter's face contorted.

"Grasshoppers."

"Fireflies."

"Crickets. Loud, cheerful crickets!"

"Birds. Sleek, sweet-singing—"

"Thank you, gentlemen," a flustered Danny Patter broke in. "Unfortunately our time is up. We're a little late, System viewers, so until tomorrow at our regular time. . . ."

They watched the Mars colonists, all of them aging but unbowed by the planet's slight gravity. Tall, spare men, with alert eyes dimmed through silent tears of thankfulness, tears hiding, for a moment, the deep loneliness for other life. One by one the jetcopters rose into the perfect air of the colony and swept away to the fields, the lakes, the forests, bearing their plastic crates.

The last plane dwindled in the distance and they shuffled their feet. The Mars colonists clustered in silent groups. Finally they began to drift away, back to their homes to wait hopefully for life to spread, for the sweet call of birds, shrill chirps, spots of radiant color fluttering over the green fields.

Slowly they moved away, the group faded. But one, whiter haired, the deep seams of age etching his hands and face, stopped; others stopped with him. He turned up his face in an attitude of rapt attention, cupping one hand to an ear. He was absorbed in the sheer effort of *listening*.

And in the deep silence that surrounded him he quavered, "I hear . . . I . . . hear . . . a . . . bird!"

Raising one trembling finger he pointed, smiling, to the sky. "I see a bird. Oh, thank God, I see a bird!"

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE LOTOS EATERS

A Remarkable Novelet by BOLLING BRANHAM