

I, ROCKET

AT THE RATE THINGS ARE COMING AND GOING, IT'LL TAKE A FEW HUNDRED YEARS TO BREAK ME DOWN INTO RUST AND CORROSION... MAYBE LONGER. IN THE MEANTIME, I'LL HAVE MANY DAYS AND NIGHTS TO THINK IT OVER. YOU CAN'T STOP ATOMS FROM REVOLVING AND HUMMING THEIR LIFE-ORBITS INSIDE METAL. THAT'S HOW METAL LIVES ITS OWN SPECIAL LIFE. THAT'S HOW METAL THINKS. WHERE I LIE IS A BARREN, PEBBLED PLATEAU, WITH PALE, WEEDY GROWTHS AND A FEW HUNCHED TREES COMING UP OUT OF PLANETOID ROCK. THERE'S A WIND COMES OVER THE PLATEAU EVERY MORNING. THERE'S RAIN COMES IN THE TWILIGHT, AND A SILENCE COMES DOWN EVEN CLOSER IN THE NIGHT. THAT'S MY WHOLE LIFE, NOW... LYING HERE WITH MY JETS TWISTED AND MY FORE-PLATES BASHED...

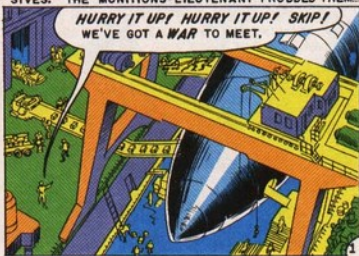
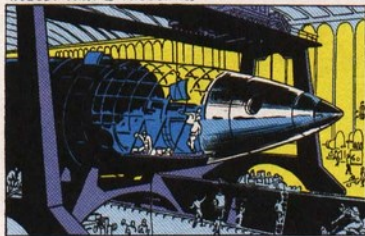


BUT WHILE I'M RUSTING AND WONDERING, I CAN THINK IT ALL OVER...
HOW I CAME TO BE HERE, HOW I CAME TO BE BUILT...

I WAS A WAR ROCKET. MY BIRTH-PERIOD, AND THE BASE WHERE I WAS INTEGRATED... SKELETON, SKIN, AND INNARDS... WENT THROUGH THE USUAL BIRTH-PAINS. IT IS A DIM PORTION IN MY MEMORY, BUT WHEN THE FINAL HULL WAS MELTED TO ME, THE AWARENESS WAS THERE. A **METAL** AWARENESS. I COULD THINK, BUT TELL NOBODY THAT I THOUGHT...

FORE AND AFT THEY PLACED THEIR SPACE-ARTILLERY NOZZLES, AND WEIGHTED ME WITH SCARLET AMMUNITION. I BEGAN TO FEEL MY PURPOSE, EXPECTANTLY, PERHAPS A BIT IMPATIENTLY. MEN HUSTLED IN AND OUT OF ME WITH SMALL RUBBER-TIRED TRUCKS BEARING EXPLOSIVES. THE MUNITIONS-LIEUTENANT PRODDED THEM...

HURRY IT UP! HURRY IT UP! SKIP!
WE'VE GOT A WAR TO MEET.



THEN THERE WAS SOME FANCY BUSINESS ABOUT A CHRISTENING. SOME OFFICIAL'S DAUGHTER CRASHED A BOTTLE OF FOAMING LIQUOR ON MY PROW. A FEW REPORTERS FLICKED THEIR CAMERAS. AND A SMALL CROWD PUT UP THEIR HANDS, WAVED THEM, AND PUT THEM DOWN, AS IF THEY REALIZED HOW STUPID IT REALLY WAS WASTING THAT FINE CHAMPAGNE...



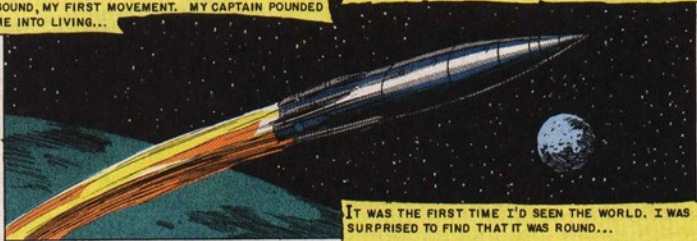
THEY RAPPED ME TIGHT. THEY EXPELLED THE CROWD. SIRENS SHOUTED ACROSS THE BASE APRON. THE CREW DID THINGS TO MY ALIMENTARY CANAL. THE CAPTAIN SHOUTED. THAT WAS THE SLAP ON MY BACK THAT BROUGHT ME MY FIRST BREATH, MY FIRST SOUND, MY FIRST MOVEMENT. MY CAPTAIN POUNDED ME INTO LIVING...

AND THEN I SAW THE CAPTAIN, METAL BLESS HIM, FOR THE FIRST TIME. HE CAME RUNNING ACROSS THE FIELD, THE MASTER OF MY FATE... THE CAPTAIN OF MY SOUL. I LIKED HIM RIGHT OFF. HE STOMPED ABOARD AND CRACKED OUT ORDERS...

Snap it! GET RID OF THAT DAME, AND THOSE REPORTERS OUT THERE. CLEAR THE APRON! SEAL THE LOCKS! CLAMP PORTS! WE'RE PUSHING THE BLAZES OUT OF HERE!



I THREW OUT WINGS OF FIRE AND SMOKE. SUDDENLY I WASN'T METAL LYING IN THE SUN ANY MORE. I WAS THE BIGGEST DARN BIRD THAT EVER SANG INTO THE SKY. MAYBE MY VOICE WASN'T ANYTHING BUT THUNDER, BUT IT WAS STILL SINGING TO ME. I SANG LOUD AND I SANG LONG...



IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'D SEEN THE WORLD. I WAS SURPRISED TO FIND THAT IT WAS ROUND...

YES, I LIKED MY CAPTAIN. HIS NAME WAS LAMB. IRONIC FOR A MAN LACKING LAMB-LIKE QUALITIES. CAPTAIN LAMB SAT IN MY CONTROL ROOM, CRACKING HIS KNUCKLES...

YES. SHE'S A GOOD SHIP! A FINE SHIP. WE'LL POUND THE HOLY MARROW OUT OF THOSE MARTIANS.

THE YOUNG MAN NAMED CONRAD SAT BESIDE THE CAPTAIN AT THE DUO-CONTROLS...

WE'D BETTER. THERE'S A GIRL WAITING IN YORK PORT FOR US TO COME BACK

US! BOTH OF YOU? YOU AND HILLARY?



THE TWO OF US. BOTH ON THE SAME WAR-ROCKET. AT LEAST I CAN KEEP MY EYE ON HIM. I'LL KNOW HE'S NOT DOWN THERE SCUDDING ALONG ON MY ACCELERATION.

SPACE IS A FUNNY PLACE TO TALK ABOUT LOVE. IT'S LIKE LAUGHING OUT LOUD IN A BIG CATHEDRAL... TRYING TO MAKE A WALTZ OUT OF A HYMN.



THEY WERE PART OF ME... LAMB AND CONRAD AND THE CREW. LIKE BLOOD CORPUSCLES PULSING IN THE ARTERIES OF A WARM BODY. AND LIKE ANY BODY, THERE WERE MICROBES TOO. DESTROYING ELEMENTS. THEIR NAMES WERE LARION AND BELLOC...

NOW AS FAR AS KILLING LAMB GOES... THAT'S OUT! WE'RE ONLY TWO AGAINST THE REST. I WANT TO COLLECT THAT MONEY WE'RE GUARANTEED...



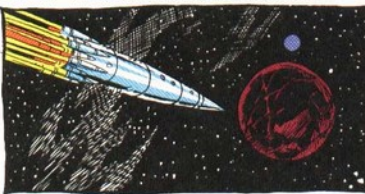
SELF-PRESERVATION IS AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING THING. YOU FIND IT IN METAL AS YOU FIND IT IN MEN. MY BODY WAS TO BE ATTACKED. FROM OUTSIDE I FEARED NOTHING. FROM INSIDE, I WAS UNCERTAIN. I DIDN'T APPROVE OF THE IDEA...

LARION. BELLOC. GOING BELOW? I'LL BE DOWN IN THIRTY MINUTES. WE'LL CHECK THE AUXILIARIES TOGETHER.

RIGHT, SIR. C'MON, BELLOC.



MARS CAME UP AHEAD LIKE A RUDDY DROP OF DRIED BLOOD. THE WAR I'D NEVER SEEN BUT ALWAYS HEARD ABOUT WAS OUT THERE. I WANTED TO BE PART OF IT. I WANTED TO GET THERE WITH LAMB AND HILLARY AND CONRAD AND THE OTHERS. LARION CLIMBING RUNGS, ON HIS WAY TO GET THE TIME-BOMB, BELLOC, WAITING BELOW. TIME GETTING SHORTER... SHORTER...



A WELL-PLACED TIME-BOMB SHOULD WORK MIRACLES WITH THE MAIN JET-ENGINE. AND WHEN IT HAPPENS, WE CAN BE OUT AND AWAY IN SPACE IN PLENTY OF TIME.

SEEMS A SHAME. NICE NEW ROCKET, NEVER TESTED BEFORE. AND IT ALL GOES BOOM BEFORE IT HAS PROVEN ITSELF...



DON'T GET SENTIMENTAL, BELLOC. YOU'RE GETTING PAID FOR IT. NOW HERE'S THE PLAN. THERE'S A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF CONFUSION DURING THE SHIFT CHANGE-OVER. HALF THE CREW'S GROGGY. THE OTHER HALF'S TOO TIRED TO WORRY. NOW, DURING THE NEXT CHANGE-OVER, WE'LL...



LARION AND BELLOC WENT BELOW TO THEIR STATIONS. THE CHANGE-OVER PROCEEDED. THE POISON WAS IN MY HEART... WAITING...

DID YOU CHECK THE LIFE-BOATS, BELLOC?

NUMBER THREE BOAT'S READY TO GO. LET'S GET THIS OVER WITH...



I THOUGHT ABOUT CAPTAIN LAMB AND THE WAY HE BARKED ORDERS, ABOUT HILLARY AND CONRAD THINKING ABOUT A WOMAN'S LIPS, ABOUT BELLOC, WAITING. AND SUDDENLY... THERE WAS A HISS, AN EXPLOSION...



SOMEBODY SCREAMED. I KNEW WHO IT WAS AND WHERE IT WAS AND WHAT IT WAS...

WARNING BELLS CLAMORED THROUGH ME. CONRAD SCUTTLED DOWN THE WALLS, YELLING. HE VANISHED TOWARD THE ENGINE ROOM...

IT'S DOWN THERE...



HILLARY GRABBED THE SHIP'S CONTROLS AND FROZE THEM, LISTENING AND WAITING. HE SAID ONE WORD...

ALICE...



THE CAPTAIN GOT THERE FIRST. HE TOOK ONE LOOK AND SCREAMED...

CUT THE FEED VALVE... FOR GOD'S SAKE!



CONRAD GRASPED A VALVE-WHEEL GLINTING ON THE WALL, TWISTING IT, GRUNTING. THE LOUD GUSHING NOISE STOPPED. STEAM-CLOUDS BILLOWED IN MY HEART, WRAPPING CAPTAIN LAMP AND THE OTHERS TIGHT... MAKING THEM COUGH...

CHOKE...

WHAT HAPPENED...

IT'S BELLOC...



MY VACUUM VENTILATORS BEGAN HUMMING, CLEARING THE STEAM. THEY SAW BELLOC, LYING THERE. HE SAID NOT A WORD TO ANYBODY. HE JUST BLEED WHERE THE EXPLODED OIL-PIPE HAD CAUGHT HIM ON THE NOSE AND CHEEK AND PLUNGED ON BACK INTO HIS BRAIN...

HE'S... DEAD.

I...I CAN'T UNDERSTAND IT. I CHECKED THOSE OIL-LINES THIS MORNING. THEY WERE OKAY! I DON'T SEE...



FOOTSTEPS ON THE RUNGS. LARION CAME DOWN. HE LOOKED AS IF SOMEBODY'D KICKED HIM IN THE STOMACH WHEN HE SAW BELLOC LYING THERE. HIS FACE SUCKED BONE-WHITE, STARING. HIS JAW DROPPED...

YOU... YOU KILLED HIM! YOU FOUND OUT... FOUND OUT WHAT WE WERE GOING TO DO AND YOU KILLED HIM. WELL, I'LL SHOW YOU...

WHAT?



LARION BEGAN TO LAUGH. HE DARTED ABOUT SUDDENLY AND LEAPED UP THE LADDER RUNGS...

I'LL SHOW YOU...

STOP HIM...



CONRAD RUSHED UP THE LADDER AT LARION'S HEELS. CAPTAIN LAMB WATCHED THEM GO, LISTENING TO THE FADING FEET ON THE RUNG, GOING UP AND UP...

WATCH IT...



A FEW MINUTES LATER, CONRAD CAME BACK DOWN THE LADDER. HE HELD UP THE TIME-BOMB...

IT'S A GOOD THING THAT OIL-PIPE BURST, CAR LARION TRIED TO HIDE THIS IN SUPPLY. IT'S A BOMB. HE AND BELLOC...

WHAT ABOUT LARION?



HE TRIED TO ESCAPE THROUGH AN EMERGENCY LIFE-BOAT AIR-LOCK. THE FOOL WAS IN TOO MUCH OF A HURRY. HE OPENED THE OUTER DOOR TOO SOON AND WAS SUCKED OUT INTO SPACE. HE'S GONE FOR GOOD...



THE CAPTAIN LOOKED PUZZLED...

THAT'S FUNNY. HE *KNEW* HOW THOSE AIR LOCKS WORK. HE *WOULDN'T* HAVE MADE SUCH A *STUPID* MISTAKE. IT...IT MUST HAVE BEEN AN *ACCIDENT*...OR...OR...*SOMETHING ELSE*!

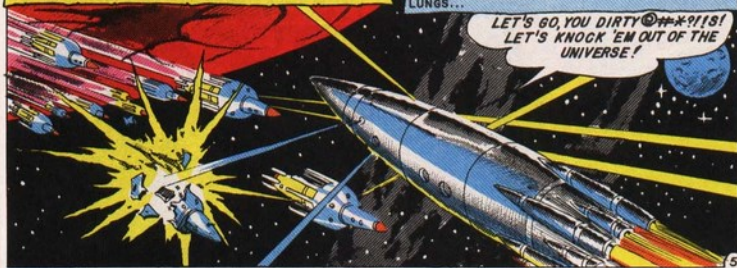


MY BODY WAS CLEANSED. THE ORGANIC POISON WAS ELIMINATED. MARS WAS VERY CLOSE NOW. RED. *BRIGHT RED*. IN ANOTHER SIX HOURS WE WOULD BE ENGAGED IN COMBAT...

I HAD MY TASTE OF WAR. WE DROVE DOWN, CAPTAIN LAMB AND THE MEN INSIDE ME, AND I PUT OUT MY ARMS FOR THE FIRST TIME, AND I CLOSED MY FINGERS OF POWER AROUND MARTIAN SHIPS...FIFTEEN OF THEM...

I SCREAMED. I TALKED TO THE STARS. I DIS-SECTED MARTIAN ROCKETS WITH QUICK CALM STROKES OF MY RAY-ARMS. AND SPUNKY LITTLE CAP LAMB GUIDED MY VITALS, SWEARING AT THE TOP OF HIS LUNGS...

LET'S GO, YOU DIRTY @##*?!S!
LET'S KNOCK 'EM OUT OF THE
UNIVERSE!



ONE DAY CONRAD COLLAPSED UPON THE CONTROL DECK WITH A SHARD OF SHRAPNEL WEBBED IN HIS LUNGS ...



AND IT WAS HILLARY WHO TOOK THE NEWS BACK TO YORK PORT, TO THE GIRL THEY BOTH LOVED...

AND OTHERS OF THE CREW DIED WITHIN ME, THEIR BLOOD SPILLING OUT UPON MY DECK PLATES, WARM AND THICK. SLOP, THE COOK. AYRES, THE NAVIGATOR...



WE KNOCKED HOLES IN THE VACUUM. WE GOT WHAT WE WANTED OUT OF WAR, AND THEN... QUITE SUDDENLY ONE DAY... SPACE WAS SILENT. CAPTAIN LAMB SHRUGGED HIS SHOULDERS...

WELL, MEN, IT'S ALL OVER. THE WAR'S OVER... THIS SHIP IS BEING CONVERTED INTO A CARGO-FREIGHTER...

THE CREW MUTTERED, SHIFTING THEIR FEET... IT'S BEEN GOOD. I WON'T DENY IT. I HAD A FINE CREW AND A SWEET SHIP. WE WORKED HARD. WE DID WHAT WE HAD TO DO. AND NOW IT'S ALL OVER, WE HAVE *PEACE*.

PEACE. IT MEANS GETTING *DRUNK* AGAIN... LIVING ON *EARTH* AGAIN. IT MEANS FORGETTING HOW FREE-FALL FEELS ON YOUR GUTS. IT MEANS LOSING FRIENDS. AND IT MEANS LEAVING THIS ROCKET...



WE LANDED IN YORK PORT WITHOUT FANFARE. THE CREW PACKED THEIR DUFFLE BAGS AND LEFT. CAPTAIN LAMB LINGERED AWHILE, WALKING THROUGH ME, SWEARING UNDER HIS BREATH...

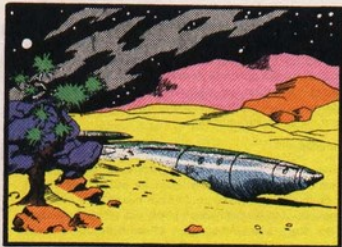
I WASN'T A WAR-ROCKET ANYMORE. THEY CRAMMED ME WITH CARGO AND SHIPPED ME BACK AND FORTH TO VENUS FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS. I HAD A NEW CAPTAIN AND A STRANGE CREW AND A STRANGE PEACEFUL ROUTINE COMING AND GOING ACROSS THE STARS...



...AND AFTER A WHILE, HE LEFT TOO...



NOTHING IMPORTANT HAPPENED UNTIL JULY 17TH, 2243. THAT WAS THE DAY I CRACKED UP ON THIS WILD, PEBBLED, LITTLE PLANETOID WHERE THE WIND WHINED AND THE RAIN POURED AND THE SILENCE WAS SO VERY SILENT...



UNTIL ONE DAY, AFTER THE RAIN, I SAW A SILVER SPECK IN THE SKY... A SHIP. IT CAME DOWN A HUNDRED YARDS FROM MY SILENT HULK. A MAN CLIMBED OUT. HE CAME WALKING UP THE PEBBLED HILL. HE STOOD IN MY AIR-LOCK DOOR AND I HEARD HIM SAY...



HELLO!

...AND I KNEW WHO IT WAS...

SILENCE. HE QUIT YELLING FOR PEOPLE WHO COULDN'T ANSWER HIM. HE SAT DOWN IN THE CONTROL CHAIR... TALKED TO ME...

THINGS ARE TURNING BAD ON VENUS. COLONIALS REVOLTING. YOU'RE OLD-FASHIONED, BUT YOU'RE PROUD AND TALL, AND A FIGHTER! YOU CAN FIGHT AGAIN! SO HELP ME GOD, I'LL BE CAPTAIN OF YOU AGAIN...



CAPTAIN LAMB. AFTER ALL THESE YEARS...

I HEARD YOU WERE LOST FOUR MONTHS AGO. I THOUGHT I'D HUNT YOU UP MYSELF. JUST FOR OLD TIMES' SAKE...



HE CLIMBED THE RUNGS TO MY CONTROL ROOM AND STOOD THERE, SWAYING, REMEMBERING ALL THE OLD TIMES WE HAD TOGETHER...

HILLARY! CONRAD! AYRES! SLOP! WHERE IN BLAZES IS EVERYBODY? WHERE IN GOD-BLAMED... CHOKE...



AND SO I'VE BEEN LYING HERE, WAITING FOR THE REPAIR CREW TO COME, WAITING WITH A STIRRING OF MY OLD ANTICIPATION. I'VE BEEN DEAD A WHILE, AND CAP LAMB HAS SHOWED UP TO SLAP ME BACK TO LIFE. THEY'LL GO OVER ME FROM SEAM TO SEAM... AND SOMEDAY SOON, CAP LAMB WILL STOMP INTO MY AIR LOCK AND SHOUT...

SNAP IT! CLEAR THE APRON! SEAL THE LOCKS! CLAMP PORTS. WE'RE PUSHING THE BLAZES OUT OF HERE!



...AND I'LL BE LIVING AND BREATHING AND MOVING AGAIN... OFF TO WAR AGAIN! OFF TO WAR...

THE END