

Raiders out of Space

by Robert Moore Williams

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An ANNA Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

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Rolf Baden turned around in the pilot's seat of the big bomber and looked back toward his gunner. Danny Walker's unshaven face was puckered into a twisted frown and his baby-blue eyes were mirrors of apprehension. Danny was scared again, the big pilot decided. Or perhaps he was still scared.

Whichever it was, it didn't mean anything. Danny was always scared—until things got tough. Then the little gunner was a howling hornet of daredevil bravery.

"Never mind about the gas," Rolf Baden grinned. "We got plenty of juice. You keep your eyes peeled for land. We ought to sight the coast of Maine pretty soon now, unless the wind has shoved us too badly off our course."

The big pilot turned to the front again. His eyes swept the instrument panel, lingering for a fraction of a second longer than was necessary on the gas gauge. The little red needle had been as far to the right as it would go when they started. Now it was almost pressing the pin that stopped its motion—to the left.

"Maybe enough gas for thirty minutes," Rolf Baden thought. "Maybe enough for twenty minutes. Where in hell is the continent of North America?"

Aloud he said nothing. There was no need in alarming Danny.

"I don't see anything but ocean," Danny spoke up, lifting his voice over the drone of the motors. "It seems to me like we've crossed a million miles of ocean since we left France. I never did see so much water in all my life."

"You crossed it on the way over," Baden reminded him.

"Yeah, but I was in the stokehole and I didn't see much of it. Rolf, you suppose the Nazis will be mad if they ever learn we swiped one of the planes *they* were planning to swipe, and flew it home before they could get their hands on it? Do you think that'll make 'em mad, huh?"

"What the hell do we care if they do get mad?" Baden answered. "Anyhow, they'll never miss one plane more or less."

When the French army had collapsed in June of 1940, the many American volunteers fighting in its ranks had faced the prospect of internment. Rolf Baden and Danny Walker had been among the first volunteers to go over, fighting until the war ended in the French defeat. It had not been their first war. They had seen action in Spain; and before that, in China.

But it might easily have been their last—at least for a long time—if they had stuck around and waited

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China.

But it might easily have been their last—at least for a long time—if they had stuck around and waited for the Nazi occupation. The point was, they hadn't stuck. France was finished, done, off the face of the map. There was nothing two men could do against an invading army. So, since they were in the air service, they did the only possible thing—removed the bombs from one of the big American-made bombers, loaded the plane with gas, and hopped off—for America. For home. All they had to do was cross the ocean.

“‘Wrong-Way’ Corrigan did it,” Rolf Baden had said. “Why in hell can't we? It's better than waiting around here and

getting stuck in some stinking jail for the next five years.”

It was Baden who made the decision to fly home. Danny, as a faithful satellite revolving in a fixed orbit around the big pilot, had merely stuttered,

“W-what are we waiting for? C-crank her up, Rolf, and 1-let’s burn the wind home.”

THE great plane droned on through the afternoon. The needle of the gasoline gauge moved steadily toward the left. The furrows on Rolf Baden’s cheeks grew deeper each time the red needle quivered. He kept staring westward, watching for land to come drifting up out of the sea. But no land came.

“I’ve been thinking,” Danny said

suddenly. “What are we going to do when we get home? We haven’t got more’n enough dough to buy a couple of steins of beer.”

“We’ll manage,” Baden answered. Silently, he thought, “First, *get* home.”

“Look,” said Danny. “Look, Rolf; I’ve been thinking. How about us getting ourselves a couple of jobs and settling down somewhere? Maybe we could hook up with some big air transport company, you as a pilot and me as a mechanic. How about it, Rolf, huh?”

“Well—” said Baden.

“No, sir,” Danny interrupted.

“I haven’t said anything yet,” Baden protested.

“No, but you were going to. You were

going to say there is still a war in China, and since we're out of a job, how about us taking another whirl for the laundry men? Was that what you were going to say, huh?"

The pilot turned in his seat and grinned at his diminutive gunner.

"I hadn't thought of such a thing," he denied.

"You're a liar if ever I saw one, Rolf Baden! And it's no go," Danny said fiercely. "I've had enough fighting to last me a lifetime. I'm going to settle down. Me and you, we're going to settle down. And we're going to get ourselves some jobs where we'll never even hear a nasty word. Do you understand me, you big lug? We're not going to get in any

more fights! Not ever!”

There was a passionate wail in Danny Walker’s voice.

“You talked like that when we came out of Spain,” Baden reminded.

“Yeah, but this time I mean it. You can pick the jobs for us—anything suits me—but I’m going to have it specified in the contract: *no fighting!*”

“Okay, Danny,” the big pilot answered, taking another glance at the gas gauge. “I give in. No more fighting, except in self-defense.”

The right motor coughed and spat blue smoke, and for an instant Baden’s heart was up in his mouth. The plane quivered, but then the motor again took up its throbbing drone.

“Land, ho!” Danny Walker called. “I see it. Looks like mountains. Land, ho!”

“Where?” Rolf Baden fiercely demanded.

“Over yonder,” Danny answered, pointing. Off to the westward a dim blue mass was vaguely visible. No trace of emotion showed on the face of the big pilot.

“Ten minutes,” he thought. “Just ten minutes more, and we’ll be there.” The lines etched around the corners of his eyes began to smooth out.

The plane droned smoothly on. Ten minutes later they were over a rocky coast line.

“It’s Maine, all right,” Baden said. “Mountains and forests all over the

place. Where, oh where are we going to put this bus down?”

“Go on inland,” Danny Walker suggested. “There’s bound to be some place where we can set down.”

“You hope.”

Both motors gulped simultaneously. They sputtered, sucked the last drops of gas, and died.

“Now we’re in for it,” Danny groaned.

“Yep. Gotta set her down.”

BADEN’S eyes were already searching for an open space large enough to land the big ship. Off to the right he saw a cleared field, with a large ramshackle building located near it. He pushed the nose of the plane down.

“That’s a damned small field!” Danny shouted.

“I know it,” Baden answered. “But it’s the best we can do. We can’t be choosy about where we’re going to land. Hold on tight, Danny!” he yelled.

Baden had already lowered the retractable landing gear. Now he squinted fiercely over the nose of the plane, watching the line of trees at the edge of the field. He had to brush the undercarriage on the tops of those trees, then set the ship down and hope she wouldn’t overrun the field and bury her nose in the line of trees on the other side.

The wind around the wings was a whistling whine. The ground was coming up, up, *up*! The trees looked like

a line of lances reaching up to impale the bomber. Then the branches rattled against the undercarriage, against the wings, popping and snapping.

Baden held his breath. Was he too low? Were the trees going to flip them over? The ship slid over. They were past the trees! But the nose was dropping too fast. They were losing flying speed. He pushed the nose down farther, and jerked it up. The wheels thudded into the ground, and the ship jumped like a frightened bird trying to take wing. Baden shoved her down. The wheels caught again. They were rolling. They were on the ground, racing across the field. The line of trees on the other side was looming closer every second. He

fought the brakes. The ship slowed. It came to a halt not ten feet from the trees.

“G-g-golly!” Danny quavered.
“Golly!”

The gunner yanked open the door. He didn't try to step out of the plane. He fell out, deliberately. When Baden stuck his face out of the ship, the gunner was hugging the ground.

“Dirt!” Danny gasped. “Look at it, Rolf! Good honest dirt! It looks so good to me I could almost eat it.”

Baden grinned. He stepped out of the plane, and rather abruptly sat down. Until that moment he had not known how much that mad ocean flight had taken out of him, both physically and mentally. Every muscle in his body ached. His

mind was a dull, dead, continuous throb. But the important thing was—they were home. They were safe—

“Get out of here!” a voice said. “You two men are trespassing, and I want you to get out of here this minute.”

Baden blinked. The voice seemed to be coming from the ground. Then he saw something he had not noticed before. The plane had stopped right beside a hole somebody had dug in the ground. It was a large hole, and dirt from it was scattered everywhere. Oddly, he wondered why anyone would dig a hole here at the edge of the field. Then he saw the speaker, and his wonder grew. The speaker was a girl, an unusually attractive girl. She was climbing out of

the hole. She had a shovel in her hand, but she promptly dropped the shovel, reached down into the hole and picked up a rifle!

“Get right back in that plane and get out of here!” she vigorously demanded, pointing the rifle at them.

“Lady—” Rolf Baden began mildly.

“I’m going to count to ten,” she snapped. “If you’re not gone by then, I’m going to start shooting.”

ROLF BADEN stared at her in stupefied amazement. He was used to guns and girls, but not in combination. From the way this girl handled the rifle, he knew she knew how to use it, and her red hair told him she probably *would* use it. Looking at her, he saw she was

badly frightened, scared, but the odd thing was that she did not seem to be scared of the transoceanic newcomers.

“Lady,” Baden said, “you’ve got us wrong. We didn’t drop in to take an uninvited hand in your private treasure hunt,” he nodded toward the hole, “but because we couldn’t help ourselves.”

“One,” she answered grimly.

“Put down that gun, girl. You’re making a mistake.”

“Two.”

“I tell you we couldn’t move the plane if we had to. We’re out of gas. This was a forced landing,”

Baden protested.

“Do you think we’d pick a place like this to set down if we had any choice?”

Danny queried.

“Three.”

“G-gosh!” the gunner quavered. “She means to shoot, Rolf! We better make tracks out of here.”

“Four.”

Danny got to his feet.

“Sit down!” his companion commanded. “This is the Maine wilderness. There’s probably not another house within forty miles.”

“But she’ll shoot us! She’s not fooling!”

“Then let her shoot.”

“Five,” the girl chanted.

Rolf Baden looked at her. He dug a cigarette out of his pocket, lighted it.

“Lady,” he drawled, “after you’ve

shot us, I suggest you look at our identification papers. You'll find we're ex-members of the French air force. Then take a look at the markings on this plane. You'll find it's an American-made French bomber. Then you can spend the rest of your life explaining to yourself how you happened to shoot a couple of strangers who accidentally dropped in on you."

The shot went home. For the first time, doubt showed on the girl's face. But she did not lower the muzzle of the rifle.

"Are you telling the truth?" she demanded.

"No," Baden drawled. "With a rifle looking us in the eye, we're thinking up

fairy stories. Here, take a look at this.” He flung his little packet of identification papers at her. A struggle showed on her face. Finally, but without lowering the rifle, she bent over and picked up the papers. Then she made Danny show his papers. Then she examined the markings on the plane.

“All right,” she said in a hollow voice. “You’re right when you said it was forty miles to the nearest house. It’s farther than that. You can stay here until tomorrow. Then you’ll have to be on your way. Come on. I’ll take you to the house.” And she motioned for them to follow her.

“What’s going on here?” Danny quavered, as they got to their feet. Rolf

Baden didn't answer. He had moved casually nearer the hole the girl had dug in the ground. Instantly her rifle came up.

“Stay away from that hole!” she snapped. “If you want to stay alive.”

CHAPTER II

The Sphere

“I—I don’t like this, Rolf,” Danny Walker wailed. “I don’t like it a 1-little bit.”

The two men were seated in a large bedroom on the second floor of the house to which the girl had taken them. Bathed, shaved and full of good food, they were vastly improved in appearance. Outside the shadows were lengthening as the afternoon began to move into night. The girl had told them her name—Jean Chapman. Somewhere that name had struck a responsive chord in Rolf Baden’s mind. He had seen or heard it before but he couldn’t remember

where. From the plane, she had taken them straight to the house, where a fat but somehow rather frightened Negro cook had prepared food for them. They had seen no one else. After they had finished eating, the girl had taken them to their room.

“You may remain tonight, if you will promise not to leave this room,” she had said. “You must leave tomorrow.”

“Why must we stay in this room tonight, Miss Chapman?” Baden questioned.

“Because I request it.”

“And if we don’t choose to do so?”

“Then you can leave now,” she had flared. “One of the conditions on which I am accommodating you, is that you stay

where I put you. If you don't choose to do as I say, you can start walking."

"We'll stay," Rolf Baden had grimly answered, "where you put us."

"See that you do," she had answered. With that, she had left them alone.

"I still don't like it," Danny Walker muttered, gesturing toward the window. "Take a look at that building out there, Rolf. You might think it's a barn, but it isn't. Too big for that, doors too large. And it's not a factory, in spite of the fact that it seems to be full of machinery. Nobody would build a factory 'way out here in this godforsaken corner of the wilderness. So what is it, huh?"

Baden had already been looking at the building. As Danny had said, it was full

of machinery. Sprawling over a couple of acres, it obviously wasn't a barn.

"It looks like a laboratory of some kind," Baden mused.

"Laboratory? Who would build a lab way up here?"

The pilot shrugged. "I don't know *who* built it. From the way it looks, it hasn't been used for several years, anyhow. But I can easily guess *why* it was built where it is."

"Why?" Danny challenged.

"Because somebody wanted to work in private," Baden answered. "So he came up here, where the nearest neighbor is miles away, and built himself a laboratory."

Danny Walker was silent, turning over

in his mind various reasons why anybody would come so far into the wilderness to build a laboratory. They were in a corner room, with windows on two sides, and Baden walked across to the other windows and glanced down toward the field where they had landed their plane. He stiffened.

Danny, coming up and looking over his shoulder, said,

“She’s back at that hole again, working like she was trying to dig up the devil himself. What do you suppose she’s got buried there, Rolf, huh?”

“Just another question that we can’t answer,” the big pilot mused.

“Do you suppose we ought to go down and offer to help her?” Danny

questioned. “Sort of pay for our room and board that way. Digging a hole is no work for a woman.”

“From the way she poked that rifle up out of that hole when we landed, I would say she didn’t want any help,” Baden answered.

He moved away from the window, lit a cigarette and stretched himself on the bed. The girl was up to something, but whatever it was, she had unmistakably indicated that she considered it her business. And Baden was tired. Ocean hops drain the strength out of a man. Before he knew it, he was asleep. THE crash of a rifle awakened him.

He sat up and stared around the room, trying to remember what had happened.

Danny was lying beside him. The gunner's snore broke off in the middle of a wheeze, and he gasped.

“What is it, a bombing raid? Are the Nazis coming over again?”

Baden was off the bed and over to the window in a single stride. Night had fallen. A glance at the radium-illuminated dial of his wrist-watch told him it was past ten o'clock. There was a full moon in the sky, pouring a flood of silver radiation down to Earth.

The moonlight clearly revealed the field with their plane resting on it. Beside the plane, the hole Jean Chapman had been digging was a vague dark blotch. Baden's eyes swept over the scene and abruptly returned to the dark

patch of fresh earth.

Something was rising out of that hole! Pushing the earth aside, like a gigantic mole thrusting itself to the surface, something was coming up out of the ground.

“W—what is that thing, Rolf?” Danny husked. “It’s coming r-right up out of the ground! W-w-what is it?”

“I don’t know!” Baden answered. “Shut up and watch.”

Abruptly, as though the restraining pressure had been removed, the thing sprang upward into the air. Baden saw what it was. A sphere! A huge round ball.

“A balloon!” Danny gasped. “But how would a balloon get buried like that?”

“That’s no balloon,” Baden snapped. “No balloon could push itself up out of the ground. That thing is made out of metal, or I’m a cockeyed liar!”

There was growing excitement in the pilot’s voice. He was an expert on all forms of ships that flew through the air: to be the cracker jack pilot that he was, he had to be an expert. But here was a sphere that could thrust itself out of the ground and leap into the air. *And it had no wings. It had no propellers. It wasn’t an airplane.* And the absence of exhaust jets showed conclusively that it wasn’t a rocket.

A single question was thundering in Rolf Baden’s mind.

“What is that thing?”

How had it happened to be buried in the ground? Where had it come from? Had it—incredible thought!—come up from *below*?

The rifle that had awakened them spoke again, adding its note of sinister menace to a night that was already suddenly tense with an inexplicable threat.

“It’s the girl!” Danny hissed, pointing. “She’s there in the shadow of the trees. And she’s shooting at that thing!”

The flash of the gun had revealed Jean Chapman. She brought the gun up to fire again. And the sphere moved toward her. It had leaped out of the ground and had begun to circle the field like an airplane seeking a place to land, but now

it darted straight toward the girl crouching in the shadows.

“Come on!” Rolf Baden rapped out. “This is where we take a hand in whatever is going on.”

“B-but she told us to stay here,” Danny protested with literal truth. Baden was already moving. There was a door that led downstairs and out of the house, but he didn't have time to use it. The open window was handier and quicker. He thrust himself over the sill and dropped lightly from the second story to the ground. Although both men had removed their uniforms and had donned civilian clothes, they had kept their guns. Baden's pistol was in his hand before his feet touched earth.

“G-gosh!” Danny quavered as he took the same leap. “H-here goes nothing.” The gunner did not hesitate. Where Rolf Baden led, Danny Walker would follow.

“BADEN, racing toward the edge of the field, could see the sphere dropping lower and lower. For the first time, he saw how big it was. It was at least thirty feet in diameter, possibly forty. And it moved with the easy grace of a swallow breasting an air current.

The girl’s rifle thundered. Bright stabs of orange flame lanced from the gun. She was not, could not be missing. But the bullets seemed to have no effect whatsoever on the sphere. It was moving steadily toward her.

Baden ran silently. The first

intimation the girl had that he was near was his pistol roaring an echo to her rifle. She turned a startled face toward him.

“We’ve come to help,” he said huskily.

Those four words were a fair measure of Rolf Baden. He didn’t know what was happening, didn’t know what kind of fight he was taking a hand in. And didn’t care. All he had ever needed to know was that somebody needed help. That quixotic urge had taken him all over the world, looking for an underdog who needed a lift. Here was a girl who needed assistance. That was enough for Rolf Baden.

“This isn’t your fight!” she panted.

“Get back inside. You may be killed!”

“So we may get killed,” he repeated.

“So what?”

She didn't answer. A loud hiss, like the air brakes of a heavy bus going into action, had come from the sphere. Its descent was slowed. It settled gently to the ground.

“Shoot it!” Jean Chapman whispered, the husk of a madly rising fear in her voice. “Damage it!

Anything, so that it can't take off again!”

She flung up her rifle, poured bullet after bullet at the huge ball. The two flyers began shooting. Heavy slugs tore through the air, to strike with metallic clangs against the surface of the sphere.

Quietly it rested on the soil. Baden saw several round openings like port-holes on its surface. He aimed at them but the moonlight was too indistinct to reveal whether he was hitting his target. Yet he got the impression that the sphere, absorbing the barrage of hot lead being poured against it, *was sitting there quietly watching them.*

Or something inside it was watching them!

Cold chills shot up Rolf Baden's spine at the thought. There was something inside the sphere! Until now it had not occurred to him that logically it should have an occupant. Or occupants. But, unless it possessed some incredibly uncanny life of its own, there should be

someone inside directing and controlling it.

What was inside that metal ball?

Rolf Baden was as nearly fearless as any man who ever lived, but the instant he began to wonder what was in that sphere, for the first time in his life he knew the meaning of fear, the mad fear that is similar to the fear of the darkness, of the unknown.

It sat there in the moonlight and seemed to size them up. Then abruptly it hummed up into the air.

“Look out!” Danny yelled. “It may be going to bomb us!”

But it didn't attempt to bomb them. It rose straight up until it was well above the trees and then moved away, flying

parallel with the ground.

“It’s g-g-gone,” Danny shuddered in abject relief.

“It’s landing on the ridge!” Jean Chapman exclaimed. “See! It’s coming back down again.”

They could see it slowly settle down on a rocky ridge nearby.

“Maybe we put a slug through its gas tank,” Danny hopefully suggested. ROLF BADEN slowly shook his head. “That’s probably what happened!” the girl said excitedly.

“We damaged it. And we’ve simply got to get to it before it’s repaired. Come on!” she flung back over her shoulder as she darted off toward the ridge.

“Just a minute,” Baden called to her.

The girl turned. “But you said you wanted to help!” she exclaimed. “Of course, if you don’t want to, that’s your business. But you said—”

“And we meant it,” Baden interrupted grimly. “But before we go dashing off to tackle that thing, we had better know what we’re doing. What is that sphere? What’s inside it? Who invented it? What’s going on here, anyhow?”

“I—” the girl began. “I don’t know what it is and I don’t know what’s inside it,” she said unconvincingly.

“You don’t know?”

She shook her head.

“But it came out of the hole you were digging!” Baden exploded. “And you know more about this than you’re telling.

Come on, girl; give!”

“I know—only a little. And I don’t have time to explain what I do know. And it’s desperately important that I reach it immediately. If you want to help, all right. If you don’t, you can stay here!”

Without another word, she turned and ran toward the ridge where the sphere rested.

“Y-you think she luring us on, huh, Rolf? You think she’s telling the truth, huh?”

“I don’t know,” Baden answered, his face dark with anger. “But we don’t have much choice except to help her.”

They raced after the fleeing girl. Coming to the top of the ridge, she was still ahead of them. The sphere was

resting in a jumble of huge boulders. There was no sign of motion anywhere about it. With its portholes dark, it looked entirely inanimate.

Jean Chapman was edging cautiously toward it. Lively she moved from boulder to boulder, taking advantage of every spot of cover.

“Be careful, girl,” Baden hoarsely called.

The sphere did not move. She raised her rifle, fired a quick shot into the huge ball. The bullet sullenly clanged against the metal.

“It’s been damaged!” the girl cried. “It’s out of order.”

“You had better be darned certain of that before—” Baden stopped in mid-

sentence to stare in horror at what had happened.

THE huge sphere had not moved. With the speed of spring steel, a door opened in it. Out of that door, moving with clanking ponderousness but with a rapidity entirely out of proportion to the huge bulk, there came—

“G-golly, it’s a man in armor!” Danny gasped.

“Man in armor, hell!” Baden snapped, leaping forward. “That thing is made out of metal. If it’s not a living robot, it’s the next thing to it.”

As he leaped forward in a desperate attempt to save the girl, the big pilot clearly saw the monstrosity. It was big, far bigger than a human being. Great,

glaring, unwinking eyes gleamed in its broad head. Huge arms waved angrily.

Things happened too fast now for even Rolf Baden to follow them. He caught a vague glimpse of a length of snaky metal cable reaching from the head of the monstrosity back into the hollow interior of the sphere. He saw Jean Chapman fling up her rifle and fire. The bullet clanged venomously as it struck but the creature never faltered in its stride. The girl saw it was coming too fast for another shot. She dropped the gun and tried to leap to one side.

The metal monstrosity snatched Jean Chapman into its arms and stopped dead in its tracks. Baden did not dare fire for fear of hitting the girl. Desperately he

threw himself forward. THE metal man whirled. Two ponderous but exceedingly rapid strides, and it was back in the sphere. The door clanged shut in the face of the racing pilot. A vast humming came from inside the ball. With a roar of wind, it leaped upward into the sky.

But this time it didn't stop after it had risen a short distance. It kept on going—*straight up!* Rising with incredible speed, it became a black dot against the face of the moon. Then it was gone. From the time the door of the sphere had opened until the metal ball was out of sight in the sky, not more than four minutes had passed.

“It got her!” Danny whispered shakily.

“It meant to get her down there on the field, but we c-came up and scared it off. It was j-just waiting for her to come up here so it could jump out and grab her. Oh, g-golly, Rolf, what is it, huh? What is it?”

The big pilot was too shaken to try to answer. He had seen something that all his previous experience had said was impossible—a wingless object rising straight up into the air. But far more important than that was the fact that Jean Chapman had been kidnapped, only kidnapped was too insignificant a word for what had happened.

Suddenly—“There it is coming back!” Danny hissed.

The metal sphere was driving along a

few hundred feet off the ground, coming with inconceivable rapidity from the east.

“That isn’t the same one,” Baden rasped. “It simply couldn’t have moved fast enough to get over there. That’s another one.”

He thought rapidly. “Get out in the open, Danny,” he suddenly commanded. “Wave your hands, shout, fire your pistol, do anything!”

“B-but it’ll see me,” the gunner objected. “It’ll come down and grab me.”

“That’s just exactly what we want,” Baden answered. “You lure it down, and when that black hobgoblin jumps out, we’ll take over.”

“M-me wait for that metal giant to jump on me?” Danny protested.

“Yes, you! There’s a chance in a thousand that we may be able to capture it if we can get it to land. I’ve got an idea.” Baden quickly explained his plan.

“Oh, hell, here goes nothing,” Danny gulped resignedly. “But I sure h-hope your plan works!”

CHAPTER III

The Trick

“COME on down here, you big ball of cheese!” Danny yelled, firing his pistol and waving his arms.

“Come on down and fight like a man!”

Rolf Baden, crouched out of sight among the rocks, felt a lump rise in his throat as his companion's daring challenge rang out. Good old Danny, Baden thought. If his own plan failed, the price the little gunner would pay would be his life. Baden's lips set in a grim line at the thought. His plan *must* not fail!

He saw the sphere swerve in its headlong flight and shy away like a

skittish horse sighting a piece of paper. It had seen Danny, Baden knew. But would it descend? Or would it merely circle overhead, detect the trap, and bomb both of them out of existence?

It began to circle. Rolf Baden held his breath.

“Come on and help yourself to a chunk of me!” Danny yelled. Under his breath, he whispered, “Oh, R-Rolf, is e-everything all right, h-huh?”

“As right as we can make it, Danny,” Baden answered.

The huge ball dropped lower. It circled, settled, started to land, and then abruptly sprang into the air again. Baden did not move a muscle but his fingers ground into the butt of his pistol. The

sphere circled again. Then it landed! It seemed to sit and watch the puny, two-legged creature who had attracted its attention.

Danny moved toward it... Abruptly the door swung open. Clanking, the metal giant leaped out. It dived straight toward Danny Walker!

Baden leaped out of hiding. He heard Danny's yell of defiance change into a scream of terror as the giant scooped the gunner up with one sweeping flash of its metal arm. It turned back toward the sphere. Calmly, his arm as steady as a rock, not a trace of emotion on his bronze face, Rolf Baden fired a single shot. The slug was aimed at the long snaky cable stretching from the head of

the creature back into the sphere.

That was Baden's plan. To shoot the cable in two. The cable must serve to control the clanking monstrosity. If he could sever it—

The metal *giant* was already leaping toward the opening in the sphere when Baden's shot rang out. The big pilot was so close he could have touched the creature. He aimed at the spot where the cable entered the helmet.

And his shot went home! It struck its target! The cable jerked under the impact of the heavy bullet. A white shower of electrical sparks jetted out. With a sullen clank, the metal giant stopped moving. It stood for a second as though frozen. Then its arms relaxed and Danny Walker

leaped free. His jump threw the monster off balance. It fell like a tractor turning over.

“Y-you did it, Rolf! You did it!” the gunner exulted.

“Are you all right?” the big pilot fiercely demanded.

Danny hastily felt of himself. “J-just had the wind squeezed out of me. I’m all right.”

“Then come on,” Baden commanded, leaping toward the sphere.

The door was still open. He looked inside, gun ready, expecting to find someone seated at the controls. The controls were there, all right, a bank of levers and switches, but there was no one inside the sphere. The girl was

nowhere to be found.

“N-nobody home,” Danny gulped. “Rolf, this thing must work by remote control.”

“Probably,” the pilot answered, mystified. He stepped inside and began to look around. Danny Walker followed him.

“W-what are we going to do now?” the gunner demanded.

“We’re going up,” Baden answered. “Miss Chapman went up. We’re going to follow her.”

“B-but you don’t know how to fly this thing!”

“I can fly anything that has a motor,” Baden clipped. “Pull that cable inside and close the door. We’re going to take

off.”

DANNY yanked the end of the severed cable into the sphere. Oddly, it was no longer emitting sparks. He closed the heavy metal door. Instantly the sphere was filled with the roar of a heavy pulsation. Power to burn was being applied. The globe shot into the air.

“We’re going up!” Danny shouted. “You sure can fly anything!”

Baden was desperately working with the levers. There was a look of startled surprise on his face.

“Slow her down, Rolf,” Danny yelled, clutching at the sides to keep from being pushed to the floor by the tremendous acceleration. “We’re rising too fast.”

“I can’t!” Baden yelled. “I didn’t even start it. When you closed the door, the damned thing started automatically. There’s not a damned thing I can do to control it.”

The sphere hurtled upward, Baden trying to learn how to operate the levers.

“The controls seem to be locked,” he groaned at last.

“G-golly, where are we going?” Danny wailed.

“I don’t know,” Baden replied.

An hour later, however, he began to suspect the answer. The sphere was out of the atmosphere in minutes, but it was perfectly sealed, and a hidden mechanism seemed to be creating air. It kept rising. Long before two hours had

passed, Baden knew where the globe was heading. He pointed up in the sky toward the huge golden planet hanging there.

“This metal sphere didn’t come up out of the earth,” Baden said. “It came from the moon. And it’s returning there!”

There was no mistaking what was happening. Incredibly, impossibly, the sphere was driving straight out across space to the moon. Moving with tremendous speed, it covered the 240,000-mile distance from the earth in a few short hours. Rolf Baden gazed in stupefied amazement as the surface of the satellite came hurtling up toward them.

When he had first seen the metal

sphere, he had known he was on the trail of some tremendous mystery. But that the mystery would lead him to the moon, he had not the slightest intimation. And what was back of the mystery? What incredible secret had they stumbled into? The cold winds of rising fear played up and down the pilot's spine.

Far below them, slowing to a halt above the surface of the satellite, Rolf Baden caught a glimpse of another sphere; and he knew, without knowing how he knew it, that this was the globe in which Jean Chapman was held prisoner.

Then the rescuers' sphere began to slow up.

“W-we're g-going to land,” Danny

whispered. “Oh, golly, look! There’s a hole opening in the side of one of those m-mountains, and that’s-sphere is going right into it!”

The lunar landscape, seen at close range, was a tortuous jumble of cracked, distorted, broken mountains glittering in intensely brilliant sunlight. They had left Earth at night, with the moon in the sky, but here the sun was shining.

In the side of one of the cliffs, a dark opening had suddenly appeared. The kidnaper sphere ducked into it and out of sight. But the hole remained open.

“We’re going in, too,” Baden gritted.

The ball in which they were held captive slid into the opening and halted. Behind it the door closed. Ahead a

second huge portal began to open.

“It’s an airlock!” Baden exclaimed.

The two spheres moved through the lock and into a tremendous cavern. Hissing, they settled down to rest.

“L-look!” Danny whispered. “The place is l-lousy with those metal giants!”

“BADEN was already staring. His face was drawn and taut, his eyes wide as he tried to see everything at once. In a row against the farther wall, he saw dozens of the spheres arranged in an orderly manner like cars parked in a storage garage. There was a jumble of intricate machinery, the function of which Baden could not even begin to guess.

But the things that held his eyes were

the gigantic metal monsters. They seemed to be everywhere, exact duplicates of the one that had leaped from the sphere and had seized Jean Chapman, with this exception—the metal monsters here in this cavern did not have cables attached to them. Instead, their helmets were adorned with a spidery framework of wires.

Clanking, the creatures converged on the first sphere. Baden saw the door open and the metal occupant step out, the girl in his arms, the cable trailing behind him. Releasing the girl, he reached up and pulled the cable from his helmet. One of the other creatures promptly attached a spidery framework in the place where the cable had been,

plugging it in like a light cord in a socket. The girl cowered like a frightened rabbit, staring frantically at the creatures who surrounded her. One of them took hold of her arm, and the others started toward the second sphere.

“T-they’re coming for us,” Danny hissed. “Oh, Rolf, do you think those d-darned things are alive?”

“They can’t be alive,” Baden answered. “They simply must be robots worked by remote control.”

“W-what are we going to do?” Danny stuttered.

“What the hell can we do?” the big pilot answered. “Except keep our chins up and act like we owned the place!”

“O-okay. B-but I wish I was back on

E-Earth.”

“Keep your gun out of sight,” Baden commanded. “They may not search us.”

The door of their sphere was opened. Two unblinking eyes in a metallic head peered inside.

“They want us to c-come out,” Danny wailed.

“That’s exactly what we are going to do,” Baden answered.

HIS back straight, his shoulders square, he stepped from the sphere like a general reviewing his troops.

A robot took his arm with a firm grip. Baden made no attempt to resist. The strength in those steel fingers told him that resistance would be useless. The robot could tear him limb from limb.

Another robot took hold of Danny. They walked the two men over to where the girl stood.

“How did you get here?” she faltered.
“What happened?”

Baden told her about the second sphere, how they had captured it and how it in turn had captured them.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t intend to get you into a mess like this.”

“What I want to know is, what kind of a mess is this?” the big pilot demanded.
“What are these things, anyway?”

“I—I don’t know,” Jean Chapman replied.

Baden’s mouth snapped shut. If she wanted to pretend she didn’t know what was going on, there was nothing he

could do about it.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” the girl wailed, watching his face.

She was telling the truth! She wasn’t lying. Incredible as it seemed, she really didn’t know.

“All right, Jean,” Baden told her. “We’re in this mess together and we’ll try to fight our way out together.”

Clanking ponderously, the robots led them out of the main chamber, down a long corridor and, after opening a door, into another, smaller room. Baden saw that there had been machinery in this room very recently. The marks of heavy equipment were on the floor. But the machinery had all been removed. Now the only furnishings in the room were a

heavy chair and a crude bed. A man was lying on the bed, a raggedly clad, bearded, emaciated man. He sat up when they entered the room. Jean Chapman wrenched loose from the robot and flew straight to his arms.

“Dad!” she cried. “Dad!”

THAT single word and the sight of this man lying there closed a circuit in Rolf Baden’s mind. Ever since he had learned Jean Chapman’s name and had caught a glimpse of the machinery in that barn-like structure back on Earth, he had known he had seen the name somewhere before. But where? Now he remembered. A newspaper feature story flashed before his mind’s eye.

INVENTOR TO TRY FOR MOON

The story had read:

John Chapman, who claims to have invented a new type of rocket ship, plans to put his invention to the acid test tomorrow. From his laboratory on the coast of northern Maine, he will take off for the moon...

The account had run on at great length in a humorous vein. There had been pictures of Chapman and of his ship. Also, there had been a picture of “the attractive daughter of the inventor, Jean Chapman, who will remain here and operate the radio apparatus with which her father hopes to maintain contact with Earth on his daring voyage.”

Chapman had taken off on schedule, and when he had not returned, it was

assumed his ship had fallen into the Atlantic. The newspapers had commented on the passing of another crackpot inventor. The story was at least three years old, Baden recalled.

But Chapman hadn't fallen into the Atlantic. He hadn't been a crackpot inventor. He had been successful. He had landed on the moon. There was no refuting that he had reached Earth's satellite, for he was here now, frantically hugging his daughter.

But what had happened to him? And who were those robots? Were they Moon men? Why had they seized Jean Chapman and brought her here? Possessing the metal spheres, which were an almost perfect method of

crossing space, why hadn't they been on Earth before?

Moments later Jean Chapman introduced the two airmen to her father. Baden, even his iron control deserting him, as soon as the robots withdrew, broke out in a rash of questions.

“The robots were here when I landed,” John Chapman explained. “They captured me and have held me prisoner ever since. Even after three years I do not fully understand them, but I know this much: *In some uncanny and incredible way, they are alive.*”

“Alive!”

“Yes. But they are not Moon men. They did not originate here on the moon. They came here from somewhere else,

and they are a surveying party.”

“*A surveying party!*” Baden incredulously echoed. “What do you mean by that?”

CHAPTER IV

Surveyors of Space

JOHN CHAPMAN explained fully. “They belong to a race whose home is on one of the nearer star-clusters—which one I don’t know. It is an incredibly ancient race; it was old before our solar system was created. And this race for uncounted centuries has been sending exploring parties out across space, mapping and charting the worlds in the sky, looking for valuable mineral deposits, studying the life-forms on the various planets.

“That’s why I call the group that has captured us a surveying party. They’ve been surveying the solar system,

mapping the planets, the asteroid belt, Mars, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Earth—”

BADEN'S mind reeled with the immensity of the picture the old scientist was painting. A surveying party! Back on Earth, he knew surveying parties were frequently sent out, to map the headwaters of the Amazon, to explore the North Pole. Right at this moment Admiral Byrd was surveying the Antarctic. But that was on Earth. Surveying parties there crossed seas and mountains and deserts. This party here on the moon had crossed *space*. They were charting solar systems, star clusters, possibly even galaxies.

“They treated me well enough,” John Chapman continued. “They went to the

trouble of synthesizing food and water for me, but for that matter, we take good care of the animals in our zoos too. And that is the way they regarded me—as an intelligent, captivating pet, a curiosity to take home to the children—if they have any children and if they ever go home.”

There was unmistakable bitterness in the old scientist's voice.

“I take it something happened that made them change their minds about you,” Baden said.

“Yes,” Chapman answered. “They gave me free run of the place, except that I couldn't go near the spheres and I couldn't venture outside. Since I displayed some slight mechanical ability, they gave me tools to work with,

just as we give the monkeys in the zoo building blocks and balls, and watch them to see how smart they are.

“When I asked for tools and equipment, I got them, and the robots thought the electrical gadgets I built were darned cute—until they discovered I had built a radio set and was using it to communicate with my daughter back on Earth.”

Baden remembered it was Jean Chapman who had remained behind to operate the radio set on the Maine coast. How long had she kept a faithful vigil beside those silent instruments before a signal came through, he wondered. And how that first, faint signal must have thrilled her. He glanced at the pale girl.

She was standing beside her father.

“As soon as you started your radio transmitter, they decided their pet had displayed enough ingenuity?” Baden said.

“No, they didn’t discover my transmitter for a long time. I got the whole story back to Jean.”

“The devil you did!” Baden gasped. He looked again at the girl. “Why didn’t you advise the authorities and get somebody to help you?”

“I did!” the girl blazed. “I tried to tell everybody from the President of the United States down to the last subeditor of New York’s biggest newspaper. Every last one of them gave me a fish-eyed stare, as if they thought I was trying

to sell them something.

“Finally I realized that if I kept trying to tell my story, which I knew was the truth, but couldn’t begin to prove, it would get me a bed in a psychopathic ward.”

She began to cry. “Now, now, Jean.” her father soothed. “You did your best. It wasn’t your fault that nobody would believe you.”

“I’ll say it wasn’t,” Baden gritted. “But what happened when the robots discovered your radio set?”

CHAPMAN nodded toward the floor.

“You can see what happened. I had this room full of equipment. You can see where it rested.”

“They cleared it out, eh?”

“Before they did, I was able to get a warning message through to Jean, telling her to be on the lookout for anything. Knowing I had been communicating with her, they sent a sphere down to Earth to investigate. What happened to that sphere, daughter?”

“It miscalculated the greater gravity of Earth and buried itself in the ground when it landed.”

“S-so that was what was in that mysterious hole you were digging.” Danny spoke for the first time.

“Yes,” Jean admitted. “I saw it land. From my father’s description, I recognized it as being one of the space spheres of the creatures here on the moon. I was trying to dig down to it,

destroy its occupant, and use it to try to rescue my father.”

Baden's heart thrilled at the words. He was an adventurer and he had faced death in the four corners of the earth, but he had never seen a better grade of courage than that displayed by Jean Chapman in trying to dig up the buried sphere. She knew how dangerous it was but she had not hesitated. Instead, she had taken a shovel and a rifle and started digging.

He grinned at her and she smiled back at him.

“B-but what I want to know,” Danny demanded, “is w-what are they going to do with us, now that they have us?”

Chapman's eyes went from the two

men to his daughter.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “They seized Jean to keep the human race from learning about their existence. They have finished their survey of the solar system and are about ready to leave. But I don’t know what they’re going to do with us.”

His eyes were on the girl. There was pathos and tragedy in her face.

“Father!” she said. “You *do* know.”

The old man shook his head.

“You’re not telling the truth,” she said accusingly. “You’re keeping something back!”

“No,” her father miserably answered. “No.”

“You’re trying to make it easier for me,” she said. “Whatever it is, I can take

it. Are they going to take us back to their home world with them?”

“No,” the old man quavered. “Not that. We couldn’t stand the trip. It would take too long. We would die on the way.”

“Then what are they going to do?”

“Jean, please—” the old man begged.

“Are they going to invade Earth, destroy the human race?” Jean demanded.

“No. A thousand or possibly ten thousand years from now, they may return to this system, if they ever need the metals they have discovered here. But this is only a surveying and exploring party. It isn’t going to attack Earth.”

“Then what?” the girl insisted.

John Chapman looked at the floor.

“Remember, we’re like animals in a zoo to them. And now the keepers of the zoo are leaving. What will happen to the animals? They can’t return us to our homes. With the knowledge I now have, I could duplicate their space sphere in a few years.”

“So what are they going to do with us?” Baden said crisply. “We’re scarcely children, you know. Whatever it is, we can take it.”

“All right,” the old man said. “I’ll tell you. We’re animals in a zoo and the keepers are going away on a trip that will last for years. They don’t want the animals to starve, and they can’t turn

them loose. So they're going to do the only thing they can—painlessly put us to death.”

THE hiss of Jean Chapman's indrawn breath was loud in Rolf Baden's ears. There was a moment of stunned, horrified silence. Then Danny, drawing upon that hidden store of courage that sustained him when the situation became desperate, drawled,

“Painlessly put us to death, huh? Well, all I can say is that it's d-d-d-damned white of them!”

“We aren't dead yet,” Rolf Baden said grimly. He turned to the elderly inventor. “Isn't there anything we can do? If we promise never to attempt to construct one of their space spheres, do

you think they will take us back to Earth and release us?”

The old man slowly shook his head.

“I don't think there is a chance. They're coldly logical, utterly impersonal, and while they treated me all right, it was merely because I was an interesting scientific experiment. Also, they have made accurate estimates of the population of Earth, and they realize the human race would be a strong competitor if we had a method of crossing space.

“They have no intention of letting us develop to the point where they would have to fight us in the future. No, there is no hope in appealing to their better nature, for they haven't any. They are

making a great concession in killing us painlessly.”

The words had the finality of doom.

“Then,” said Baden bitterly, “is there anything we can do to save ourselves? You are familiar with these creatures. Do they have a weakness anywhere?”

The old man still shook his head.

“I had a plan worked out once, but there is no hope for it now,” he said hopelessly.

“What was your plan?” Baden insisted.

“It won’t work,” Chapman answered unhappily.

“How do you know it won’t?”

“Because it depended on a powerful radio transmitter I had built secretly. But

when they removed all my equipment, they took my transmitter with them. You probably don't know it but these creatures live on power, electrical power. In their space-crossing spheres they have powerful generators which they connect by means of a cable to themselves.

“Here in their caverns they have even more powerful generators, which ‘broadcast’ their energy. In order to give themselves greater freedom of motion than the cables would permit, they use power transmitted by radio, receiving the current through the antennae they wear on their forehead.

“My plan was to use my transmitter to block out their power; just as two radio

stations on Earth, if they are operating on the same wavelength, block out each other. This wouldn't kill them—nothing kills them short of complete destruction—but it would make them helpless. But it won't work now,”

Chapman finished with a hopeless shrug. “My transmitter is gone.”

Baden's mind was racing. He remembered how the robot, on entering the Moon cavern and emerging from the sphere, had disconnected the cable from the top of his head. Another robot had promptly plugged in an antennae.

“Why can't we destroy that radio transmitter?” Baden demanded.

Here was a chance, a thin one, but still a chance! Deprived of radiated

power, the robots would be helpless. For the first time John Chapman's face showed hope.

"It might work," he admitted. "If we could get to the radio room—"

"We have to get there!" Baden blazed. "Do you know where it is?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go!"

"But we can't get out of this room," Danny interrupted.

Baden was the picture of chagrin.

"Hell, that's right," he admitted.

"One trick the robots never knew was that their guinea pig had learned how to open the door of his prison," Chapman said. "I can open that door, but what if we run into some of the robots?"

“Shoot them,” Baden answered unhesitatingly. “We still have our guns. Shoot at the antennae on their heads! With that knocked out, they won’t be able to move.”

“We hope!” Danny amended. “What I want to know is, don’t these metal men have some g-guns of their own?”

Baden looked at the inventor for an answer.

“Yes,” Chapman said. “They have disintegrators that will melt solid rock. That’s how they dug these caverns.”

“To hell with the disintegrators!” Baden snarled. “Open that door!”

CHAPTER V

The Animals' Revolt

THEY were in the corridor, Chapman leading the way, Baden and Danny Walker with drawn guns, nervously alert. Danny's freckled face was wrinkled into a fighting snarl. All fear was gone from him. Baden's face showed nothing, but the big pilot knew how hopeless were the odds against them. At any minute they might run into one of the metal giants. Then, unless they could disable the antennae that fed power to the creature, they would be helpless.

But they were met by none of the robots.

“I think most of them are up in front getting the spheres ready for the trip home,” Chapman whispered. “And that’s a lucky break for us. But there are certain to be several of them in the room with the power transmitter. We’ll have to knock them out before they realize what is happening. And now that we have revolted against them, they will exterminate us mercilessly, without bothering to devise a painless death method.”

Three men and a girl against raiders out of space! Human flesh against steel, human strength against the resistless surge of electric current! All of the four knew that their lives were numbered in minutes. In spite of their show of

bravery, they knew they didn't have a chance. But because they were human, and because life was dear, they were going to exact as high a price as possible for the death they knew was coming.

Chapman, motioning them to move over against the wall, approached an opening.

“That is the entrance to the power room,” he whispered tersely. “The door is open.”

A throbbing roar was coming from the chamber, the hum of powerful generators.

“I'll go first,” said Rolf Baden, lifting his voice above the volume of sound. He glanced at Jean Chapman. Her face was white and bloodless but there was

resolution on it. She tried to smile at him.

Then, slowly and cautiously he thrust his head around the corner of the opening, and looked inside. It was a large room. Immediately to the right along the wall was a huge switchboard that apparently controlled the flow of current from the generators to the power transmitter.

“If we can only reach that switchboard, we’ll have a chance,” Baden gritted.

“Yeah, but look over there to the left,” Danny hissed.

There were at least six of the metal monsters on the left. They were as busy as bees around a device that looked like

a cross between a concrete mixer and a coast defense gun.

“Come on before they see us!” Baden gritted, diving into the room. The switchboard was only yards away. His first driving rush would take him to it. The metal monsters, busy around the machine, did not see him. Nor did Baden see the metal man standing beside the switchboard until he was completely in the room. The angle of the corner had kept Baden from seeing the creature.

The switchboard wasn't unguarded!

No surprise showed in the lensed eyes of the metal giant as he saw the human being hurtling toward him. No emotion could show in those lusterless orbs. But he reacted instantly. Clanking

ponderously, but moving with the tremendous swiftness of which his kind was capable, he stepped in front of the charging pilot.

Baden sent a slug through the spidery framework of the antennae on the monster's head. His heart was up in his mouth when he pulled the trigger. If the antennae were smashed, would the creature be unable to move? Chapman had said that this would happen, but was Chapman right? When Baden had shot the cable away from the robot's head back on Earth, the robot had stopped instantly. But would smashing the antennae have the same effect?

To Rolf Baden an eternity seemed to pass while he watched to see the effect

of his shot. The robot was moving toward him. And it kept coming! It kept moving. His shot hadn't disabled it. Their plan had failed!

INSTINCTIVELY Baden leaped to one side to avoid the rush of the monster. But the creature didn't swerve. It kept driving forward. With a thud like a truck hitting a brick wall, it fell to the floor. Fell, and didn't attempt to rise!

Stupefied, Baden stared at it. Then he realized what had happened. His shot had smashed the antennae but the robot had been in motion at the time and its inertia had kept it going until it fell.

“It works!” Baden exultantly thought. “Smash their antennae and they're powerless!”

He started again toward the switchboard.

The roar of a pistol behind him whirled him around. Danny was doing the shooting. The six robots who had been busy around the machine were driving toward them. They looked as big as six separate mountains. And in the next moment they were on the two airmen.

“Take this back to hell with you, you black devils!” Danny was roaring. Now that the need for silence was past, the gunner was using his voice. Danny Walker would die with a shout of defiance on his lips. And death was seconds off.

One of the robots, its antennae

shattered by a bullet, went down. But the other five kept coming. Rolf Baden began to shoot. He might have been at target practice for all the emotion he showed. Coolly and calmly, he brought the pistol up and fired. He saw the fragile antennae of the nearest monster crumple. One down.

But there were four more left. Baden shot again. Another went down. He pulled the trigger a third time. The gun clicked! He had not reloaded it after he had left Earth—no cartridges. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Danny snapping an empty weapon, too.

“This is the end, Danny,” he breathed, hurling the empty pistol at the metal monster looming over him.

“We’ll go out together.”

Then the black giant grabbed him. Fingers of steel closed around his body. He felt himself lifted. He fought with all his strength, but against the power that energized the creature his muscles were useless. Vaguely he saw Danny struggling in the grip of another of the monsters, struggling uselessly. Baden felt himself shaken like a dog shaking a rat. Only he was the rat and he was being shaken. Blackness began to close in on him. There was a growing roar in his ears—

Suddenly the roar stopped. The robot had quit shaking him. The strength went out of the monster’s steel fingers. Its grip began to relax. Baden slid exhausted to

the floor. Dazedly he stared around him, seeking an explanation for the fact that he was free. And found it. Jean Chapman and her father were at the switchboard. While he and Danny had fought the metal monsters, they had slipped unobtrusively into the room and had opened the switches, cutting off the flow of current through the power transmitter. The robots stood like suddenly frozen giants!

Danny struggled to his feet. Violently he shoved the creature that had held him. It tumbled over.

“Take that, darn you,” Danny growled. Then he ran to Baden, tried to help the pilot to his feet. “Are you all right, Rolf, huh?” he anxiously inquired. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” the pilot answered.

Whether or not he was all right didn't matter. There was only one thing that did matter. They had secured control of the power transmitter! The raiders out of space were now powerless!

“We'll return to that cavern at the entrance,” Rolf Baden said. “We'll take these damned robots apart, each and every one of them, and make certain this particular surveying party will never take a list of the wealth of the solar system back to whatever godforsaken world spawned them. Then we'll grab one of those interspatial spheres and head for home.”

“Home!” Danny echoed. “And this time,” he fiercely added, “we're going

to settle down and stop this damned fighting! Soldiers of fortune, nuts!”

“We’ve won!” John Chapman gasped. “I never thought it possible, but there is no doubt that every one of these metal devils is standing around powerless to move!”

HE broke off, to stare from horror-stricken eyes at the door. Baden turned to see what was attracting the inventor’s attention. He saw it—a sphere coming down the corridor, moving slowly but certainly toward the room.

“Some of the robots must have been working in the spheres,” Chapman stammered. “They were drawing current from the power supply within the spheres instead of from the radio

transmitter. Naturally, this first power supply remained on. But those robots working outside the spheres, using their antennae, stopped work the moment we turned off their ‘broadcast’ power supply.

“Their comrades, using the power source within the spheres naturally became alarmed, surmised what we were up to. So they carried the paralyzed robots inside and connected up their power cables. Now the whole mob of them is descending upon us in their spheres!”

“Close that door before that sphere gets in here!” Baden rasped. He and Danny leaped and closed the heavy metal barrier.

“That will stop those devils,” Danny said. “But what are we going to do? If they can’t get to us, neither can we get to them. We’re trapped in here!”

The gunner had voiced the truth. The four stared at each other.

“Not only that,” Chapman said. “But they will be able to melt that door down within a very short time. Those spheres are armed with disintegrators.”

As he spoke the hiss of heavy currents came from the corridor. Danny laid his hand against the door.

“They’ve already turned the juice on,” he said. “The door has begun to get hot.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Baden raged. “We’re caught like rats in a trap. Isn’t there any way we can get out

of here?”

“There are connecting corridors,” Chapman answered. “We can hide. But it won’t do us any good. They’ll find us in the end.”

“We’ll hide, then!” Baden commanded.

He started to marshal his three companions out of the room. Chapman stopped to stare with suddenly glowing eyes at the device the robots had been working on when the two men first entered the room.

“That’s one of their disintegrators,” he rapidly explained. “One of the big ones that they use to dig caverns with.”

“We’ll turn it on the spheres,” Baden shouted. “They’ll have a fancy time

getting into this place with one of their own weapons turned on them.”

The inventor leaped over to the huge weapon. He took one look at it and all the fire died out of his eyes.

“It’s all apart,” he said. “They were dismantling it when you came in.”

“Then we’ll put it together again,” Baden rasped. “You surely know how. All three of us will help you.”

“It will be a tough job,” Chapman said.

“But we’ll do it, huh, Rolf?” Danny chortled.

Working like fiends, they began to reassemble the bulky device. Parts were scattered all over the floor. Apparently the metal monsters had been taking it

apart, preparatory to putting it into one of the spheres for the return trip to their own world. Baden, glancing often toward the door, drove himself and the others like slaves. The inventor directed their efforts. Danny and Baden lifted the heavy parts. Jean Chapman helped where she could.

Smoke began to pour from the door.

“It’s g-going down,” Danny whispered.

“We only need minutes,” Chapman answered.

Sweat stood out all over the inventor’s face. His ragged clothes were wet with perspiration. But he worked like a madman. And Baden drove him to fiercer efforts.

Just as the door went down they fitted the last piece back into the disintegrator and swung the barrel around.

“I’ll aim,” Baden gritted, lining up the huge device.

The door went down into molten metal. A sphere came poking through.

“Fire!” Baden yelled.

A STREAK of bluish flame lanced out from the muzzle of the weapon. It swirled over the sphere in a coruscating blaze of blue-white radiance. So hot was the blast that the sphere literally seemed to burst into flame. The tough metal flared in great white-hot droplets, then burst into vapor. The occupant never had a chance.

“That will teach you something about

painless forms of death,” Baden raged. Inwardly he knew that the occupant of the sphere, whatever incredible form of life it possessed, had died so quickly that death was practically painless.

The first sphere was finished, then.

“But w-what about the others?” Danny quavered. “That cavern up in front is f-full of them. We may knock off one or two, but they’ll g-get us in the end.”

“So they will,” Baden answered. He thought rapidly, and turned to Chapman. “You say they used this disintegrator to dig this cavern?”

The inventor nodded.

“Then I know what we’ll do about that nest of spheres up in front,” Baden answered. “Come on, Danny. Put your

shoulder behind this thing and push.”

“W-what are you going to do?” the gunner demanded.

Baden told them.

It took the combined strength of all four to move the disintegrator. Fortunately it was mounted on wheels, for the robots had frequently found it necessary to move the device when they enlarged their caverns. An hour later, after pushing it along little-frequented corridors, Baden had it where he wanted it. He lined it up with the muzzle facing a blank wall.

“Turn the juice on,” he commanded.

The flame licked out, began to eat into the rock. It had blasted the sphere very rapidly, but it destroyed stone even

faster.

“G-golly, I hope your plan works,” Danny muttered.

“It will,” Baden answered grimly.

The beam ate into the stone like a knife slicing through butter. Rolf Baden swung it to the right and to the left, digging a gigantic horizontal groove in the rock. Then he swung it down. Suddenly the whole vast layer of rock gave way. Its support gone, cut loose from the top and the sides, the only thing it could do was fall. And it fell—straight into the cavern!

That was Baden’s plan. To use the disintegrator to cut away the roof of the cavern, releasing thousands of tons of rock to crash down on the spheres

below.

And it succeeded! Like a gigantic landslide, the roof began to fall. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of tons of rock started downward. The roof buckled in the middle, tremendous cracks spread rapidly through it. Then, like an avalanche gathering momentum and sweeping everything before it, it dropped downward.

The sound was like the roar of hundreds of cannon being fired in one vast chorus. The solid rock underfoot swayed and trembled. Gigantic thudding concussions sounded.

“Some of the spheres are exploding,” Chapman said breathlessly.

“The ones that explode will help to

smash the others,” Baden answered. The roar grew. The crash and thunder of falling stone was a continuous sound. Some of the spheres, rising rapidly, tried to force their way through the torrent raining down on them. Baden swung the disintegrator, sweeping it in great arcs. Flaming, the spheres plummeted downward. Slowly silence came. Slowly the thunder of falling stone died away.

“They’re finished!” Baden exulted. “They’re buried under more tons of rock than I can even count. This surveying party has met its Waterloo on the moon!”

WHAT he had done awed him. He had destroyed the advance guard of a race that was reaching out across space,

sprawling as conquerors over the worlds in the sky. If another surveying party came—Well, they would not come for many years. And the human race would be able to meet them then.

He looked at Jean Chapman. She was trying to smile.

“W-what I want to know is, h-how are we going to get home?” Danny suddenly demanded.

“Home!” There was startled surprise in Rolf Baden’s voice. “I never thought of that. We’ve destroyed all the spheres. How in hell can we get back to Earth?”

“I think,” Chapman interposed, “that if you can dig out one of those spheres, I can guarantee to repair it so it will make the trip back to Earth. It may take

months, however.”

“That’s all right with me,” Danny answered. “At least we’ll have a chance to settle down for a while.”

Rolf Baden looked at Jean Chapman.

“What do you say?” he asked her.

“That,” said the girl, coming into his arms, “is a leading question.”

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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