

Today Pluto Satellite III Station recorded one of the strangest messages ever received via wavecast ion beam. It is a tale in itself:

A Short-Short + by **LAWRENCE E. LARKEY**

Harris, Spaceman First Class, speaking.

Two things are uppermost in my mind at this time.

First, I now realize a long-dreamed-of ambition—but the realization brings small satisfaction. It is a hollow mockery. I could now, if I wished, wear upon my shoulder pads, the gleaming stars and spheres that only the space-commanders wear—nothing would be said about it. To speak into this microphone is normally considered a great honor and an important function. I feel neither pride nor joy.

Second, we shall soon know if the operation Dr. Tata performed three weeks ago on Beckner, Crewman Second Class, is a success. That is all-important. If it were a failure, there is little point in anything we do. Although the operation was delicate in the extreme, those of us who are still alive, have not given up hope, even though we know how slim the chances of success really are.

It is for that reason that I now indulge in this absurd wavecast—stand here and beam this message out into interstellar space at random. Of course, I fully realize, that the possibility that any intelligent being, let alone a man, will ever record this message is infinitesimal. In the distant, unguessed aeons to come, if any one should even find our dead ship, adrift amid the vastness of space, it would be truly remarkable. This wavecast beam will travel forever and ever. We would put our faith and prayers into it, except that we cannot tell anyone where we are, and it is doubtful if the beam could be traced.

The meteor ripped through our screens at least five Earth days ago and our precious air swooshed out. Men exploded like fish brought up from the bottom of the sea. My section was more fortunate than the rest. Our blood did not boil away, nor did our skin rupture. Only our more delicate organs suffered. Not all of the air escaped from the hospital ward where we were stationed, and the amount of blast and radiation was limited.

Thanks to the skill and ingenuity Dr. Tata displayed in this dire emergency, we can now converse with each other and hear in a limited sort of way. The man is undoubtedly a genius in his profession, but he has done all he can. *From here on out it is Beckner, Beckner, Beckner.*

We have food and heat, good air to breathe. The plants suffered little or no harm while the air was gone. The ship has automatically sealed off the damaged area, restored the air pressure and is still, mechanically, in operating order. Only, we are lost. We do not know where we are.

How much or how little we were deflected from our original course by the collision with the meteor we cannot determine. We have no way of computing our position—unless, perhaps, Beckner can.

Fate is strange. Beckner almost did not sail with us.

Space flights between suns are long, long flights. Not many men can endure the monotony.

Certainly the vast kaleidoscope of space is grand at first, but even the most beautiful flower would soon become commonplace if there were nothing else to see. The canopy of space is there all the time, and canned music grows boring, while movies are just movies, and games get on your nerves. Everything grows pointless. You eat to live and live to eat, and you wish there was some real work to do—and you long, above all else, for something to happen.

Dr. Tata had to have something to do. Beckner was the answer.

Beckner's eye affliction was beyond medical skill, at least so the specialists told him, but Dr. Tata thought there was hope. Beckner was not as enthusiastic as our ship's doctor—he had no reason to be hopeful, but he agreed, finally, to sail with us.

Dr. Tata performed one surgical operation after another, building up to the tying of optical nerves after all the transplanting was done. Finally he performed the last operation. Then he could only wait.

Right after the operation, the meteor struck.

Technically, such an accident should never have happened. Meteors should "bounce" off our hull, and they usually do. But this one did not. It must have been the angle at which it came at us, or maybe our force screen was at fault for an instant—there might have been a lag of power. Anything could have caused it. Perhaps we will never know. But the counteracted force caused a deflection, and threw us light-years off course. We have no pilot to chart our position. Each of us is capable, by training and skill, yet only Beckner can provide hope. So we wait.

The motors of our ship sing with power. We have enough food to wait even our entire lifetimes for rescue, but the odds against us are fantastic. Even if another meteor should penetrate our hull, the ship's pneumatic qualities probably would preserve us as before. The auxiliary power units would build up air pressure. *But that is not what frightens us.*

Each deflection must be corrected. And Dr. Tata and I cannot see. We can never see again to chart a new course, nor make a correction. Unlike Beckner, our eyes were unprotected. His were shielded with bandages.

You understand, Beckner is the only one of the entire crew that *may* ever see again.

(Illustration by Frank R. Paul)