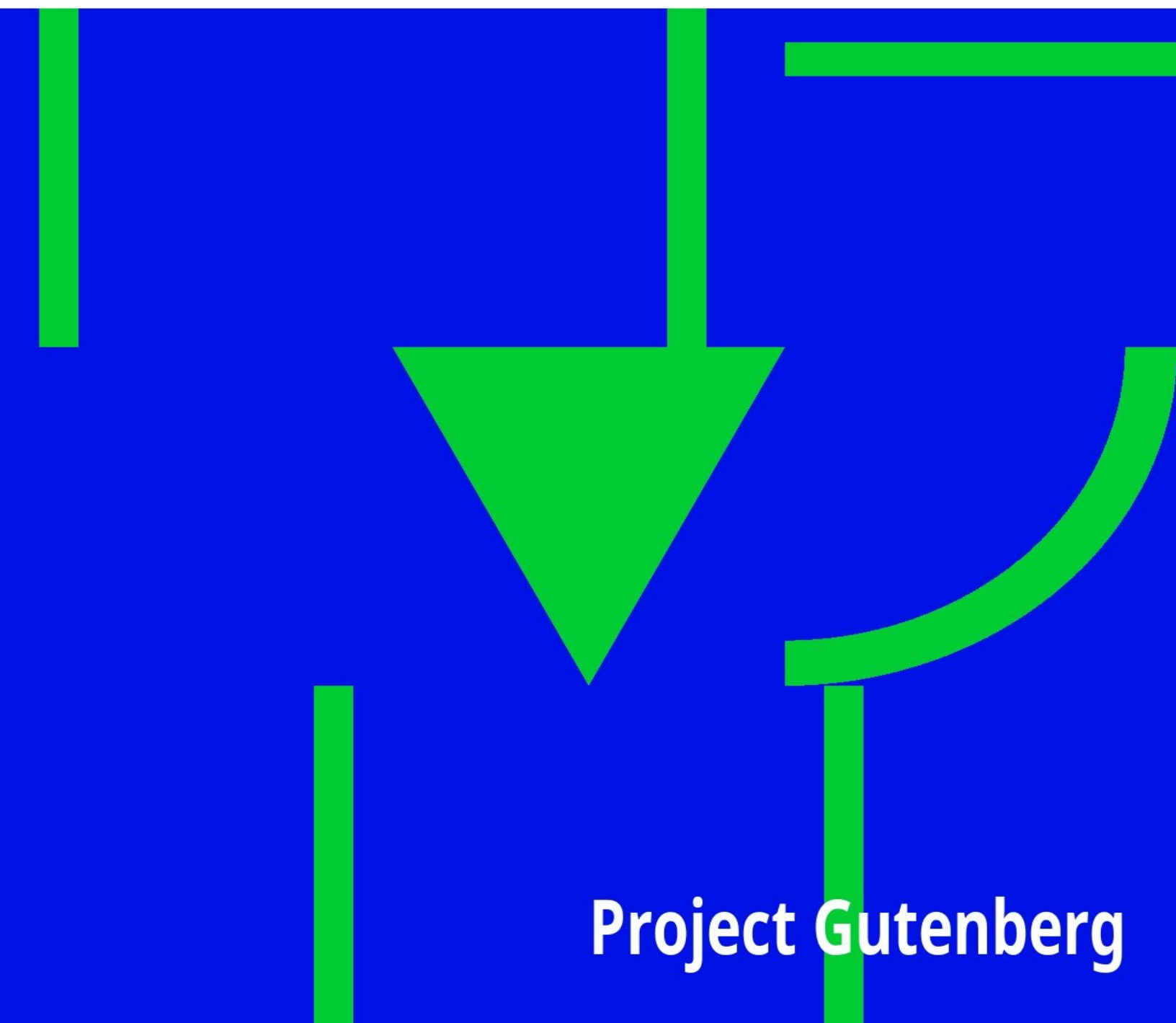


# The Sky Trap

Frank Belknap Long



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*Nothing affected it.*

# The SKY TRAP

by FRANK BELKNAP LONG

Lawton enjoyed a good fight. He stood happily trading blows with Slashaway Tommy, his lean-fleshed torso gleaming with sweat. He preferred to work the pugnacity out of himself slowly, to savor it as it ebbed.

"Better luck next time, Slashaway," he said, and unlimbered a left hook that thudded against his opponent's jaw with such violence that the big, hairy ape crumpled to the resin and rolled over on his back.

Lawton brushed a lock of rust-colored hair back from his brow and stared down at the limp figure lying on the descending stratoship's slightly tilted athletic deck.

"Good work, Slashaway," he said. "You're primitive and beetle-browed, but you've got what it takes."

Lawton flattered himself that he was the opposite of primitive. High in the sky he had predicted the weather for eight days running, with far more accuracy than he could have put into a punch.

They'd flash his report all over Earth in a couple of minutes now. From New York to London to Singapore and back. In half an hour he'd be donning street clothes and stepping out feeling darned good.

He had fulfilled his weekly obligation to society by manipulating meteorological instruments for forty-five minutes, high in the warm, upper stratosphere and worked off his pugnacity by knocking down a professional gym slugger. He would have a full, glorious week now to work off all his other drives.

The stratoship's commander, Captain Forrester, had come up, and was staring at him reproachfully. "Dave, I don't hold with the reforming Johnnies who want to re-make human nature from the ground up. But you've got to admit our generation knows how to keep things humming with a minimum of stress. We

don't have world wars now because we work off our pugnacity by sailing into gym sluggers eight or ten times a week. And since our romantic emotions can be taken care of by tactile television we're not at the mercy of every brainless bit of fluff's calculated ankle appeal."

Lawton turned, and regarded him quizzically. "Don't you suppose I realize that? You'd think I just blew in from Mars."

"All right. We have the outlets, the safety valves. They are supposed to keep us civilized. But you don't derive any benefit from them."

"The heck I don't. I exchange blows with Slashaway every time I board the Perseus. And as for women—well, there's just one woman in the world for me, and I wouldn't exchange her for all the Turkish images in the tactile broadcasts from Stamboul."

"Yes, I know. But you work off your primitive emotions with too much gusto. Even a cast-iron gym slugger can bruise. That last blow was—brutal. Just because Slashaway gets thumped and thudded all over by the medical staff twice a week doesn't mean he can take—"

The stratoship lurched suddenly. The deck heaved up under Lawton's feet, hurling him against Captain Forrester and spinning both men around so that they seemed to be waltzing together across the ship. The still limp gym slugger slid downward, colliding with a corrugated metal bulkhead and sloshing back and forth like a wet mackerel.

A full minute passed before Lawton could put a stop to that. Even while careening he had been alive to Slashaway's peril, and had tried to leap to his aid. But the ship's steadily increasing gyrations had hurled him away from the skipper and against a massive vaulting horse, barking the flesh from his shins and spilling him with violence onto the deck.

He crawled now toward the prone gym slugger on his hands and knees, his temples thudding. The gyrations ceased an instant before he reached Slashaway's side. With an effort he lifted the big man up, propped him against the bulkhead and shook him until his teeth rattled. "Slashaway," he muttered. "Slashaway, old fellow."

Slashaway opened blurred eyes, "Phew!" he muttered. "You sure socked me hard, sir."

"You went out like a light," explained Lawton gently. "A minute before the ship lurched."

"The ship *lurched*, sir?"

"Something's very wrong, Slashaway. The ship isn't moving. There are no vibrations and—Slashaway, are you hurt? Your skull thumped against that bulkhead so hard I was afraid—"

"Naw, I'm okay. Whatd'ya mean, the ship ain't moving? How could it stop?"

Lawton said. "I don't know, Slashaway." Helping the gym slugger to his feet he stared apprehensively about him. Captain Forrester was kneeling on the resin testing his hocks for sprains with splayed fingers, his features twitching.

"Hurt badly, sir?"

The Commander shook his head. "I don't think so. Dave, we are twenty thousand feet up, so how in hell could we be stationary in space?"

"It's all yours, skipper."

"I must say you're helpful."

Forrester got painfully to his feet and limped toward the athletic compartment's single quartz port—a small circle of radiance on a level with his eyes. As the port sloped downward at an angle of nearly sixty degrees all he could see was a diffuse glimmer until he wedged his brow in the observation visor and stared downward.

Lawton heard him suck in his breath sharply. "Well, sir?"

"There are thin cirrus clouds directly beneath us. They're not moving."

Lawton gasped, the sense of being in an impossible situation swelling to nightmare proportions within him. What could have happened?

Directly behind him, close to a bulkhead chronometer, which was clicking out the seconds with unabashed regularity, was a misty blue visiplate that merely had to be switched on to bring the pilots into view.

The Commander hobbled toward it, and manipulated a rheostat. The two pilots appeared side by side on the screen, sitting amidst a spidery network of dully gleaming pipe lines and nichrome humidification units. They had unbuttoned their high-altitude coats and their stratosphere helmets were resting on their knees. The Jablochoff candle light which flooded the pilot room accentuated the haggardness of their features, which were a sickly cadaverous hue.

The captain spoke directly into the visiplat. "What's wrong with the ship?" he demanded. "Why aren't we descending? Dawson, you do the talking!"

One of the pilots leaned tensely forward, his shoulders jerking. "We don't know, sir. The rotaries went dead when the ship started gyrating. We can't work the emergency torps and the temperature is rising."

"But—it defies all logic," Forrester muttered. "How could a metal ship weighing tons be suspended in the air like a balloon? It is stationary, but it is not buoyant. We seem in all respects to be *frozen in*."

"The explanation may be simpler than you dream," Lawton said. "When we've found the key."

The Captain swung toward him. "Could *you* find the key, Dave?"

"I should like to try. It may be hidden somewhere on the ship, and then again, it may not be. But I should like to go over the ship with a fine-tooth comb, and then I should like to go over *outside*, thoroughly. Suppose you make me an emergency mate and give me a *carte blanche*, sir."

Lawton got his *carte blanche*. For two hours he did nothing spectacular, but he went over every inch of the ship. He also lined up the crew and pumped them. The men were as completely in the dark as the pilots and the now completely recovered Slashaway, who was following Lawton about like a dotting seal.

"You're a right guy, sir. Another two or three cracks and my noggin would've split wide open."

"But not like an eggshell, Slashaway. Pig iron develops fissures under terrific pounding but your cranium seems to be more like tempered steel. Slashaway, you won't understand this, but I've got to talk to somebody and the Captain is too busy to listen.

"I went over the entire ship because I thought there might be a hidden source of

buoyancy somewhere. It would take a lot of air bubbles to turn this ship into a balloon, but there are large vacuum chambers under the multiple series condensers in the engine room which conceivably could have sucked in a helium leakage from the carbon pile valves. And there are bulkhead porosities which could have clogged."

"Yeah," muttered Slashaway, scratching his head. "I see what you mean, sir."

"It was no soap. There's nothing *inside* the ship that could possibly keep us up. Therefore there must be something outside that isn't air. We know there *is* air outside. We've stuck our heads out and sniffed it. And we've found out a curious thing.

"Along with the oxygen there is water vapor, but it isn't H<sub>2</sub>O. It's HO. A molecular arrangement like that occurs in the upper Solar atmosphere, but nowhere on Earth. And there's a thin sprinkling of hydrocarbon molecules out there too. Hydrocarbon appears ordinarily as methane gas, but out there it rings up as CH. Methane is CH<sub>4</sub>. And there are also scandium oxide molecules making unfamiliar faces at us. And oxide of boron—with an equational limp."

"Gee," muttered Slashaway. "We're up against it, eh?"

Lawton was squatting on his hams beside an emergency 'chute opening on the deck of the Penguin's weather observatory. He was letting down a spliced beryllium plumb line, his gaze riveted on the slowly turning horizontal drum of a windlass which contained more than two hundred feet of gleaming metal cordage.

Suddenly as he stared the drum stopped revolving. Lawton stiffened, a startled expression coming into his face. He had been playing a hunch that had seemed as insane, rationally considered, as his wild idea about the bulkhead porosities. For a moment he was stunned, unable to believe that he had struck pay dirt. The winch indicator stood at one hundred and three feet, giving him a rich, fruity yield of startlement.

One hundred feet below him the plummet rested on something solid that sustained it in space. Scarcely breathing, Lawton leaned over the windlass and stared downward. There was nothing visible between the ship and the fleecy clouds far below except a tiny black dot resting on vacancy and a thin beryllium plumb line ascending like an interrogation point from the dot to the 'chute opening.

"You see something down there?" Slashaway asked.

Lawton moved back from the windlass, his brain whirling. "Slashaway there's a solid surface directly beneath us, but it's completely invisible."

"You mean it's like a frozen cloud, sir?"

"No, Slashaway. It doesn't shimmer, or deflect light. Congealed water vapor would sink instantly to earth."

"You think it's all around us, sir?"

Lawton stared at Slashaway aghast. In his crude fumbblings the gym slugger had ripped a hidden fear right out of his subconsciousness into the light.

"I don't know, Slashaway," he muttered. "I'll get at that next."

A half hour later Lawton sat beside the captain's desk in the control room, his face drained of all color. He kept his gaze averted as he talked. A man who succeeds too well with an unpleasant task may develop a subconscious sense of guilt.

"Sir, we're suspended inside a hollow sphere which resembles a huge, floating soap bubble. Before we ripped through it it must have had a plastic surface. But now the tear has apparently healed over, and the shell all around us is as resistant as steel. We're completely bottled up, sir. I shot rocket leads in all directions to make certain."

The expression on Forrester's face sold mere amazement down the river. He could not have looked more startled if the nearer planets had yielded their secrets chillingly, and a super-race had appeared suddenly on Earth.

"Good God, Dave. Do you suppose something has happened to space?"

Lawton raised his eyes with a shudder. "Not necessarily, sir. Something has happened to *us*. We're floating through the sky in a huge, invisible bubble of some sort, but we don't know whether it has anything to do with space. It may be a meteorological phenomenon."

"You say we're floating?"



"We're floating slowly westward. The clouds beneath us have been receding for fifteen or twenty minutes now."

"Phew!" muttered Forrester. "That means we've got to—"

He broke off abruptly. The Perseus' radio operator was standing in the doorway, distress and indecision in his gaze. "Our reception is extremely sporadic, sir," he announced. "We can pick up a few of the stronger broadcasts, but our emergency signals haven't been answered."

"Keep trying," Forrester ordered.

"Aye, aye, sir."

The captain turned to Lawton. "Suppose we call it a bubble. Why are we suspended like this, immovably? Your rocket leads shot up, and the plumb line dropped one hundred feet. Why should the ship itself remain stationary?"

Lawton said: "The bubble must possess sufficient internal equilibrium to keep a big, heavy body suspended at its core. In other words, we must be suspended at the hub of converging energy lines."

"You mean we're surrounded by an electromagnetic field?"

Lawton frowned. "Not necessarily, sir. I'm simply pointing out that there must be an energy tug of *some* sort involved. Otherwise the ship would be resting on the inner surface of the bubble."

Forrester nodded grimly. "We should be thankful, I suppose, that we can move about inside the ship. Dave, do you think a man could descend to the inner surface?"

"I've no doubt that a man could, sir. Shall I let myself down?"

"Absolutely not. Damn it, Dave, I need your energies inside the ship. I could wish for a less impulsive first officer, but a man in my predicament can't be choosy."

"Then what *are* your orders, sir?"

"Orders? Do I have to order you to think? Is working something out for yourself such a strain? We're drifting straight toward the Atlantic Ocean. What do you propose to do about that?"

"I expect I'll have to do my best, sir."

Lawton's "best" conflicted dynamically with the captain's orders. Ten minutes later he was descending, hand over hand, on a swaying emergency ladder.

"Tough-fibered Davie goes down to look around," he grumbled.

He was conscious that he was flirting with danger. The air outside was breathable, but would the diffuse, unorthodox gases injure his lungs? He didn't know, couldn't be sure. But he had to admit that he felt all right *so far*. He was seventy feet below the ship and not at all dizzy. When he looked down he could see the purple domed summits of mountains between gaps in the fleecy cloud blanket.

He couldn't see the Atlantic Ocean—yet. He descended the last thirty feet with mounting confidence. At the end of the ladder he braced himself and let go.

He fell about six feet, landing on his rump on a spongy surface that bounced him back and forth. He was vaguely incredulous when he found himself sitting in the sky staring through his spread legs at clouds and mountains.

He took a deep breath. It struck him that the sensation of falling could be present without movement downward through space. He was beginning to experience such a sensation. His stomach twisted and his brain spun.

He was suddenly sorry he had tried this. It was so damnably unnerving he was afraid of losing all emotional control. He stared up, his eyes squinting against the sun. Far above him the gleaming, wedge-shaped bulk of the *Perseus* loomed colossally, blocking out a fifth of the sky.

Lowering his right hand he ran his fingers over the invisible surface beneath him. The surface felt rubbery, moist.

He got swayingly to his feet and made a perilous attempt to walk through the sky. Beneath his feet the mysterious surface crackled, and little sparks flew up about his legs. Abruptly he sat down again, his face ashen.

From the emergency 'chute opening far above a massive head appeared. "You all right, sir," Slashaway called, his voice vibrant with concern.

"Well, I—"

"You'd better come right up, sir. Captain's orders."

"All right," Lawton shouted. "Let the ladder down another ten feet."

Lawton ascended rapidly, resentment smouldering within him. What right had the skipper to interfere? He had passed the buck, hadn't he?

Lawton got another bad jolt the instant he emerged through the 'chute opening. Captain Forrester was leaning against a parachute rack gasping for breath, his face a livid hue.

Slashaway looked equally bad. His jaw muscles were twitching and he was tugging at the collar of his gym suit.

Forrester gasped: "Dave, I tried to move the ship. I didn't know you were outside."

"Good God, you didn't know—"

"The rotaries backfired and used up all the oxygen in the engine room. Worse, there's been a carbonic oxide seepage. The air is contaminated throughout the ship. We'll have to open the ventilation valves immediately. I've been waiting to see if—if you could breathe down there. You're all right, aren't you? The air is breathable?"

Lawton's face was dark with fury. "I was an experimental rat in the sky, eh?"

"Look, Dave, we're all in danger. Don't stand there glaring at me. Naturally I waited. I have my crew to think of."

"Well, think of them. Get those valves open before we all have convulsions."

A half hour later charcoal gas was mingling with oxygen outside the ship, and the crew was breathing it in again gratefully. Thinly dispersed, and mixed with oxygen it seemed all right. But Lawton had misgivings. No matter how attenuated a lethal gas is it is never entirely harmless. To make matters worse, they were over the Atlantic Ocean.

Far beneath them was an emerald turbulence, half obscured by eastward moving cloud masses. The bubble was holding, but the morale of the crew was beginning to sag.

Lawton paced the control room. Deep within him unsuspected energies surged. "We'll last until the oxygen is breathed up," he exclaimed. "We'll have four or five days, at most. But we seem to be traveling faster than an ocean liner. With luck, we'll be in Europe before we become carbon dioxide breathers."

"Will that help matters, Dave?" said the captain wearily.

"If we can blast our way out, it will."

The Captain's sagging body jackknifed erect. "Blast our way out? What do you mean, Dave?"

"I've clamped expulsor disks on the cosmic ray absorbers and trained them downward. A thin stream of accidental neutrons directed against the bottom of the bubble may disrupt its energies—wear it thin. It's a long gamble, but worth taking. We're staking nothing, remember?"

Forrester sputtered: "Nothing but our lives! If you blast a hole in the bubble you'll destroy its energy balance. Did that occur to you? Inside a lopsided bubble we may careen dangerously or fall into the sea before we can get the rotaries started."

"I thought of that. The pilots are standing by to start the rotaries the instant we lurch. If we succeed in making a rent in the bubble we'll break out the helicoptic vanes and descend vertically. The rotaries won't backfire again. I've had their burnt-out cylinder heads replaced."

An agitated voice came from the visiplat on the captain's desk: "Tuning in, sir."

Lawton stopped pacing abruptly. He swung about and grasped the desk edge with both hands, his head touching Forrester's as the two men stared down at the horizontal face of petty officer James Caldwell.

Caldwell wasn't more than twenty-two or three, but the screen's opalescence silvered his hair and misted the outlines of his jaw, giving him an aspect of senility.

"Well, young man," Forrester growled. "What is it? What do you want?"

The irritation in the captain's voice seemed to increase Caldwell's agitation. Lawton had to say: "All right, lad, let's have it," before the information which he had seemed bursting to impart could be wrenched out of him.

It came in erratic spurts. "The bubble is all blooming, sir. All around inside there are big yellow and purple growths. It started up above, and—and spread around. First there was just a clouding over of the sky, sir, and then—stalks shot out."

For a moment Lawton felt as though all sanity had been squeezed from his brain. Twice he started to ask a question and thought better of it.

Pumpings were superfluous when he could confirm Caldwell's statement in half a minute for himself. If Caldwell had cracked up—

Caldwell hadn't cracked. When Lawton walked to the quartz port and stared down all the blood drained from his face.

The vegetation was luxuriant, and unearthly. Floating in the sky were serpentine tendrils as thick as a man's wrist, purplish flowers and ropy fungus growths. They twisted and writhed and shot out in all directions, creating a tangle immediately beneath him and curving up toward the ship amidst a welter of seed pods.

He could see the seeds dropping—dropping from pods which reminded him of the darkly horned skate egg sheaths which he had collected in his boyhood from sea beaches at ebb tide.

It was the *unwholesomeness* of the vegetation which chiefly unnerved him. It looked dank, malarial. There were decaying patches on the fungus growths and a miasmatic mist was descending from it toward the ship.

The control room was completely still when he turned from the quartz port to meet Forrester's startled gaze.

"Dave, what does it mean?" The question burst explosively from the captain's lips.

"It means—life has appeared and evolved and grown rotten ripe inside the bubble, sir. All in the space of an hour or so."

"But that's—*impossible*."

Lawton shook his head. "It isn't at all, sir. We've had it drummed into us that evolution proceeds at a snailish pace, but what proof have we that it can't mutate with lightning-like rapidity? I've told you there are gases outside we can't even make in a chemical laboratory, molecular arrangements that are alien to earth."

"But plants derive nourishment from the soil," interpolated Forrester.

"I know. But if there are alien gases in the air the surface of the bubble must be reeking with unheard of chemicals. There may be compounds inside the bubble which have so sped up organic processes that a hundred million year cycle of mutations has been telescoped into an hour."

Lawton was pacing the floor again. "It would be simpler to assume that seeds of existing plants became somehow caught up and imprisoned in the bubble. But the plants around us never existed on earth. I'm no botanist, but I know what the Congo has on tap, and the great rain forests of the Amazon."

"Dave, if the growth continues it will fill the bubble. It will choke off all our air."

"Don't you suppose I realize that? We've got to destroy that growth before it destroys us."

It was pitiful to watch the crew's morale sag. The miasmal taint of the ominously proliferating vegetation was soon pervading the ship, spreading demoralization everywhere.

It was particularly awful straight down. Above a ropy tangle of livid vines and creepers a kingly stench weed towered, purplish and bloated and weighted down with seed pods.

It seemed sentient, somehow. It was growing so fast that the evil odor which poured from it could be correlated with the increase of tension inside the ship. From that particular plant, minute by slow minute, there surged a continuously mounting offensiveness, like nothing Lawton had ever smelt before.

The bubble had become a blooming horror sailing slowly westward above the storm-tossed Atlantic. And all the chemical agents which Lawton sprayed through the ventilation valves failed to impede the growth or destroy a single seed pod.

It was difficult to kill plant life with chemicals which were not harmful to man. Lawton took dangerous risks, increasing the unwholesomeness of their rapidly dwindling air supply by spraying out a thin diffusion of problematically poisonous acids.

It was no sale. The growths increased by leaps and bounds, as though determined to show their resentment of the measures taken against them by marshalling all their forces in a demoralizing plantkrieg.

Thwarted, desperate, Lawton played his last card. He sent five members of the crew, equipped with blow guns. They returned screaming. Lawton had to fortify himself with a double whiskey soda before he could face the look of reproach in their eyes long enough to get all of the prickles out of them.

From then on pandemonium reigned. Blue funk seized the petty officers while some of the crew ran amuck. One member of the engine watch attacked four of his companions with a wrench; another went into the ship's kitchen and slashed himself with a paring knife. The assistant engineer leapt through a 'chute opening, after avowing that he preferred impalement to suffocation.

He *was* impaled. It was horrible. Looking down Lawton could see his twisted body dangling on a crimson-stippled thornlike growth forty feet in height.

Slashaway was standing at his elbow in that Waterloo moment, his rough-hewn features twitching. "I can't stand it, sir. It's driving me squirrely."

"I know, Slashaway. There's something worse than marijuana weed down there."

Slashaway swallowed hard. "That poor guy down there did the wise thing."

Lawton husked: "Stamp on that idea, Slashaway—kill it. We're stronger than he was. There isn't an ounce of weakness in us. We've got what it takes."

"A guy can stand just so much."

"Bosh. There's no limit to what a man can stand."

From the visiplat behind them came an urgent voice: "Radio room tuning in, sir."

Lawton swung about. On the flickering screen the foggy outlines of a face appeared and coalesced into sharpness.

The Perseus radio operator was breathless with excitement. "Our reception is improving, sir. European short waves are coming in strong. The static is terrific, but we're getting every station on the continent, and most of the American stations."

Lawton's eyes narrowed to exultant slits. He spat on the deck, a slow tremor shaking him.

"Slashaway, did you hear that? *We've done it*. We've won against hell and high water."

"We done what, sir?"

"The bubble, you ape—it must be wearing thin. Hell's bells, do you have to stand there gaping like a moronic ninepin? I tell you, we've got it licked."

"I can't stand it, sir. I'm going nuts."

"No you're not. You're slugging the thing inside you that wants to quit. Slashaway, I'm going to give the crew a first-class pep talk. There'll be no stampeding while I'm in command here."

He turned to the radio operator. "Tune in the control room. Tell the captain I want every member of the crew lined up on this screen immediately."

The face in the visiplate paled. "I can't do that, sir. Ship's regulations—"

Lawton transfixed the operator with an irate stare. "The captain told you to report directly to me, didn't he?"

"Yes sir, but—"

"If you don't want to be cashiered, *snap into it*."

"Yes—yessir."

The captain's startled face preceded the duty-muster visiview by a full minute, seeming to project outward from the screen. The veins on his neck were thick blue cords.

"Dave," he croaked. "Are you out of your mind? What good will talking do *now*?"

"Are the men lined up?" Lawton rapped, impatiently.

Forrester nodded. "They're all in the engine room, Dave."

"Good. Block them in."

The captain's face receded, and a scene of tragic horror filled the opalescent



visiplate. The men were not standing at attention at all. They were slumping against the Perseus' central charging plant in attitudes of abject despair.

Madness burned in the eyes of three or four of them. Others had torn open their shirts, and raked their flesh with their nails. Petty officer Caldwell was standing as straight as a totem pole, clenching and unclenching his hands. The second assistant engineer was sticking out his tongue. His face was deadpan, which made what was obviously a terror reflex look like an idiot's grimace.

Lawton moistened his lips. "Men, listen to me. There is some sort of plant outside that is giving off deliriant fumes. A few of us seem to be immune to it.

"I'm not immune, but I'm fighting it, and all of you boys can fight it too. I want you to fight it to the top of your courage. You can fight *anything* when you know that just around the corner is freedom from a beastliness that deserves to be licked—even if it's only a plant.

"Men, we're blasting our way free. The bubble's wearing thin. Any minute now the plants beneath us may fall with a soggy plop into the Atlantic Ocean.

"I want every man jack aboard this ship to stand at his post and obey orders. Right this minute you look like something the cat dragged in. But most men who cover themselves with glory start off looking even worse than you do."

He smiled wryly.

"I guess that's all. I've never had to make a speech in my life, and I'd hate like hell to start now."

It was petty officer Caldwell who started the chant. He started it, and the men took it up until it was coming from all of them in a full-throated roar.

I'm a tough, true-hearted skyman,  
Careless and all that, d'ye see?  
Never at fate a railer,  
What is time or tide to me?

All must die when fate shall will it,  
I can never die but once,

I'm a tough, true-hearted skyman;  
He who fears death is a dunce.

Lawton squared his shoulders. With a crew like that nothing could stop him! Ah, his energies were surging high. The deliriant weed held no terrors for him now. They were stout-hearted lads and he'd go to hell with them cheerfully, if need be.

It wasn't easy to wait. The next half hour was filled with a steadily mounting tension as Lawton moved like a young tornado about the ship, issuing orders and seeing that each man was at his post.

"Steady, Jimmy. The way to fight a deliriant is to keep your mind on a set task. Keep sweating, lad."

"Harry, that winch needs tightening. We can't afford to miss a trick."

"Yeah, it will come suddenly. We've got to get the rotaries started the instant the bottom drops out."

He was with the captain and Slashaway in the control room when it came. There was a sudden, grinding jolt, and the captain's desk started moving toward the quartz port, carrying Lawton with it.

"Holy Jiminy cricket," exclaimed Slashaway.

The deck tilted sharply; then righted itself. A sudden gush of clear, cold air came through the ventilation valves as the triple rotaries started up with a roar.

Lawton and the captain reached the quartz port simultaneously. Shoulder to shoulder they stood staring down at the storm-tossed Atlantic, electrified by what they saw.

Floating on the waves far beneath them was an undulating mass of vegetation, its surface flecked with glinting foam. As it rose and fell in waning sunlight a tainted seepage spread about it, defiling the clean surface of the sea.

But it wasn't the floating mass which drew a gasp from Forrester, and caused Lawton's scalp to prickle. Crawling slowly across that Sargasso-like island of noxious vegetation was a huge, elongated shape which bore a nauseous resemblance to a mottled garden slug.

Forrester was trembling visibly when he turned from the quartz port.

"God, Dave, that would have been the *last straw*. Animal life. Dave, I—I can't realize we're actually out of it."

"We're out, all right," Lawton said, hoarsely. "Just in time, too. Skipper, you'd better issue grog all around. The men will be needing it. I'm taking mine straight. You've accused me of being primitive. Wait till you see me an hour from now."

Dr. Stephen Halday stood in the door of his Appalachian mountain laboratory staring out into the pine-scented dusk, a worried expression on his bland, small-featured face. It had happened again. A portion of his experiment had soared skyward, in a very loose group of highly energized wavicles. He wondered if it wouldn't form a sort of sub-electronic macrocosm high in the stratosphere, altering even the air and dust particles which had spurted up with it, its uncharged atomic particles combining with hydrogen and creating new molecular arrangements.

If such were the case there would be eight of them now. *His* bubbles, floating through the sky. They couldn't possibly harm anything—way up there in the stratosphere. But he felt a little uneasy about it all the same. He'd have to be more careful in the future, he told himself. Much more careful. He didn't want the Controllers to turn back the clock of civilization a century by stopping all atom-smashing experiments.

**Transcriber's Note:**

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