



The Planetoid of Peril
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About Ernst:

Paul Frederick Ernst (1899 - 1985) was an American pulp fiction writer. He is best known as the author of the original 24 "Avenger" novels, published by Street and Smith Publications under the house name Kenneth Robeson.

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- *The Red Hell of Jupiter* (1931)
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Harley 2Q14N20 stopped for a moment outside the great dome of the Celestial Developments Company. Moodily he stared at their asteroid development chart. It showed, as was to be expected, the pick of the latest asteroid subdivision projects: the Celestial Developments Company, established far back in 2045, would handle none but the very best. Small chance of his finding anything here!

However, as he gazed at the chart, hope came suddenly to his face, and his heart beat high under his sapphire blue tunic. There was an asteroid left for sale there—one blank space among the myriad, pink-lettered Sold symbols. Could it be that here was the chance he had been hunting so desperately?

He bent closer, to read the description of the sphere, and the hope faded gradually from his countenance. According to its orbit and location, and the spectroscopic table of its mineral resources, it was a choice planetoid indeed. Of course such a rich little sphere, listed for sale by the luxurious Celestial Developments Company, would cost far more than he could ever rake together to pay for an asteroid.

Shaking his head, he adjusted his gravity regulator to give him about a pound and a half of weight, and started to float on. Then, his lips twisting at his own absurd hopefulness, he stopped again; and after another moment of indecision turned into the archway that led to the concern's great main office. After all, it wouldn't hurt to inquire the price, even though he knew in advance it would be beyond his humble means.

A youngster in the pale green of the one-bar neophyte in business promptly glided toward him.

"Something for you to-day, sir?" he asked politely.

"Yes," said Harley. "I'm looking around for a planetoid; want to get a place of my own out a way from Earth. Something, you understand, that may turn out to be a profitable investment as well as furnishing an exclusive home-site. I see on your chart that you have a sphere left for sale, in the Red Belt, so I came in to ask about it."

"Ah, you mean asteroid Z-40," said the youngster, gazing with envious respect at the ten-bar insignia, with the crossed Sco drills, that proclaimed Harley to be a mining engineer of the highest rank. "Yes, that is still for sale. A splendid sphere, sir; and listed at a remarkably low figure. Half a million dollars."

"Half a million dollars!" exclaimed Harley. It was an incredibly small sum: scarcely the yearly salary of an unskilled laborer. "Are you sure that's right?"

"Yes, that's the correct figure. Down payment of a third, and the remaining two thirds to be paid out of the exploitation profits—"

Here the conversation was interrupted by an elderly, grey-haired man with the six-bar dollar-mark insignia of a business executive on his purple tunic. He had been standing nearby, and at the mention of asteroid Z-40 had looked up alertly. He glided to the two with a frown on his forehead, and spoke a few curt words to the neophyte, who slunk away.

"Sorry, sir," he said to Harley. "Z-40 isn't for sale."

"But your young man just told me that it was," replied Hartley, loath to give up what had begun to look like an almost unbelievable bargain.

"He was mistaken. It's not on the market. It isn't habitable, you see."

"What's wrong—hasn't it an atmosphere?"

"Oh, yes. One that is exceptionally rich in oxygen, as is true of all the spheres we handle. With a late model oxygen concentrator, one would have no trouble at all existing there."

"Is its speed of revolution too great?"

"Not at all. The days are nearly three hours long: annoying till you get used to it, but nothing like the inferior asteroids of the Mars Company where days and nights are less than ten minutes in duration."

"Well, is it barren, then? No minerals of value? No vegetation?"

"The spectroscope shows plenty of metals, including heavy radium deposits. The vegetation is as luxuriant as that of semi-tropic Earth."

"Then why in the name of Betelgeuse," said Harley, exasperated, "won't you sell the place to me? It's exactly what I've been looking for, and what I'd despaired of finding at my price."

"I'm forbidden to tell why it isn't for sale," said the executive, starting to float off. "It might hurt our business, reputation if the truth about that bit of our celestial properties became widely known—Oh, disintegrate it all! Why wasn't the thing erased from the chart weeks ago!"

"Wait a minute." Harley caught his arm and detained him. "You've gone too far to back out now. I'm too eager to find some such place as your Z-40 to be thrown off the subject like a child. *Why* isn't it for sale?"

The man tightened his lips as though to refuse to answer, then shrugged.

"I'll tell you," he said at last. "But I beg of you to keep it confidential. If some of our investors on neighboring asteroids ever found out about the peril adjoining them on Z-40, they'd probably insist on having their money back."

He led the way to a more secluded spot under the big dome, and spoke in a low tone, with many a glance over his shoulder to see if anyone were within earshot.

"Z-40 is an exceptionally fine bit of property. It is commodious; about twenty miles in diameter. Its internal heat is such that it has a delightful climate in spite of the extreme rarity of atmosphere common to even the best of asteroids. It has a small lake; in fact it has about everything a man could want. Yet, as I said, it is uninhabitable."

His voice sank still lower.

"You see, sir, there's already a tenant on that sphere, a tenant that was in possession long before the Celestial Developments Company was organized. And it's a tenant that can't be bought off or reasoned with. It's some sort of beast, powerful, ferocious, that makes it certain death for a man to try to land there."

"A beast?" echoed Harley. "What kind of a beast?"

"We don't know. In fact we hardly even know what it looks like. But from what little has been seen of it, it's clear that it is like no other specimen known to universal science. It's something enormous, some freak of animal creation that seems invulnerable to man's smaller weapons. And that is why we can't offer the place for sale. It would be suicide for anyone to try to make a home there."

"*Has anyone ever tried it?*" asked Harley. "Any competent adventurer, I mean?"

"Yes. Twice we sold Z-40 before we realized that there was something terribly wrong with it. Both buyers were hardy, intrepid men. The first was never heard of after thirty-six hours on the asteroid. The second man managed to escape in his Blinco Dart, and came back to Earth to tell of a vast creature that had attacked him during one of the three-hour nights. His hair was white from the sight of it, and he's still in a sanitarium, slowly recovering from the nervous shock."

Harley frowned thoughtfully. "If this thing is more than a match for one man, why don't you send an armed band with heavy atomic guns and clear the asteroid by main force?"

"My dear sir, don't you suppose we've tried that? Twice we sent expensive expeditions to Z-40 to blow the animal off the face of the sphere, but neither expedition was able to find the thing, whatever it is. Possibly it has intelligence enough to hide if faced by overwhelming force. When the second expedition failed, we gave it up. Poor business to go further. Already, Z-40 has cost us more than we could clear from the sale of half a dozen planetoids."

For a long time Harley was silent. The Company was a hard headed, cold blooded concern. Anything that kept them from selling an asteroid must be terrible indeed.

His jaw set in a hard line. "You've been honest with me," he said at length. "I appreciate it. Just the same—I still want to buy Z-40. Maybe I can oust the present tenant. I'm pretty good with a ray-pistol."

"It would be poor policy for us to sell the asteroid. We don't want to become known as a firm that trades in globes on which it is fatal to land."

"Surely my fate is none of your worry?" urged Harley.

"The asteroid," began the executive with an air of finality, "is not for—"

"Man, it's *got* to be!" cried Harley. Then, with a perceptible effort he composed himself. "There's a reason. The reason is a girl. I'm a poor man, and she's heiress to fabulous—Well, frankly, she's the daughter of 3W28W12 himself!" The executive started at mention of that universally known number. "I don't want to be known as a fortune hunter; and my best bet is to find a potentially rich asteroid, cheap, and develop it—incidentally getting an exclusive estate for my bride and myself far out in space, away from the smoke and bustle of urban Earth. Z-40, save for the menace you say now has possession of it, seems to be just what I want. If I can clear it, it means the fulfillment of all my dreams. With that in view, do you think I'd hesitate to risk my neck?"

"No," said the executive slowly, looking at the younger man's powerful shoulders and square-set chin and resolute eyes. "I don't think you would. Well, so be it. I'd greatly prefer not to sell you Z-40. But if you want to sign an agreement that we're released of all blame or responsibility in case of your death, you can buy it."

"I'll sign any agreement you please," snapped Harley. "Here is a down payment of a hundred and seventy thousand dollars. My name is Harley; sign 2Q14N20; unmarried—though I hope to change that soon, if I live—occupation, mining engineer, ten-bar degree; age, thirty-four. Now draw me up a deed for Z-40, and see that I'm given a stellar call number on the switchboard of the Radivision Corporation. I'll drop around there later and get a receiving unit. Good day." And, adjusting his gravity regulator to lighten his weight to less than a pound, he catapulted out the archway.

Behind him a prosaic business executive snatched a moment from a busy day to indulge in a sentimental flight of fancy. He had read once of curious old-time beings called knights, who had undertaken to fight and slay fire-eating things called dragons for the sake of an almost outmoded emotion referred to as love. It occurred to him that this brusque man of

action might be compared to just such a being. He was undertaking to slay a dragon and win a castle for the daughter of 3W28W12—

The romantic thought was abruptly broken up by the numeral. It jarred so, somehow, that modern use of numbers instead of names, when thinking of sentimental passages of long ago. "The rose is fair; but in all the world there is no rose as fair as thou, my princess 3W28W12... ." No, it wouldn't do.

Cursing himself for a soft-headed fool, he went to deliver a stinging rebuke to somebody for not having blocked Z-40 off the asteroid chart weeks before.

"Harley 2Q14N20," recited the control assistant at Landon Field. "Destination, asteroid Z-40. Red Belt, arc 31.3470. Sights corrected, flight period twelve minutes, forty-eight seconds past nine o'clock. All set, sir?"

Harley nodded. He stepped inside the double shell of his new Blinco Dart—that small but excellent quantity-production craft that had entirely replaced the cumbersome space ships of a decade ago—and screwed down the man-hole lid. Then, with his hand on the gravity bar, he gazed out the rear panel, ready to throw the lever at the control assistant's signal.

The move was unthinkingly, mechanically made. Too many times had he gone through this process of being aimed by astronomical calculation, and launched into the heavens, to be much stirred by the wonder of it. The journey to Z-40 in the Dart was no more disquieting than, a century and a half ago, before the United States had fused together into one vast city, a journey from Chicago to Florida would have been in one of the inefficient gasoline-driven vehicles of that day.

All his thoughts were on his destination, and on a wonder as to what could be the nature of the thing that dwelt there.

He had just come from the sanitarium where the man who'd bought Z-40 before him was recovering from nervous exhaustion. He'd gone there to try to get first hand information about the creature the executive at the Celestial Developments Company had talked so vaguely of. And the tale the convalescent had told him of the thing on the asteroid was as fantastic as it was sketchy.

A tremendous, weirdly manlike creature looming in the dim night—a thing that seemed a part of the planetoid itself, fashioned from the very dirt and rock from which it had risen—a thing immune to the ray-pistol, that latest and deadliest of man-made small-arms—a thing that moved like a walking mountain and stared with terrible, stony eyes at its prey!

That was what the fellow said he had faintly made out in the darkness before his nerves had finally given way.

He had impressed Harley as being a capable kind of a person, too; not at all the sort to distort facts, nor to see imaginary figures in the night.

There was that matter of the stone splinter, however, which certainly argued that the wan, prematurely white-haired fellow was a little unbalanced, and hence not to be believed too implicitly. He'd handed it to Harley, and gravely declared it to be a bit of the monster's flesh.

"Why, it's only a piece of rock!" Harley had exclaimed before he could check himself.

"Did you ever see rock like it before?"

Turning it over in his hands, Harley had been forced to admit that he never had. It was of the texture and roughness of granite, but more heavily shot with quartz, or tridymite than any other granite he'd ever seen. It had a dull opalescent sheen, too. But it was rock, all right.

"It's a piece of the thing's hide," the man had told him. "It flaked off when it tried to pry open the man-hole cover of ray Dart. A moment after that I got Radivision arc directions from London Field, aimed my sights, and shot for Earth. It was a miracle I escaped."

"But surely your ray-pistol—" Harley had begun, preserving a discreet silence about the man's delusion concerning the stone splinter.

"I tell you it was useless as a toy! Never before have I seen any form of life that could stand up against a ray-gun. But *this* thing *did*!"

This was another statement Harley had accepted with a good deal of reservation. He had felt sure the weapon the man had used had a leak in the power chamber, or was in need of recharging, or something of the kind. For it had been conclusively proved that all organic matter withered and burned away under the impact of the Randchron ray.

Nevertheless, discounting heavily the convalescent's wild story, only a fool would have clung to a conviction that the menace on Z-40 was a trivial one. There was *something* on that asteroid, something larger and more deadly than Harley had ever heard of before in all his planetary wanderings.

He squared his shoulders. Whatever it was, he was about to face it, man against animal. He was reasonably certain his ray-gun would down anything on two legs or ten. If it didn't—well, there was nothing else that could; and he'd certainly provide a meal for the creature, assuming it ate human flesh... .

A mechanic tapped against the rear view panel to recall his wandering attention. The control assistant held up his hands, fingers outspread, to indicate that there were ten seconds left.

Harley's hand went to his throat, where was hung a locket—a lovely but useless trinket of the kind once much worn by Earth women—and his fingers tightened tenderly on it. It had belonged to Beatrice 3W28W12's great-great-grandmother, and Beatrice had given it to him as a token.

"With luck, my dear," he whispered aloud. "With luck... ."

There was a slight vibration. He threw the gravity bar over to the first notch. Earth dropped, plummet-like, away from him. He pushed the bar to the limit leg; and, at a rate of hundreds of miles a second, was repelled from Earth toward Z-40, and the thing that skulked there.

With a scarcely perceptible jar, he landed on the small sphere that, he hoped, was to be his future home. Before opening his man-hole lid, he went from panel to panel of the Dart and cautiously reconnoitered. He had elected to land beside the little lake that was set like a three hundred-acre gem on the surface of Z-40, and it was more than possible that the enemy had its den nearby.

However, a careful survey of the curved landscape in all directions failed to reveal a glimpse of anything remotely threatening. He donned his oxygen concentrator—in appearance a simple tube of a thing, projecting about six inches above his forehead, and set in a light metal band that encircled his head. Adjusting his gravity regulator so he wouldn't inadvertently walk clear off into empty space—he calculated his weight would be less than a twentieth of an ounce here—he stepped out of the Dart and gazed around at the little world.

Before him was the tiny lake, of an emerald green hue in the flashing sunlight. Around its shores, and covering the adjacent, softly rolling countryside as far as eye could reach, was a thick growth of carmine-tinted vegetation: squat, enormous-leaved bushes; low, sturdy trees, webbed together by innumerable vines. To left and right, miniature mountains reared ragged crests over the abbreviated horizon, making the spot he was in a peaceful, lovely valley.

He sighed. There was everything here a man could wish for—provided he could win it! Loosening his ray-pistol in its holster, he started to walk slowly around the lake to choose a site for the house he intended to build. On the opposite shore he found a place that looked suitable.

A few yards back from the water's edge, curling in a thick crescent like a giant sleeping on its side, was a precipitous outcropping of rock; curious stuff, rather like granite, that gleamed with dull opalescence in the brilliant sunlight. With that as a sort of natural buttress behind the house, and with the beautiful lake as his front dooryard, he'd have a location that any man might envy.

He returned to his Dart, hopped back across the lake in it, and unloaded his Sco drill¹. With this he planned to sink a shaft that would serve in the future as the cellar for his villa, and in the present as an entrenchment against danger.

But now the swift night of Z-40 was almost upon him. The low slant of the descending sun warned him that he had less than ten minutes of light left, until the next three-hour day should break over the eastern rim. He placed the drums and the flexible hose of the Sco drill so that he could begin operations with it as soon as the dawn broke, and started to walk toward the precipitous outcropping of quartziferous stone immediately behind the home-site he had picked. He would climb to the top of this for a short look around, and then return to the Dart—in which double-hulled, metal fortress he thought he would be safe from anything.

He had almost reached the rock outcropping when the peculiarities of its outline struck him anew. He'd already observed that the craggy mound rather resembled a sleeping, formless giant. The closer he got to it the more the resemblance was heightened and the greater grew his perplexity.

It sprang straight up from the carmine underbrush, like a separate heap of stone cast there by some mighty hand. One end of it tapered down in a thick ridge; and this ridge had a deep, horizontal cleft running along it which made it appear as though it were divided into two leglike members. In the center the mound swelled to resemble a paunchy trunk with sagging shoulders. This was topped by a huge, nearly round ball that looked for all the world like a head. There were even rudimentary

1. This implement, invented by Blansco 9X247A in 2052, is not so much a "drill" as a compressor. It is somewhat superficially defined in the Universal Dictionary, 2061 edition, as "a portable mechanism which, by alternating gaseous blasts of extreme heat and cold, breaks down the atoms of inorganic matter, causing them to collapse together in dense compression." Thus a cubic yard of earth can be reduced in size, in a few moments, to a pebble no larger than a pea; which pebble would weigh, on Earth, close to a ton.

features. It was grotesque—one of those freak sculptures of nature, Harley reflected, that made it seem as though the Old Girl had a mind and artistic talent of her own.

He scrambled through the brush till he reached that part of the long mound that looked like a head. There, as the sun began to stream the red lines of its descent over the sky, he prepared to ascend for his view of the surrounding landscape.

He'd got within twenty feet of the irregular ball, and had adjusted his gravity regulator to enable him to leap to its top, when he stopped as abruptly as though he had been suddenly paralyzed. Over the two deep pits that resembled nostrils in the grotesque mask of a face he thought he had observed a quiver. The illusion had occurred in just the proper place for an eyelid. It was startling, to say the least.

"I'm getting imaginative," said Harley. He spoke aloud as a man tends to do when he is alone and uneasy. "I'd better get a tighter grip on my nerves, or—good God!"

Coincident with the sound of his voice in the thin, quiet air, the huge stumps that looked like legs stirred slightly. A tremor ran through the entire mass of rock. And directly in front of Harley, less than twenty feet from where he stood, a sort of half-moon-shaped curtain of rock slid slowly up to reveal an enormous, staring eye.

Frozen with a terror such as he had never felt before in a life filled with adventure, scarce breathing, Harley glared at the monstrous spectacle transpiring before him. A hill was coming to life, A granite cliff was growing animate. It was impossible, but it was happening.

The half-moon curtains of rock that so eerily resembled eyelids, blinked heavily. He could hear a faint rasping like the rustle of sandpaper, as they did so. One of the great leg stumps moved distinctly, independent of the other one. Three columnar masses of rock—arms, or tentacles, with a dozen hinging joints in each—slowly moved away from the parent mass near the base of the head, and extended toward the Earth man.

Still in his trance, with his heart pounding in his throat till he thought it would burst, Harley watched the further awful developments. The eyelids remained opened, disclosing two great, dull eyes like poorly polished agates, which stared expressionlessly at him. There was a convulsion like a minor earthquake, and the mass shortened and heightened its bulk, raising itself to a sitting posture. The three hinged, irregular arms suddenly extended themselves to the full in a thrust that barely missed him. They were tipped, those arms, with immense claws, like

interlocking, rough-hewn stone fingers. They crashed emptily together within a few feet of Harley. Then, and not till then, did the paralysis of horror loose its grip on the human.

He tore his ray-pistol from its holster and pointed it at the incredible body. An angry, blue-green cone of light leaped from the muzzle, and played over the mighty torso. Nothing happened. He squeezed the trigger back to the guard. The blue-green beam increased in intensity, and a crackling noise was audible. Under that awful power the monster should have disappeared, dissolved to a greasy mist. But it didn't.

The light beam from the ray-gun died away. The power was exhausted. It was only good for about ten seconds of such an emergency, full-force discharge, after which it must be re-charged again. The ten seconds were up. And the gigantic creature against which it had been directed had apparently felt no injury from a beam that would have annihilated ten thousand men.

The now useless ray-pistol slipped from his limp fingers. Stupefied with horror at the futility of the deadly Randchron ray against this terrible adversary, he stood rooted to the spot. Then the thing reached for him again; and his muscles were galvanized to action—to instinctive, stupid, reasonless action.

Screaming incoherently, mad with horror of the stone claws that had clutched at him, he turned and ran. In great leaps he bounded away from the accursed lake and made for the taller trees and thicker vegetation at a distance from the shore. It was the worst thing he could have done. There was a chance that he could have reached his Dart, had he thought of it, and soared aloft out of reach. But he thought of nothing. All he wanted to do, in that abysmal fear that can still make a mindless animal out of a civilized man, was to run and hide—to get away from the fearful monster that had risen up to glare at him with those stony, pitiless eyes, and to reach for him with two-fingered bands like grinding rock vises.

Just as the sun fell below the rim of the asteroid, plunging it into a darkness only faintly relieved by the light of the stars, he crashed into the deeper underbrush. A trailing creeper tripped him in his mad flight. He fell headlong, to lie panting, sobbing for breath, in the thick carpet of blood-colored moss.

Behind him, from the direction of the lake, he heard a sudden clangor as of rock beating against metal. This endured only a short time. Then the solid ground beneath him shook slightly, and an appalling crash of

trees and underbrush to the rear told him that the stone colossus was on his trail.

He leaped to his feet and continued his great bounds over the sharply curved surface of the asteroid, banging against tree trunks, bruising himself against stones, falling in the darkness to rise again and flee as before in a mad attempt to distance the crashing sound of pursuit behind him.

Then he felt himself writhing in thin air as his flying course took him over the edge of a cliff. Down, down he fell, to land in a dense bed of foliage far below. Something hit his head with terrific force. Pinwheels of light flashed before his eyes, to fade into velvety nothingness... .

Slowly, uncertainly he wavered back to consciousness. For a moment he was aware of nothing save that he was lying on some surface that was jagged and uncomfortable, and that it was broad daylight. He opened his eyes, and saw that he was reclining, across a springy bed formed of the top of a tree. Ahead of him loomed a cliff about a hundred feet high.

Remembrance suddenly came to him. The unreasoning rush through the underbrush. The nightmare creature lumbering swiftly after him. The fall over the cliff into the top of this tree.

With a cry, he sat up, expecting to see the stone giant nearby and poised to leap. But it was nowhere in sight; nor, listen as intently as he would, could he hear the sounds of its crashing path through the brush. Somehow, for the moment at least, he had been saved. Perhaps his disappearance over the cliff edge had thrown it off his track.

He became aware of the fact that it was difficult for him to breathe. His lungs were heaving in a vain effort to suck in more oxygen, and his tongue felt thick as though he were being strangled. Then he saw that his oxygen concentrator had been knocked from his head when he fell, and was dangling from a limb several feet away. It was almost out of breathing range. Had it fallen on through the branches to the ground he would have died, in his unconsciousness, in the rarified atmosphere. He reached for it; settled the band around his head again.

After once more listening and peering around to make sure the rock colossus was not about, he descended the tree that had saved his life, and began to walk in the direction he judged the lake to be. He would get into his Dart, cruise aloft out of harm's way, and perhaps think up some effective course of action.

He was thinking clearly, now. And, in the glare of daylight, no longer an unreasoning animal fleeing blindly over a dim-lit foreign sphere, he

was unable to understand his panic of the night. Afraid? Of course he had been afraid! What man wouldn't have been at sight of that monstrous thing? But that he, Harley 2Q14N20, should have lost his head completely and gone plunging off into the brush like that, seemed unbelievable. To the depths of his soul he felt ashamed. And to his own soul he made the promise that he would wipe out, in action, that hour of cowardice.

As he wound his way through the squat, carmine forest, he tried to figure out the nature of the thing that had crashed balefully after him in the black hours.

It had seemed made of rock—a giant, primitive stone statue imbued with life. But it was impossible that it should really be fashioned of rock. At least it ought to be impossible. Rock is inorganic, inanimate. It simply couldn't have the spark of life in it. Harley had seen many strange creations, on many strange planets, but never had he seen inorganic mineral matter endowed with animation. Nor had anyone else.

Yet the thing *looked* as though made of stone. Of some peculiar, quartz-suffused granite—proving that the wan, white-haired man he had talked to in the sanitarium had not been mad at all, but only too terribly sane. The creature's very eyes had had a stony look. Its eyelids had rasped like stone curtains rubbing together. Its awful, two-fingered hands, or claws, had ground together like stones rubbing.

Was it akin to the lizards, the cold-blooded life of Earth? Was this rocky exterior merely a horny shell like that of a turtle? No. Horn is horn and rock is rock. The two can't be confused.

The only theory Harley could form was that the great beast was in some strange way a link between the animal and the mineral kingdoms. Its skeletal structure, perhaps, was silicate in substance, extending to provide an outside covering that had hardened into actual stone, while forming an interior support to flesh that was half organic, half inorganic matter. Some such silicate construction was to be found in the sponge, of Earth. Could this be a gigantic relative of that lowly creature? He did not know, and couldn't guess. He wasn't a zoologist. All he knew was that the thing appeared to be formed of living, impregnable stone. He knew, also, that this fabulous creature was bent on destroying him.

At this point in his reflections, the glint of water came to his eyes between the tree trunks ahead of him. He had come back to the lake.

For moments he stood behind one of the larger trees on the fringe and searched around the shore for sight of the rock giant. It was nowhere in

evidence. Rapidly he advanced from the forest and ran for the Dart. From a distance it appeared to be all right: but as he drew near a cry rose involuntarily to his lips.

In a dozen places the double hull of the little space craft was battered in. The man-hole lid was torn from its braces and bent double. The glass panels, unbreakable in themselves, had been shoved clear into the cabin; their empty sash frames gaped at Harley like blinded eyes. Never again would that Blinco Dart speed through the heavens!

He went to the spot where he had left his Sco drill, and a further evidence of the thing's cold blooded ferocity was revealed. The intricate mechanism had been wrenched into twisted pieces. The drums were battered in and the flexible hose lengths torn apart in shreds. The inventor himself couldn't have put it in working order again.

He was hopelessly trapped. He had no means of fighting the colossus. He had no way of escaping into space, nor of returning to Earth and trying to raise a loan that would allow him to come back here with men and atomic guns. He hadn't even a way of intrenching himself in the ground against the next attack.

For an instant his hair prickled in a flash of the blind panic that had seized him a few hours before. With a tremendous effort of will he fought it down. This—the destruction of his precious Dart and drill—was the result of one siege of insensate fear. If he succumbed to another one he might well dash straight into the arms of death. He sank to the ground and rested his chin on his fist, concentrating all his intellect on the hopeless problem that faced him.

The surface of Z-40 was many square miles in extent. But, if he tried to hide himself, he knew it was only a question of time before he would be hunted down. The asteroid was too tiny to give him indefinite concealment. Flight, then, was futile.

But if he didn't try to conceal himself in the sparse forest lands, it meant that he must stay to face the monster at once—which was insanity. What could he do, bare-handed, against that thirty-foot, three-tentacled, silicate mass of incredible life!

It was useless to run, and it was madness to stay and confront the thing. What, then, could he do? The sun had slid down the sky and the red of another swift dusk was heralding the short night before he shook his head somberly and gave the fatal riddle up.

He rose to his feet, intending to make his way back to the concealment—such as it was—of the forest. It might be that he could find safety

in some lofty treetop till day dawned again. Then he stopped, and listened. What was that?

From far away to the left he could hear faint sounds of some gargantuan stirring. And, coincident with the flickering out of the last scrap of sunlight, a distant crashing came to his ears as an enormous body smashed like an armored ship through trees and thorn bushes and trailing vines. The rock thing had found his trail and was after him again.

A second time Harley fled through the dim-lighted night, stumbling over boulders and tripping on creepers. But this time his flight was not that of panic. Frightened enough, he was; but his mind was working clearly as he leaped through the forest away from the source of the crashing.

The first thing he noted was that though—as far as his ears could inform him—he was managing to keep his lead, he wasn't outdistancing his horrible pursuer by a yard. Dark though the night was, and far away as he contrived to keep himself, the colossus seemed to cling to his trail as easily as though following a well-blazed path.

He climbed a tree, faced at right angles to the course he had pursued, and swung for the next tree. It was a long jump. But desperation lent abnormal power to his muscles, and the gravity regulator adjusted to extremely low pitch, was a great help. He made it safely. Another swinging leap into the dark, to land sprawling in a second tree; a third; a fourth. Finally he crouched in a tangle of boughs, and listened. He was a quarter of a mile from the point where he had turned from his first direction. Perhaps this deviation would throw the rock terror off.

It didn't. He heard the steady smashing noise stop. For an instant there was a silence in the darkness of the asteroid that was painful. Then the crashing was resumed, this time drawing straight toward where he was hidden. Somehow the thing had learned of his change of direction.

He continued his flight into the night, his eyes staring glassily into the darkness, his expression the ghastly one of a condemned man. And as he fled the crashing behind him told how he was followed—easily infallibly, in spite of all his twisting and turning and efforts at concealment. What hellish intelligence the monster must possess!

He ran for eternities. He ran till his chest was on fire, and the sobbing agony of his breathing could be heard for yards. He ran till spots of fire floated before his eyes and the blood, throbbing in his brain, cut out the noise of the devilish pursuit behind him. At long last his legs buckled under him, and he fell, to rise no more.

He was done. He knew it. His was the position of the hunted animal that lies panting, every muscle paralyzed with absolute exhaustion, and glares in an agony of helplessness at the hunter whose approach spells death.

The crashing grew louder. The tremor of the ground grew more pronounced as the vast pursuer pounded along with its tons and tons of weight. Harley gazed into the blackness back along the way he had come, his eyes sunk deep in the hollows fatigue had carved in his face, and waited for the end. The dark night darkened still more with the approach of another swift, inexorable dawn.

There was a terrific rending of tree trunks and webbed creepers. Dimly in the darkness he could see something that towered on a level with the tallest trees, something that moved as rapidly and steadily as though driven by machinery. Fear so great that it nauseated him, swept over him in waves; but he could not move.

The first grey smear of dawn appeared in the sky. In the ghostly grey-ness he got a clearer and clearer sight of the monster. He groaned and cowered there while it approached him—more slowly now, eyeing him with staring, stony orbs in which there was no expression of any kind, of rage or bate, of curiosity or triumph.

Great stumps of legs, with no joints in them, on which the colossus stalked like a moving stone tower—a body resembling an enormous boulder carved by an amateurish hand to portray the trunk of a human being—a craggy sphere of rock for a head, set directly atop the deeply riven shoulders—a face like the horrible mask of an embryonic gargoyle—a mouth that was simply a lipless chasm that opened and closed with the sound of rocks grinding together in a slow-moving glacier—the whole veiled thinly by trailing lengths of snapped vines, great shattered tree boughs, bushes, all uprooted in its stumping march through the forest! Harley closed his eyes to shut out the sight. But in spite of himself they flashed open again and stared on, as though hypnotized by the spectacle they witnessed.

The grey of dawn lightened to the first rose tint of the rising sun. As though stung to action by the breaking of day, the thing hastened its ground-shaking pace. With one last stride, it came to Harley's side and loomed far above, the unwinking eyes glaring down at him.

The three arms, hinged at equidistant points at the base of the horrible head, slowly lowered toward his prostrate form. There was a grating

noise as the creature hinged in the middle and bent low, bringing its enormous, staring eyes within two yards of his face.

One of its hands closed over his leg, tentatively, experimentally, as though to ascertain of what substance he was made. He cried aloud as the rock vise, like a gigantic lobster claw, squeezed tight. The thing drew back abruptly. Then the chasm of its mouth opened a little, for all the world as though giving vent to soundless, demoniac laughter. All three of the vise-like hands clamped over him—lightly enough, considering their vast size, and intimating that the colossus did not mean to kill him for a moment or two—but so cruelly that his senses swam with the pain of it.

He felt the grip relax. The vast stone pincers were lifted from him; slithered to the ground beside him.

The first blinding rays of the sun were beating straight on the colossal figure, which glittered fantastically, like a huge splintered opal, in their brilliance.

It glared down at Harley. The abyss of a mouth opened as though again giving vent to silent, infernal laughter. Then, with the noise of a landslide, the giant form settled slowly to the ground. The rock half-moons of curtains dropped over the expressionless, dull eyes. The whole great figure quivered, and grew still. It lay without movement, stretched along the ground like a craggy, opalescent hill.

Dazed, stunned by such fantastic behavior, Harley struggled wearily to his feet. He had been a dead man as surely as though shot with a ray-gun. One twitch of those terrible rock pincers would have broken him in two pieces. It had seemed as though that deadly twitch were surely forthcoming. And then the thing had released him—and had lain down to go to sleep! Or was it asleep?

He took a few slow steps away from it, expecting to see the three great tentacles flash out to capture him as a cat claws at a mouse that thinks it is escaping. The arms didn't move. Astounding as it was, Harley was free to run away if he chose. Why was that?

A hint of a clue to the creature's action began to unfold in his mind. When he had first laid eyes on it, in daylight, it was asleep. It had not pursued him during the preceding day, which argued that again it was asleep. And now, with the first touch of dawn, it was once more quiet, immobile.

The answer seemed to be that it was entirely nocturnal; that for some obscure, unguessable reason sunlight induced in it a state of suspended

animation. It seemed an insane theory, but no other surmise was remotely reasonable.

But if it were invariably sunk in a coma during daylight, why had it delayed killing him just a moment ago? Its every act indicated that it possessed intelligence of a high order. It was more than probable that it realized its limitation—why hadn't it acted in accordance with that realization?

On thinking it over, he believed he had the answer to that, too. He remembered the way the gaping mouth had seemed to express devilish mirth. The thing was playing with him. That was all. It had saved him for another night of hopeless flight and infallible trailing through the forests of Z-40.

He gazed at the monster in a frenzy of impotent rage and fear. If only he could kill it somehow in its sleep! But he couldn't. In no way could he harm it. Secure in its silicate covering, it was impervious to his wildest attempts at destruction. And it knew it, too; hadn't it laughed just before sinking down to slumber through the asteroidal day?

With his Sco drill he might have pierced that silicon dioxide armor till he reached the creature's gritty flesh. Then he could have used his ray-pistol, possibly disintegrating all its vitals and leaving only an empty rock shell sprawling hugely there in the trampled underbrush.

But he had neither drill nor pistol. The one had been wrecked by the monster; the other he had dropped in his madness of fright, after completely exhausting its power chamber.

Half crazed by the hopelessness of his plight, he paced up and down beside the great length of animated stone. Trapped on an asteroid—utterly unarmed—alone with the most pitiless, invulnerable creation Nature had placed in a varied universe! Could Hell itself have devised a more terrible fate?

Shuddering, he turned away. He had some two and a half hours of grace, before the sun should set again and darkness release the colossus from its torpor. There was only one thing he could do: place the diameter of the sphere between the thing and himself, and try to exist through another night of terror.

His hands went to his belt to adjust the gravity regulator strapped about his waist. By reducing his weight to an ounce or two, he could make the long journey possible for his fatigue-numbed muscles—

His hands clenched into fists, and his breath whistled between his set teeth as a wild hope came to him. The touch of the regulator had brought inspiration. A way to defeat the gigantic creature stretched on the

ground beside him! A way to banish it forever from the surface of this lovely little world where all was perfect but the monstrous thing with which it was cursed!

Trembling with the reaction wrought in him by the faint glow of hope, he began to race toward the lake and his wrecked Blinco Dart. It wasn't hard to find the way; the rock giant had left a trail as broad as a road; trees broken off like celery stalks, bushes smashed flat, tracks that looked like shallow wells sunk into the firm ground. Fifty yards to a step, he leaped along this path, praying that one object, just one bit of machinery in the Dart had escaped the general wreckage.

Arrived at the little shell at last, he was forced to pause a moment and compose himself before he could step into the battered interior. Everything hinged on this one final chance!

Drawing a long breath, he entered the cabin and made his way to the stern repellor. A groan escaped his lips. It was ruined. Evidently the thing had reached in the man-hole opening with one of its three mighty tentacles, and, with sure instinct, had fastened its stone claws on the repellor housing. At any rate, it was ground to bits. But—there was the bow repellor.

He went to that, and the flame of hope came back to his eyes. It was untouched! He threw back the housing to make sure. Yes, the inter-sliding series of plates, that reversed or neutralized gravitational attraction at a touch, were in alignment.

He bent to the task of disconnecting it from the heavy bed-plate to which it was bolted, his fingers flying frenziedly. Then back to the torpid colossus he hurried, clutching the precious repellor tight in his arms lest he should drop it, walking carefully lest he should fall with it.

There he was faced by a new difficulty that at first seemed insurmountable. How could he fasten the repellor to that great, impenetrable, opalescent bulk?

A second time he bounded back toward the Dart, to return with the heavy bow and stern bed-plates from its hull.

Once more the orange ball of the sun was sinking low. The terrible brevity of those three-hour days! He had less than ten minutes, Earth time, in which to work.

One of the thing's arms, or tentacles, was pointing out away from the parent mass. It was twice the diameter of his body, and was ponderously heavy; but by rigging a fulcrum and lever device, with a stone as the

fulcrum and a tough log as the lever, he managed to raise it high enough to thrust one of the bed-plates under it. The other massive metal sheet he laid across the top.

The lower rim of the sun touched the horizon. A tremor ran through the colossus. In frantic haste, racing against the flying seconds, Harley clamped the two plates tight against the columnar tentacle with four long hull-bolts from the Dart. He set the repellor in position on the top bed-plate, and began to fasten it down.

He felt another tremor run through the stone column on which he was squatting. With a rasping sound, one of the half-moon rock-curtains the thing had for eyelids blinked open and shut. He shot the last bolt into place and tightened it.

The stone claws, just behind which he had fastened the repellor, ground savagely shut. The great tentacle began to lift, and carried him with it—toward the chasm of a mouth. That chasm opened wide... .

Harley straightened up and jumped for the ground. As he jumped, he kicked the repellor control bar hard over.

There was a shrieking of wind as though all the hurricanes in the universe were battling each other. He felt himself turned over and over, buffeted, torn at, in a mad aerial whirlpool. The whirlpool calmed as the abruptly created vacuum, caused by the monster's rapid drive upward, passed after it into space. Far overhead there was one fleeting glimpse of a pinpoint of dull opalescence reflecting the rays of the dying sun. Then the pinpoint disappeared in fathomless space. With his gravity regulator adjusted to the point where it almost neutralized his weight, he fell slowly back toward the ground... .

Almost immediately after he had landed in the darkness that blanketed the surface of the planetoid, a big space yacht settled down near him. A searchlight bored a hole in the blackness, to bathe him in cold light. Down the beam came a band of men from Earth, pushing atomic cannon and gazing apprehensively about them. In the lead was an elderly man with the six-bar dollar-mark insignia of a business executive on his purple tunic.

He hastened to Harley's side. Harley only dimly heard what he said. Something to the effect that the man had been worried after selling the fatal asteroid. Had got in touch with the Radivision Corporation and learned that this call number was dead. Had come with men and big guns to rescue him, if it wasn't too late, and take him back to Earth. Had cruised for half an hour before locating him. "I've been calling myself a

murderer ever since I let you have Z-40, Mr. 2Q14N20," he concluded. "I was sure we'd get here only to find you'd been killed. But I see you've managed to escape from the creature so far—though by the look of you, it must have been a narrow shave."

At this Harley shook off some of the gathering dizziness that hazed his mind. He threw back his shoulders. "Managed to *escape*? I did better than that. I got rid of the thing forever! Yes, I'll return to Earth with you, but only because I need a new Blinco Dart. I'm coming back to Z-40 at once. Perfect little paradise, now that I've got rid of that—animated—rock pile—"

The belated rescuers caught him as he collapsed.

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