

## MOONFALL

The end of Lunar Base could have been witnessed by roughly one half of Earth's population. Had the event been advertised in advance it would have been. But even MOONCOM, who were on the spot, could not have foreseen what was to be the finish of the marred and tarnished dream. For some hours before the climax, until they were closed forever, MOONCOM's radio channels to and from Earth were overburdened with reports, instructions, orders and counter-orders. But everything was in code. Nothing was allowed to leak out to the public.

Few, if any, of the astronomers saw it, although the Moon was full and the night abnormally clear all over the world. What need for them to train their telescopes on the satellite when exploring parties had already ranged far over both seen and unseen hemispheres? Few of those out in the open by reason either of duty or of inclination saw it. Policemen shone their torches into dark shadows and did not look up to the sky. Lovers looked into each other's eyes. Watch-officers on the bridges of surface ships either scanned the horizon or peered at the illuminated dials of instruments. Meteorologists were too busy plotting their charts to go outside to see what the weather was like, except for those few that were outside reading gauges and meters.

Only in and around CINCWHEM H.Q. were all eyes turned moonwards, where all instruments, from astronomical telescopes to opera glasses, focussed on the shining, silvery surface of the full moon. It is said —although the story may be apocryphal — that a humble Radar Mechanic Fourth Class, on seeing the distant, brief yet intolerable glare, exclaimed, "Gripes! What 'ave the silly buggers done now?"

Four days after the disaster the moonship Selenite IV dropped down gingerly to a landing about three miles to the west of what was left of MOONCOM H.Q. Her Captain sent a party of six men, under his First Lieutenant, to investigate. They were armed — three of the men carrying bazookas and all six, as well as the officer, supplied with the stud-triggered machine pistols that could be operated effectively even though the users were wearing heavy gloves. They had with them a Geiger counter. The talker kept a continual stream of information flowing back to those in the ship by means of his suit radio.

At first the information was of a routine character. As the party approached the wreckage of the radio station, however, the speaker's voice tensed, stammered with emotion. "The station's had it," he said "There are three bodies, flung clear. No-not blast. Not ... blast. Girders like ... like..." His gulp was audible in the earphones of all those listening. "Like half-chewed celery."

"Number One," came the Captain's sharp, authoritative voice. "Is that correct?"

"That is correct, sir. Shall I tell the talker to carry on?"

"Yes, carry on."

"Carry on."

"Ay, ay, sir. Carry on, sir, Wreckage twisted, broken—not fused. One ... body ... One body . trampled. Marks in the dust. Big. Footprints."

"How big?" asked the Captain.

"Big, sir. First Lieutenant, sir, what would you say?"

"All of six feet," said the First Lieutenant. "And two sets. Heading towards the Bomb Room. Carry on, Talker."

"Geiger reading — still Moon normal. Pieces of porcelain insulators —broken, thrown down in dust. Almost as though ... as though . . ."

"As though what, man?"

"As though spat out Tractor here. Cabin smashed in. Gun ripped out . . . Barrel left Breech mechanism . . . gone . . ."

"Hold, there!" The Captain's voice crackled through the helmet phones of the landing party. "Maintain radio silence. Listen." Then, after a long pause, "It's too faint here. What do you hear, Number One?"

"A ... voice, sir. A woman's voice," he said, sharply, "All right. We hear you. Where are you?"

"Where is she?" barked the captain.

"Isolation Hospital, sir. Shall we bring her in?"

"Of course. Wait. Is she a patient?"

"I'll ask, sir ... No, sir. Nurse. She has a spacesuit, but air almost exhausted."

"Do I have to remind you that all of you carry spare tanks? Bring her in."

"Yes, sir."

It was a long time before she could tell her story. She was suffering from hunger, thirst and near suffocation. The Isolation Hospital had not been in use at the time of the disaster, and neither she nor the man who had taken refuge with her there had been able to start the self-contained air-conditioning unit. She was suffering—above all—from shock. She had seen her fellow humans helpless before the onset of alien life in a world where no life — other than a few species of plants that were more like crystals than living beings — was known to exist. She had seen the tall masts of the radio station torn down and the pressure sphere crumpled like an empty eggshell. She had seen the stout airlock doors of the Base burst in like so much paper.

At last she talked. She lay, pale and haggard, in her cot in the Captain's cabin, the Surgeon every now and again giving her a sip of restorative. The Captain was there, of course, and his First Lieutenant, and one of the ratings who had a knowledge of shorthand. A recording machine hummed quietly.

She could not say where the invaders — if invaders they were — had come from. "I think they belonged here," she said. "I could feel it, somehow. And they were puzzled to find us here, and angry when we started shooting at them. And they were hungry, hungry. John — he was with me in the Hospital, he was one of the doctors — said that they must have a fantastic metabolism, said that he'd give his life to be able to dissect one of them ... And ... and he gave his life. I told him to stay with me and wait. I told him! I told him!"

"Steady," said the Surgeon gently. "Have another sip of this."

She could not say where the strange beings had come from, but it seemed certain that they were first sighted by the crew of a tractor carrying out a survey in the vicinity of Copernicus. And it was in the vicinity of Copernicus, too, as well as in other localities, that considerable test drillings had been carried out, in the early days of the Base, in the hopes of discovering metals in worthwhile quantities. No metals whatsoever had been found.

It was by one of the old drillings, however, that the tractor crew had sighted what they had at first taken for two rockets standing on stilted landing gear. Their report had been relayed to Base — as, at the time, no line of sight communication was possible between the tractor and its headquarters — by ARTSAT II. The report was believed until a panicky voice had babbled that it wasn't rockets, that it was giants, two huge, metal giants, and that they were chasing the tractor. It seemed to those listening that the tractor crew had gone mad. Mad they might have been, but one thing was certain — during the chase, real or imaginary, the vehicle had plunged into a deep crevasse.

But MOONCOM had to investigate any threat, real or imaginary, to its security. One of the armed tractors was equipped and sent out, with orders to investigate but not to fight unless attacked. This tractor's crew, like the survey men, sent incredible messages about silver giants. This tractor's crew, unlike the surveymen, got back.

"We didn't believe it," said the girl. "We couldn't believe it. We knew, we knew, that nobody else had ever put a rocket on the Moon, had never even established a Space Station. Even so — the first reports about the two rockets made some kind of sense. All the other reports didn't.

"I shouldn't have been out, I know. All personnel had been recalled. But I'd been out walking with John, looking for a moonflower to send home to my people. We heard the recall on our suit radios, but we didn't take it seriously. We dawdled. And then—there was the tractor coming over the ridge, the dust rising in front of it like the bow of a ship. Just a machine —but it looked as scared as the poor devils inside it. John and I just stood and watched, and all the time on the radio there was the clanging of alarm bells and the Old Man barking 'Action Stations! Action Stations!'

"It came over the ridge, skidded half sideways down the slope, and almost cannoned into the stilts of the radio station. It turned there, and we saw the snout of its gun lifting and wavering, looking for a target.

"It didn't have long to wait. The giants came, the two of them. One of them

was a man—the other a woman. Impossible? Yes, I know, I know. But I'm telling you what I saw. All gleaming metal they were, but the shape of them was human. Yes — I know that they were a man and woman, just as I know that you're men and I'm a woman.

"The tractor gun steadied. We didn't hear anything, of course, but we saw the orange flame, the smoke, and we saw the flash when the first shell burst between the woman's breasts. It staggered her, and the man put out a shining arm to support her. The next shell hit his shoulder. The other missed—the giants were moving too fast to make a good target, weaving as they ran.

"The tractor started to swing again, half hidden by the smother of dust raised by its tracks. I think that its crew intended to run the giants off from Base H.Q. But the man kicked it, and it went over on its side, its tracks going around and around uselessly. It was like a stupid insect on its back.

"They walked up to the radio station then, quite calmly. The woman put out just one hand, caught hold of one of the stilts. It pulled away from its foundations, from the pressure sphere, like a ... like a stick of candy. The woman broke it in two. She gave half of it to the man."

"And then?" prompted the Surgeon.

"They have a crazy metabolism," said the girl. "They ... they eat metal. The first taste of it seemed to break all their restraints. They tore into the radio house like starving dogs into a plateful of bones. No — that's not right. They were hungry. They were starving — yet all the time were—considerate. Of each other"

"They didn't show much consideration for our men," the Captain snapped.

"But they were hungry" said the girl. "And we'd shot at them, tried to kill them. And when John and I saw the wreck of the radio house we wanted to kill them, too. But our job, our action station, was in Casualty. We started to creep towards the airlock doors, scared of making any movement that would attract the attention of the giants. My knees were as weak as water and I was sick inside my helmet and all I could think of was one of those huge feet crushing me like a beetle.

"The airlock doors opened long before we got to them. They opened, and they slammed shut again. Twelve of the men ran out, carrying half a dozen heavy bazookas. They were fast—but they weren't fast enough. The giant man threw the ten feet or so of girder he was holding and it smashed the men down into the pumice dust. We could see the blood from where we were.

"And then, almost casually, the giants strolled over to the airlock.

"We watched them bending down, examining the doors with interest. As casually as they had approached them, they kicked them in. They pulled the wreckage clear, kicked in the inner doors as easily as they had done the outer ones. It was like watching children destroying an ant hill. Those inside the Base who had had time to get into their spacesuits came pouring out, carrying all kinds of weapons.

"Down!" John was saying. 'Down. Play dead. It's our only chance'. So we grovelled down in that damned dust, not daring to move a limb, watched the giants finish off what was left of our people. Then, almost as an afterthought, they went and kicked in the pressure cabin of the tractor —its engines were still working—and pulled out the bodies of the crew. After they'd looked at them for a little while they dropped them, started wandering around like kids in a strange garden. It must have been hours—it seemed like hours — before they drifted off in the direction of the Bomb Room. Herricks was there, and Pendray, and we warned them with our suit radios that the giants were coming their way. They said that they were going to detonate the bombs. I don't know what happened. Something must have gone wrong — or they just didn't get around to it."

"But they did," said the Captain. "They did. We could see the flash back on Earth."

"They didn't. Herricks and Pendray didn't."

"As soon as the coast was clear we ran for the Isolation Hospital. It seemed safe there, somehow, with walls round us and a roof over our heads and no windows to see the bodies and the wreckage. We sat there, waiting for the violent tremor that would tell us that the bombs had gone up. We waited and waited, and nothing happened, and we argued as to whether or not we should feel anything. We tried to raise Herricks on our radio, or any other survivor, but the air was dead.

"Then John said, 'I have to go. I have to go and see what's happened.'

"No; I told him. 'No.'

"I must,' he said.

"Then I'll come with you,' I told him.

"But he wouldn't have that. 'You just sit here,' he said 'and listen. You can't take notes — not in those gloves — but I know what a memory you've got. Just sit and listen.'

"He talked all the way to the Bomb Room. He said that the giants hadn't gone straight there, but had followed, as far as he could judge by their footprints, a very erratic path. But John kept on straight for the Bomb Room.

"You know what it's like—or what it was like. It was the only structure— or cave — on the Moon with giant-sized doors. The doors, as usual, had been kicked in. John edged up to them, cautiously, and saw that some sort of booby trap with wires had been arranged but, obviously, had failed to work. He didn't see anything of Herricks or Pendray.

"It was the first time that he'd been in the Bomb Room. There was enough light for him to find his way around, the emergency lamps were on. His voice came weak and tinny over the helmet phones. 'I'm slinking from pillar to pillar,' he said, 'keeping in the shadows. Oh. These can't be pillars— must be the bombs. Plutonium? Radiation? Rather too late, now, to worry about

"He found the giants, at last. They didn't see him. He found them, standing under the yellow lights, towering above the pillars that were the bombs. He said that they shone like gold. 'A golden man and a golden woman,' he said. 'I wish that we hadn't fought. I wish that we had met them as friends...: He said something about it being impossible to believe that such beings were in any way evil, 'They fought for food,' he whispered. 'In self defence. We would do the same. Suspended animation, it must have been. The last crumbs of metal in their world gone, and cannibalism utterly repugnant. Suspended animation — and then we come, and somehow wake them. We come — rich in the stuff that is life to them ...

"He crouched there, in the shadow of one of the bombs, watching them. He saw, he told me, the golden woman pick up one of the cylinders with miraculous ease. And she broke it, and she peeled it, as I would peel an orange. She ripped away the steel, or whatever it was, and handed a sphere, a ball, a ball with a hole through it, to her mate. From the other end of the bomb she took a cylinder of the same metal as the ball. It was the plutonium, John said. He said that they were going to eat the plutonium. It was then that he cried that he'd sell his soul for a chance to take them apart, to see what made them tick.

"He was quiet for a long time. I thought that they'd got him. I was afraid. I could have screamed with joy when I heard his voice again. And I almost laughed, so embarrassed it was, he was a scientist, and he knew the facts of life — but, in some things, he was very prudish.

"'Jenny,' he said 'Jenny ... and I could feel him blushing. 'Don't listen to this unless you want to. It's ...'

"'It's what?'

"'Well ... I'm not a voyeur, don't think that, please. I'm watching this as a scientist ...'

"'What are you watching?'

"'They're so human, damn them. They shouldn't be, they can't be, but they are. Tin giants, animated statues, but ... Look at it this way. They've been dead, to all intents and purposes, since before the Pyramids were built, in all probability. Something's started them ticking again. They've found food. They've fought and beaten their enemies. What remains?'

"'What remains?' he asked again.

"'Reproduction,' I said bluntly. I wish that I'd been less blunt, a little kinder.

"'Yes,' he whispered. 'Yes. If only they weren't so damned human!' "He was silent for a while. I'm no telepath, but I could sense his shame and embarrassment as he watched them ... embracing.

"Then suddenly, before the explosion, he screamed two words." "What were they?" asked the Captain urgently.

"Critical Mass," she said.