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RICK RANDOM

in
**SABOTAGE
FROM
SPACE**



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RICK RANDOM *in* **SABOTAGE FROM SPACE!**



RICK RANDOM WAS KNOWN AS THE FIRST DETECTIVE OF THE SPACE-AGE.

IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY AS CHIEF TROUBLE SHOOTER FOR THE INTERPLANETARY BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, HE WAS CALLED UPON TO SOLVE MYSTERIES WHICH TOOK HIM ALL OVER THE UNIVERSE.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2042, IT FELL TO RICK TO FIND OUT WHAT WAS CAUSING THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE ALL OVER THE WORLD TO BECOME VICTIMS OF "THE MADNESS".

ONE OF THE FIRST VICTIMS WAS A TRUSTED WORKMAN WHO TRIED TO DETONATE AN H-BOMB!



BUT IT WAS AT AN INTERPLANETARY SPORTS MEETING NEAR LONDON, THAT "THE MADNESS" FIRST CAME INTO PUBLIC NOTICE.

JUST WEST OF LONDON—NEARLY HALF-A-MILE ABOVE THE INTERPLANETARY SPORTS ARENA—A FAMOUS ATHLETE WAS ONE OF THE JUDGES OF THE GALACTIC FLY-O-BATICS MEET. FROM THE OFFICIAL HELIPLAT, WITH OTHER JUDGES, HE WATCHED COMPETITORS IN FLY-BELTS DOING INTRICATE ACROBATIC FEATS.

THAT MARTIAN TEAM IS PARTICULARLY GOOD, I THINK.

YES—WOULDN'T BE SURPRISED IF THEY WON THE COMPETITION.

AS HE WAS TALKING, THIS FAMOUS ATHLETE WAS OPENING THE GATE IN THE PROTECTIVE RAILING OF THE HELIPLAT.

THEN - QUITE CASUALLY - IN THE
MIDDLE OF THE CONVERSATION -
HE STEPPED OFF THE HELIPLAT: .



... AND PLUNGED NEARLY 2,000
FEET TO HIS DEATH IN THE
GREAT SPORTS FIELD BELOW.

IN NEW YORK, AN EXPERIENCED ELECTRICIAN
REACHED OUT AND TOUCHED A LINE
CARRYING 200,000 VOLTS. . .



... AND WAS ELECTROCUTED ON THE SPOT.

IN MELBOURNE, A RENOWNED ZOOLOGIST
TRIED TO PAT THE HEAD OF A FEROCIOUS
LION AT THE ZOO. . .



... AND WAS MAULED TO DEATH. . .

THE TRI-VIDEO NEWS THAT EVENING REPORTED THE THREE INCIDENTS AS EXAMPLES OF MORE THAN A HUNDRED THAT HAD OCCURED IN VARIOUS PARTS OF THE WORLD THAT SAME DAY..

... AND WHILE NOT ALL OF THEM HAVE RESULTED IN DEATH, THEY ALL ARE WITHOUT APPARENT REASON..

THEY ARE SIMPLY CASES OF PEOPLE DOING THINGS CONTRARY TO THEIR TRAINING, INSTINCT AND EXPERIENCE.

... MEANWHILE THE NUMBER INCREASES. SO FAR THIS WEEK, THERE HAVE BEEN MORE THAN SIX HUNDRED VICTIMS OF "THE MADNESS"

AND SO "THE MADNESS" BECAME THE NAME FOR THE STRANGE THINGS PEOPLE WERE DOING. . .

ONE EVENING, IN SCIENCE CITY, "THE MADNESS" WAS DISCUSSED BY A GROUP OF SCIENTISTS RELAXING IN THEIR OPEN-AIR CLUB ON TOP OF ONE OF THE BUILDINGS. . .

SURELY ALL LIFE-FORMS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN SUBJECT TO MADNESS.

THIS THING THEY CALL "THE MADNESS"- JUST A NEWS AGENCY SCARE.

YOU'RE WRONG. I'M AFRAID WE'RE FACING A VERY SERIOUS PROBLEM.

THEY WERE ALL STARTLED BY THE WORDS OF DR. ALTHA BERINS, THE NEW, YOUNG CHIEF OF THE PSYCHOLOGY SECTION.

DR. BERINS SAID THAT SHE, PERSONALLY, HAD EXAMINED SOME OF THE VICTIMS OF "THE MADNESS"



I'VE USED DR. M'BWANGO'S "THOUGHT-PROBE" ON SEVERAL VICTIMS AND CAN FIND ABSOLUTELY NO REASON FOR THESE STRANGE ACTIONS.

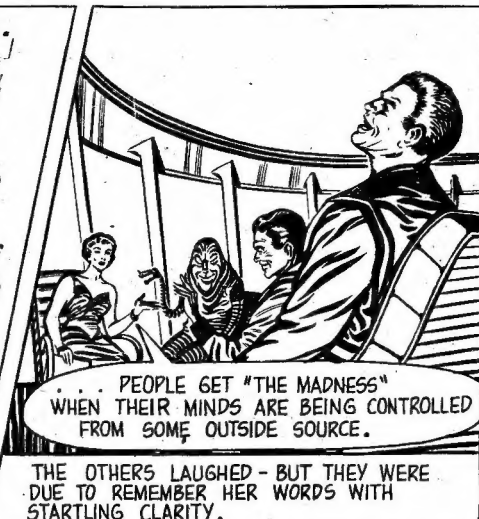
THEN ALTHA STARTLED HER SCIENTIFIC COLLEAGUES EVEN FURTHER.



ALTHA TOLD THEM HER THEORY.



WELL - I'VE REACHED THIS CONCLUSION BECAUSE THERE'S ABSOLUTELY NO OTHER EXPLANATION...



THAT SAME EVENING, TWO MEN WHO WERE FAMOUS THROUGHOUT THE GALAXY, BRIEFLY MENTIONED "THE MADNESS" AS THEY RETURNED FROM AN HOUR OF SPORT WITH THE LATEST MODEL GLID-O-KITES.

MARIUS - GOT ANY IDEAS ABOUT THIS THING THEY CALL "THE MADNESS"?

WELL, RICK - THERE'S A SHORTAGE OF HARD NEWS AND THE AGENCIES HAVE TO FILL THEIR NEWSCASTS WITH SOMETHING. THAT'S ALL, I'M SURE.

YES - BUT THESE THINGS ARE REALLY HAPPENING. THE NEWS BOYS AREN'T JUST INVENTING THEM.

TRUE, RICK - BUT THEY'RE ALWAYS HAPPENING - PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS GOING MAD AND DOING FANTASTIC THINGS.



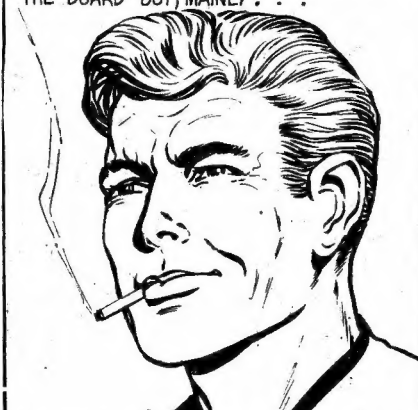
THESE TWO MEN - LIFE-LONG FRIENDS - WERE DR. MARIUS FISHER AND RICK RANDOM.

DR. FISHER WAS CHAIRMAN OF THE INTERPLANETARY BOARD.



"THE BOARD" WAS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS THE "PARLIAMENT OF THE UNIVERSE" WHICH GAVE THE CHAIRMAN THE NICKNAME OF "PRIME MINISTER" OR "PREMIER."

RICK RANDOM WAS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE BOARD BUT, MAINLY . . .



. . . HE WAS FAMOUS AS CHIEF TROUBLE-SHOOTER FOR THE IBI . . . (INTERPLANETARY BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION.)

AN HOUR LATER, RICK WAS AMONG THE GUESTS OF HONOUR ON THE PLATFORM WHEN THE PREMIER WELCOMED THE DELEGATES TO THE INTER-GALACTIC TRANSPORT CONVENTION

AND SO,
MY FRIENDS, AT THE
BEGINNING OF THIS VERY
IMPORTANT CONFERENCE,
I WANT TO SAY . . .



THEN, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SENTENCE, DR. FISHER STOPPED SPEAKING AND TURNED AWAY FROM THE MICROPHONE.

RICK SAW THAT HIS FRIEND'S FACE WAS DEVOID OF ALL EXPRESSION - THE FACE OF A DEAD MAN.

MARIUS!
WHAT'S WRONG?



... BUT THE PREMIER WALKED BY HIM WITHOUT A FLICKER OF RECOGNITION.

ACCUSTOMED TO MAKING QUICK DECISIONS, RICK STEPPED TO THE MICROPHONE AND SPOKE TO THE PUZZLED DELEGATES.

FRIENDS - DR. FISHER HAS SUDDENLY BEEN TAKEN ILL AND BEGS YOU TO CONTINUE WITHOUT HIM.



AND, HAVING DONE HIS BEST TO COVER AN AWKWARD SITUATION, HE HURRIED AFTER HIS FRIEND.

IN THE GREAT FOYER, RICK SAW DR. FISHER RIDING THE LONG ESCATRACK TOWARDS THE ROOF-TOP EXIT.



RICK RACED TO THE ESCATRACK - BUT, WHEN HE WAS ONLY A QUARTER OF THE WAY UP, THE PREMIER REACHED THE TOP.

BEFORE GOING OUT ONTO THE ROOF, DR. FISHER STOPPED LONG ENOUGH TO OPEN THE ESCATRACK'S CONTROL BOX . . .



FIRST HE STOPPED THE GREAT MOVING BELT . . .



. . . THEN HE PUT IT INTO REVERSE.

BECAUSE THIS DELAY COST HIM MANY VALUABLE MINUTES, RICK REACHED THE ROOF TOO LATE TO CATCH DR. FISHER. INSTEAD, HE FOUND THAT ALL THE HELICARS IN THE PARKING AREA HAD BEEN SET AFIRE . . .



. . . AND HE SAW THE PREMIER'S PRIVATE HELICAR LIFTING INTO THE EVENING SKY.

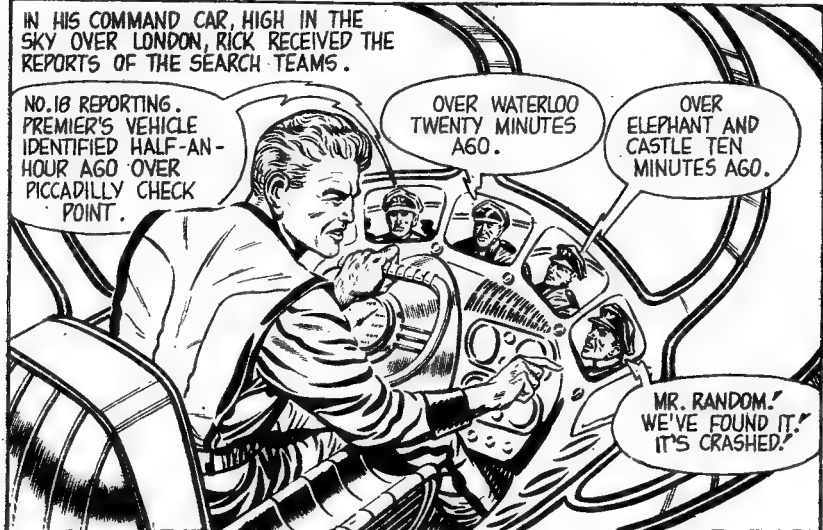
FROM A POLICE HELICRUISER, ATTRACTED BY THE BLAZE, RICK RADIOED THROUGH TO 1B1 HQ - GIVING THE DESCRIPTION AND LICENCE NUMBER OF DR. FISHER'S VEHICLE. . .



AFTER THE BAREST HESITATION - AND WITH OBVIOUS RELUCTANCE - RICK ADDED ANOTHER BIT OF INFORMATION.



IN HIS COMMAND CAR, HIGH IN THE SKY OVER LONDON, RICK RECEIVED THE REPORTS OF THE SEARCH TEAMS.



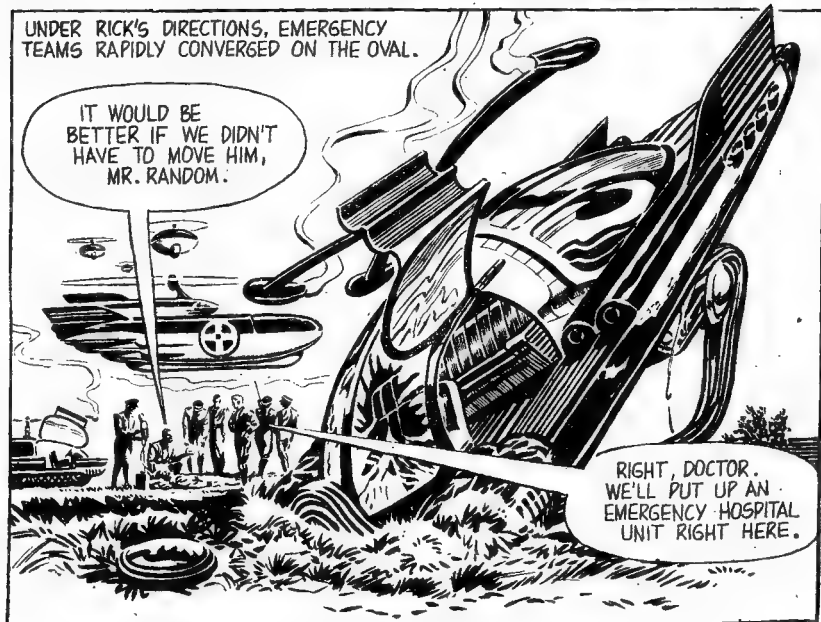


THE WRECK
IS IN THE CENTRE FIELD
OF THE OVAL. NO SIGN OF
LIFE. GOING DOWN TO
INVESTIGATE.



RICK HIMSELF HAD ALMOST REACHED THE
SCENE WHEN THE NEXT REPORT CAME IN.

DR. FISHER'S
HERE, MR. RANDOM
STILL - ALIVE -
BUT UNCONSCIOUS.



UNDER RICK'S DIRECTIONS, EMERGENCY
TEAMS RAPIDLY CONVERGED ON THE OVAL.

IT WOULD BE
BETTER IF WE DIDN'T
HAVE TO MOVE HIM,
MR. RANDOM.

RIGHT, DOCTOR.
WE'LL PUT UP AN
EMERGENCY HOSPITAL
UNIT RIGHT HERE.

IT WAS LATE THE NEXT AFTERNOON BEFORE RICK WAS ALLOWED TO TALK TO DR. FISHER, WHOM HE FOUND STILL WEAK BUT COMPLETELY CONSCIOUS.

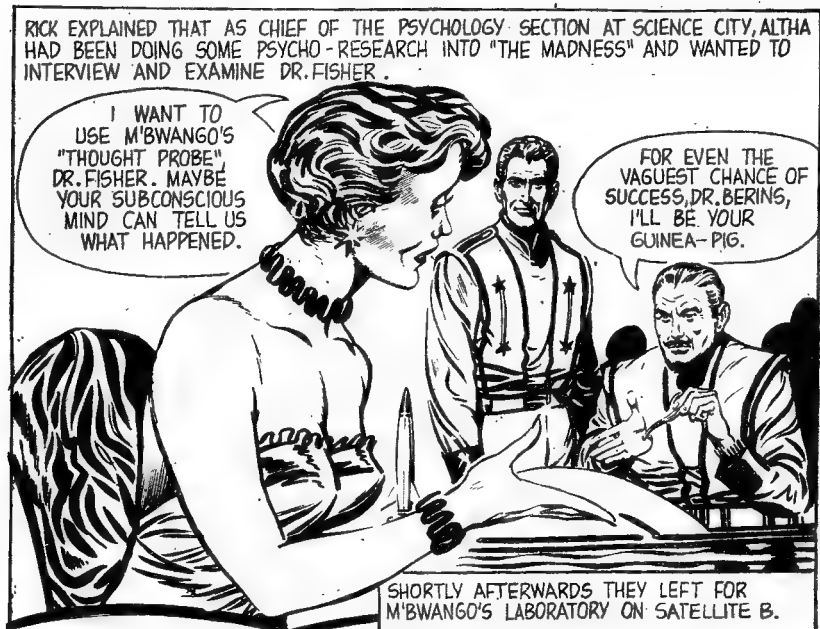
I'M SORRY, RICK—I DON'T REMEMBER A THING. I WAS TALKING TO THE CONVENTION DELEGATES. . . AND THEN I WOKE UP HERE IN BED.

YOU REALIZE WHAT THAT MEANS, MARIUS?

YES, RICK — IT MEANS I'VE LIKELY BEEN TOUCHED BY THIS THING WE DISMISSED SO LIGHTLY YESTERDAY.

THAT'S RIGHT, MARIUS—EVERYTHING POINTS TO THE FACT THAT YOU HAD "THE MADNESS"

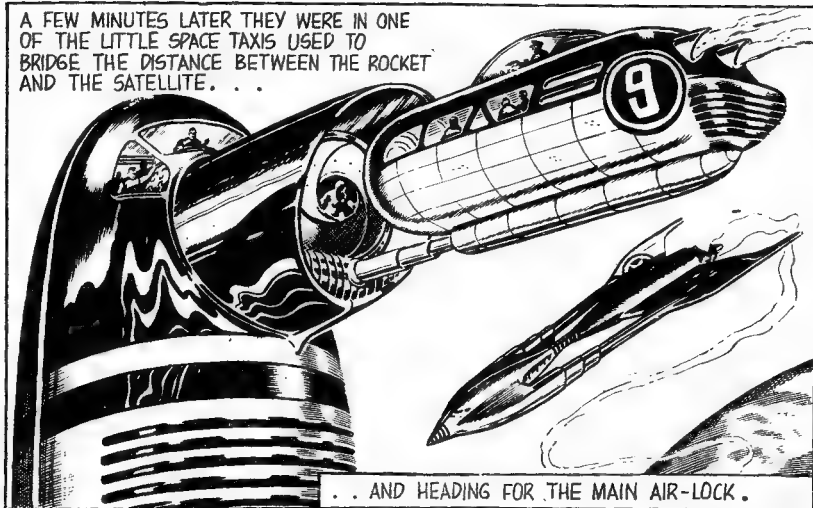
AND IT ALSO MEANT THAT RICK RANDOM WAS LAUNCHED ON ANOTHER STRANGE CASE THAT WOULD LEAD HIM TO WEIRD AND DISTANT CORNERS OF THE UNIVERSE. . . .



SOON, THROUGH THE VIEWING-PORT OF AN IBI
ROCKET, THEY COULD SEE SATELLITE-B, THE
GREAT TERRA-MARS PRISON, LOOMING UP AHEAD.



A FEW MINUTES LATER THEY WERE IN ONE OF THE LITTLE SPACE TAXIS USED TO BRIDGE THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE ROCKET AND THE SATELLITE. . .



. . AND HEADING FOR THE MAIN AIR-LOCK .

IN HIS LABORATORY, THE FAMOUS NEGRO SCIENTIST GAVE DR. FISHER A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF THE INTRICATE MACHINE HE'D INVENTED.

AS THE NAME SUGGESTS, DR. FISHER, - THE "THOUGHT PROBE" READS THE SUBCONSCIOUS AND PUTS YOUR THOUGHTS INTO WORDS. IT CAN ACTUALLY PROBE OUT DETAILS AND INFORMATION THAT YOU DON'T EVEN REALIZE YOU KNOW.



AS THE FIRST STEP, DR. FISHER RECEIVED AN INJECTION OF A FAST-ACTING BUT HARMLESS DRUG THAT PUT HIM INTO A SHALLOW "SURFACE" SLEEP.

AS I RECALL, M'BWANGO - ALL ANSWERS ARE BOUND TO BE TRUTHFUL.

THAT'S RIGHT. THE "PROBE" PICKS UP THOUGHT-IMPULSES AND ELECTRONICALLY TRANSLATES THEM INTO WORDS. THERE'S NO POSSIBILITY OF TELLING A LIE OR BEING INACCURATE.

BUT HE EMPHASIZED THAT THE TRUTH WAS LIMITED TO THE SUBCONSCIOUS KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECT. . . .

WHEN EVERYTHING WAS READY, ALTHA STARTED THE QUESTIONING. THE ANSWERS CAME FROM THE "THOUGHT PROBE" AND NOT FROM DR. FISHER HIMSELF.

DR. FISHER - WHAT MADE YOU INTERRUPT YOUR SPEECH TO THE DELEGATES OF THE TRANSPORT CONVENTION?

I - STOPPED -
BECAUSE - "IT" -
CAME - AND - TOOK -
HOLD - OF - MY - MIND. . .
I - COULD - NOT -
FIGHT - IT.

THE ANSWER STARTLED BOTH RICK AND ALTHA - BUT FOR ENTIRELY DIFFERENT REASONS . . .

RICK BECAUSE THIS WAS THE FIRST HE'D
HEARD OF "OUTSIDE" CONTROL . . .



COULD THAT
MEAN SOME
ALIEN
INTELLIGENCE
ENTERING THE
MIND?

. . . ALTHA BECAUSE IT WAS THE
FIRST SHRED OF PROOF FOR HER
THEORIES . . .



I'VE ALWAYS
SUSPECTED SOME
"ALIEN INTRUSION".

. . . AND, AS M'BWANGO POINTED OUT, DR. FISHER WAS THE FIRST VICTIM OF
"THE MADNESS" TO GIVE ANY SORT OF CLUE - EVEN UNDER THE "THOUGHT PROBE".

EAGERLY THEY ASKED MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MYSTERIOUS "IT" . . .



DR. FISHER -
WHAT TOOK
HOLD OF
YOUR MIND?

DID
IT SPEAK
TO YOU
DR. FISHER?

COULD
YOU FEEL
IT, MARIUS -
HAD IT
WEIGHT?

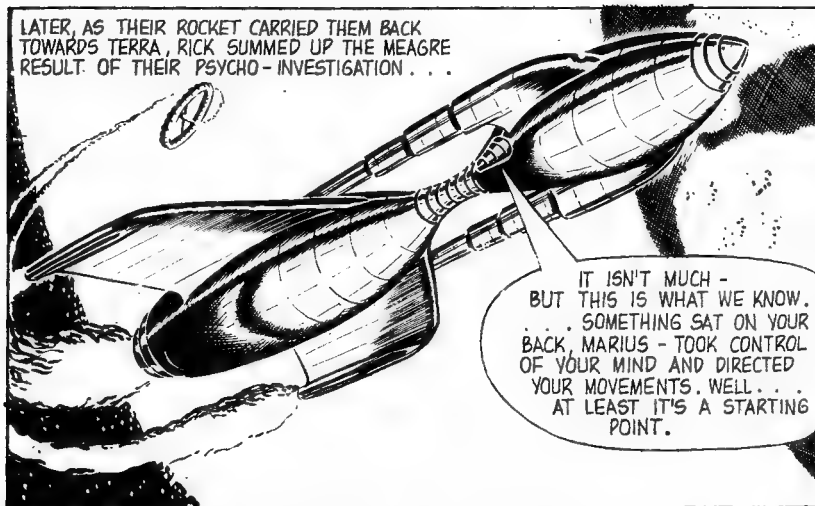
IT WAS A
POWERFUL, COMMANDING
FORCE.

NO - IT JUST
CONTROLLED ALL
MOVEMENT.

IT WAS
ON MY BACK.

. . . AND THOUGH THEY ASKED MANY MORE QUESTIONS, THOSE WERE THE ONLY
ANSWERS THEY GOT . . .

LATER, AS THEIR ROCKET CARRIED THEM BACK TOWARDS TERRA, RICK SUMMED UP THE MEAGRE RESULT OF THEIR PSYCHO-INVESTIGATION . . .



IT ISN'T MUCH - BUT THIS IS WHAT WE KNOW. SOMETHING SAT ON YOUR BACK, MARIUS - TOOK CONTROL OF YOUR MIND AND DIRECTED YOUR MOVEMENTS. WELL . . . AT LEAST IT'S A STARTING POINT.

WHEN THEY WERE ALONE, RICK AND ALTHA DISCUSSED A POINT THAT HAD PUZZLED BOTH OF THEM. . .

RICK, I WONDER WHY - OF ALL THE VICTIMS OF "THE MADNESS" - DR. FISHER IS THE FIRST TO REMEMBER ANYTHING?



YOU REALIZE THAT MARIUS IS A MENTAL GIANT. THIS THING - WHATEVER IT WAS - MUST HAVE HAD A TERRIBLE FIGHT TO TAKE OVER HIS MIND.

I SEE. AND YOU BELIEVE IT NEVER DID TAKE OVER COMPLETELY?



NOT AS MUCH, APPARENTLY, AS IT HAS DONE WITH OTHER VICTIMS.

ALTHOUGH THEY'D MADE PROGRESS, RICK REALIZED THEY WERE STILL A VERY LONG WAY FROM A SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY. BRIEFLY HE OUTLINED THE PROBLEMS THAT REMAINED.



IN THE FIRST PLACE, THERE'S THE EXACT NATURE OF THIS MYSTERIOUS CONTROLLING POWER...

...WE DON'T KNOW WHETHER WE'RE DEALING WITH ONE CREATURE OR WITH MANY OF THEM, OR WHETHER IT'S A "HE," "SHE" OR "IT".



THERE'S NOTHING TO TELL US WHERE IT'S FROM, HOW LONG IT'S BEEN HERE OR HOW LONG IT INTENDS TO STAY...

...WE DON'T KNOW WHY WE CAN'T SEE IT... NOR DO WE KNOW WHAT IT WANTS WITH US OR FROM US- OR IF IT WANTS ANYTHING...



...ALTHOUGH IT HAS CAUSED CONSIDERABLE TROUBLE FOR ALL WE KNOW IT MAY BE REALLY QUITE FRIENDLY...



...AND IT'S EVEN POSSIBLE THAT'S IT'S TRYING TO FIND A WAY TO COMMUNICATE WITH US...

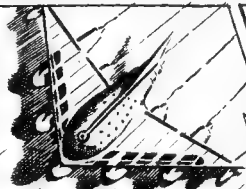
IN SHORT, THE WHOLE RIDDLE BEGINS TO LOOK BEYOND OUR ABILITY TO SOLVE.



BUT, DISCOURAGED THOUGH HE WAS, RICK HAD NO INTENTION OF GIVING UP. IT WAS AN INTRIGUING MYSTERY OF WORLD-WIDE IMPORTANCE AND HE FULLY INTENDED FINDING THE ANSWER.

MEANWHILE "THE MADNESS" CONTINUED TO MAKE PEOPLE DO STRANGE THINGS - SOME AMUSING - OTHERS MERELY HARMFUL - MOST OF THEM TRAGIC . . . FOR EXAMPLE.

. . . THE PILOT OF A DELUXE JET-LINER, ABOUT TO LAND, SUDDENLY ALTERED COURSE AND SEEMED DELIBERATELY TO PLOUGH INTO THE TERMINAL BUILDING.



. . . THE JOCKEY ON THE LEAD MOUNT IN THE GRAND NATIONAL SUDDENLY DECIDED TO GO IT ALONE.



. . . A FIRE-WORKS MANUFACTURER DELIBERATELY AND QUITE OPENLY, SET FIRE TO HIS WAREHOUSE AND STOOD WATCHING THE BRILLIANT DISPLAY.



. . . A DEEP-SEA DIVER - 100 FATHOMS DOWN - CALMLY REMOVED HIS HELMET . . . AND DIED . . .



. . . AND THERE WERE MANY MORE EXAMPLES. AS MANY AS A 1,000 A DAY WERE REPORTED AND NOBODY COULD ESTIMATE THE ADDITIONAL NUMBERS THAT WERE NEVER REPORTED. . .

THE NEWS AGENCIES STARTED GIVING ACCOUNTS OF PUBLIC REACTIONS. . .



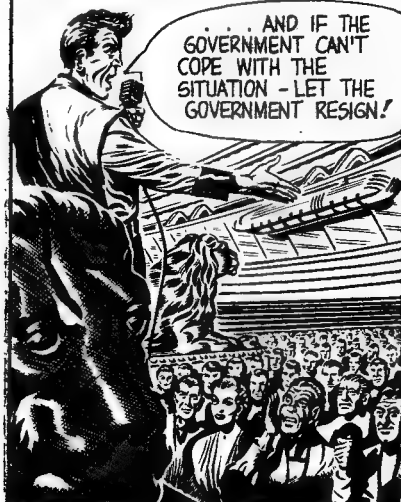
... AND ALL OVER
THE WORLD, PEOPLE ARE
BEGINNING TO SHOW
GENUINE UNEASINESS. . .



EVERYWHERE
THERE IS AN INCREASED
DEMAND FOR EFFECTIVE
POLICE ACTION. . . .

UNFORTUNATELY, THERE WAS NOTHING THE POLICE COULD DO - NO CRIMINAL TO ARREST. . .

NATURALLY, "THE MADNESS" BECAME A
POPULAR POLITICAL ISSUE. . .



... AND IF THE
GOVERNMENT CAN'T
COPE WITH THE
SITUATION - LET THE
GOVERNMENT RESIGN!

AND, OF COURSE, THE HUCKSTERS
AND PITCHMEN ROSE TO THE
OCCASION. . .



... AND IN
THIS ENVELOPE,
LADIES AND
GENTLEMEN, IS THE
MAGIC CHARM TO
PROTECT FROM
"THE MADNESS"
GUARANTEED!

UP TO THIS POINT, THE LIMITED RESULTS OF DR. FISHER'S TEST ON THE "THOUGHT-PROBE" HAD NOT BEEN GENERALLY RELEASED. AFTER WEEKS OF FRUITLESS INVESTIGATION, RICK MENTIONED THIS TO THE PREMIER DURING A VISIPHONE CALL.



WHEN IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT DR. FISHER WAS GOING TO MAKE IMPORTANT DISCLOSURES ABOUT "THE MADNESS", HE HAD THE LARGEST VIEWER-AUDIENCE OF THE DECADE.

... AND, ALTHOUGH THE RESULTS OF MY "THOUGHT-PROBE" WERE LIMITED - THEY ARE SIGNIFICANT.

WE KNOW THAT "THE MADNESS" IS CAUSED BY SOME INVISIBLE CREATURE THAT SITS ON THE BACK OF ITS VICTIM, AND SOMEHOW TAKES CONTROL OF THE MIND.

THE VICTIM LOSES ALL POWER OF SPEECH AND ALL CONTROL OF HIS ACTIONS WHICH, AS YOU KNOW BECOME QUITE ERRATIC.

AS FAR AS WE KNOW, MINE IS THE ONLY CASE OF EVEN A SUB-CONSCIOUS MEMORY OF ANY OF THIS. TO COMBAT THIS THING, WE NEED THE HELP OF EVERY ONE OF YOU.

IF YOU THINK YOU KNOW ANYTHING - NO MATTER HOW FANTASTIC OR UNIMPORTANT IT MAY SEEM TO YOU - PLEASE REPORT IT TO YOUR LOCAL FBI AGENT

ONLY BY PIECING TOGETHER A GREAT MASS OF APPARENTLY IRRELEVANT DETAILS CAN WE HOPE TO SOLVE THIS DEVASTATING MYSTERY.

REPORT ANYTHING YOU KNOW. OR THINK YOU KNOW. YOUR HELP MAY SUPPLY THE KEY TO THE MYSTERY.

THE RESULTS WERE IMMEDIATE AND TREMENDOUS. ANTICIPATING THE RUSH, RICK HAD SET UP A VAST ORGANIZATION TO SORT AND CO-RELATE THE REPORTS THAT POURED IN.

RICK - THIS IS VERY IMPRESSIVE. YOU SAY IT'S ONLY A SMALL PART OF THE ORGANIZATION?

THAT'S RIGHT, MARIUS. INTO THIS ROOM COME THE REPORTS FROM OUR 181 AGENTS IN EVERY PART OF THE WORLD.

RICK ADDED THAT THE REPORTS WERE COMING IN BY MFF BEAMS (MICRO-FOTO-FAX.)

THE REPORTS WERE RECEIVED AND RECORDED PHOTOGRAPHICALLY ON STANDARD FORMS BY THE MFF PRINTERS. . . .

M.F.F. R.X. REPORT
FOR: LBL HQ LONDON
FROM: LBL AGENT KARACHI
RE: SPECIAL INVESTIGATION
(THE MADNESS)
PHENOMENA REPORTED TO
HAVE BEEN OBSERVED AT

. . . . AND SENT FOR CLASSIFICATION UNDER ONE OF THE NEARLY 200 HEADINGS SUPPLIED BY DR. ALTHA BERING AND HER PSYCHOLOGY SECTION IN SCIENCE CITY. . . .

EACH CLASSIFICATION HAD IT'S OWN CODE-PATTERN WHICH WAS CUT INTO THE TOP RIGHT-HAND CORNER OF THE MFF FORM. . . .

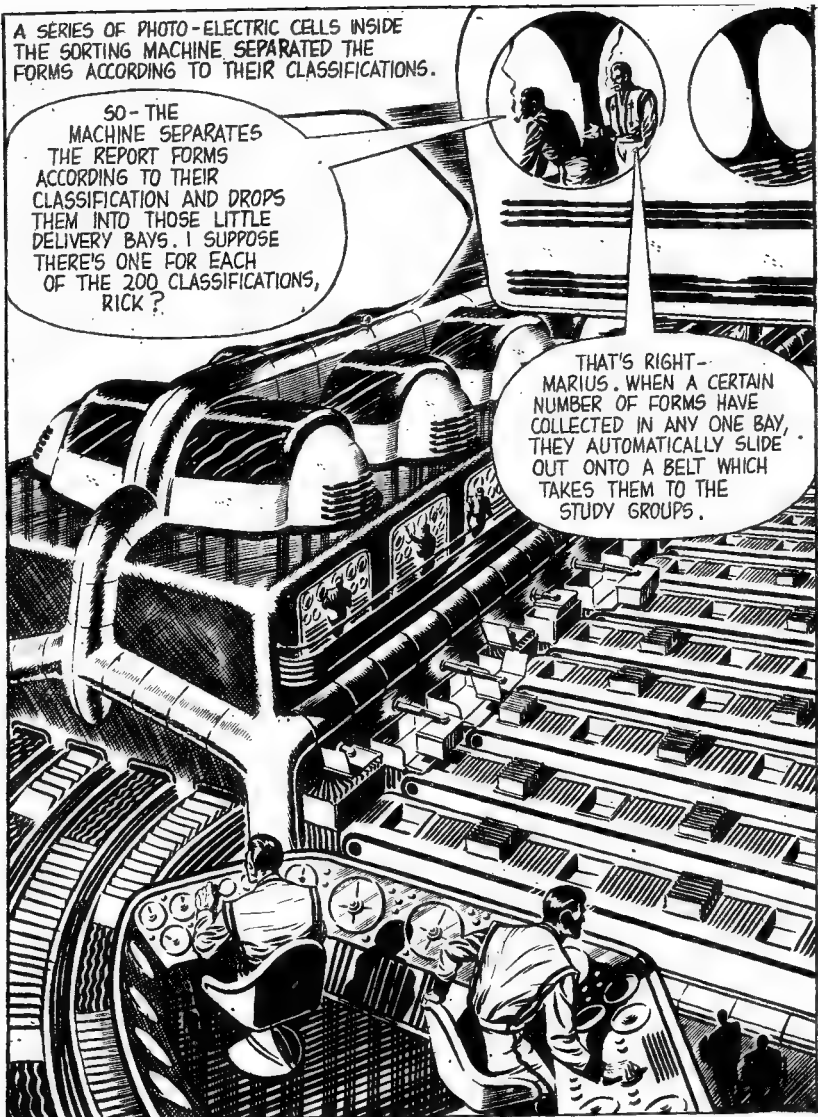
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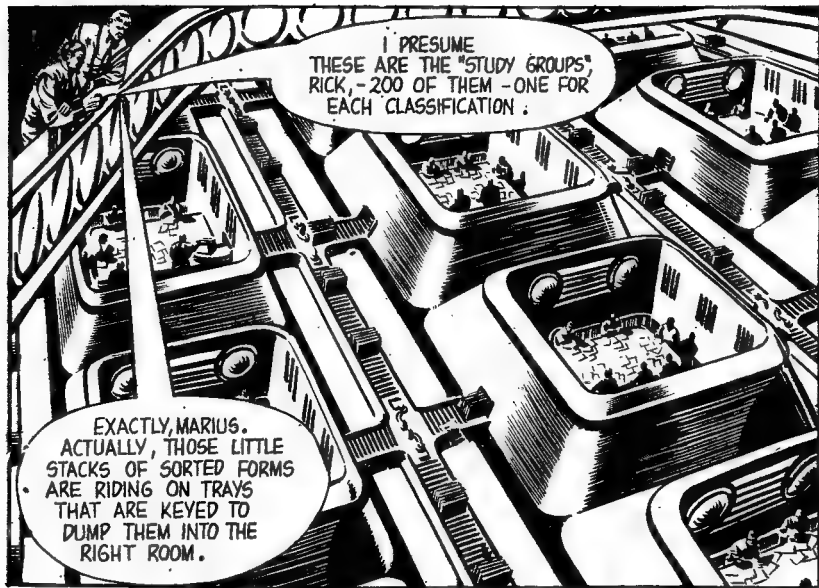
. . . . TO PREPARE IT FOR THE 'GIANT' SORTING MACHINE. . . .

A SERIES OF PHOTO-ELECTRIC CELLS INSIDE THE SORTING MACHINE SEPARATED THE FORMS ACCORDING TO THEIR CLASSIFICATIONS.

50 - THE MACHINE SEPARATES THE REPORT FORMS ACCORDING TO THEIR CLASSIFICATION AND DROPS THEM INTO THOSE LITTLE DELIVERY BAYS. I SUPPOSE THERE'S ONE FOR EACH OF THE 200 CLASSIFICATIONS, RICK?

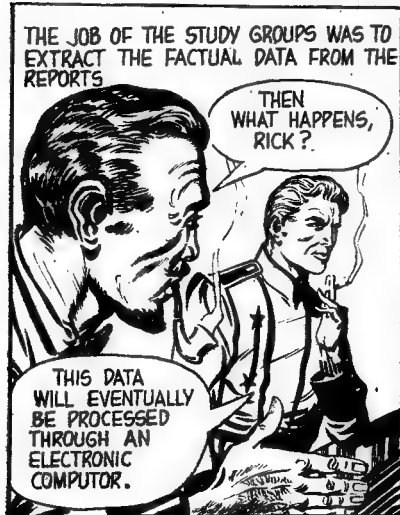
THAT'S RIGHT - MARIUS. WHEN A CERTAIN NUMBER OF FORMS HAVE COLLECTED IN ANY ONE BAY, THEY AUTOMATICALLY SLIDE OUT ONTO A BELT WHICH TAKES THEM TO THE STUDY GROUPS.





I PRESUME
THESE ARE THE "STUDY GROUPS",
RICK, - 200 OF THEM - ONE FOR
EACH CLASSIFICATION.

EXACTLY, MARIUS.
ACTUALLY, THOSE LITTLE
STACKS OF SORTED FORMS
ARE RIDING ON TRAYS
THAT ARE KEVED TO
DUMP THEM INTO THE
RIGHT ROOM.



THE JOB OF THE STUDY GROUPS WAS TO
EXTRACT THE FACTUAL DATA FROM THE
REPORTS

THEN
WHAT HAPPENS,
RICK?

THIS DATA
WILL EVENTUALLY
BE PROCESSED
THROUGH AN
ELECTRONIC
COMPUTER.



AND OUT
OF THE
COMPUTER WILL
COME YOUR
ANSWERS?
IS THAT IT,
RICK?

I DOUBT IT
VERY MUCH, MARIUS.
THE MOST I'M HOPING
FOR IS A GOOD SOUND
LEAD OR TWO THAT
I CAN FOLLOW.

OF COURSE, WHILE THIS WORK WENT ON, THERE WERE OTHER RESULTS OF DR. FISHER'S VIDEO TALK. FOR EXAMPLE, THE USUAL ASSORTMENT OF CRANKS AND CRACK-POTS HAD TO HAVE THEIR SAY. . . .



NATURALLY, THE NEWS AGENCIES INVENTED APT TITLES AND DESCRIPTIVE PHRASES. . . .



A DISSATISFIED WIFE THOUGHT SHE HAD THE PERFECT WAY TO GET RID OF AN UNWANTED HUSBAND.



... AND BECAUSE HE HAPPENED TO HEAR THAT SONG, RICK MOVED A STEP CLOSER TO SOLVING THE MYSTERY. THE SONG GAVE HIM AN IDEA WHICH HE DISCUSSED WITH THE PREMIER. . . .





IF THEY SEE ANYBODY WITH "THE MADNESS", THEY'LL HAVE INSTRUCTIONS TO TRY TO SCRAPE WHATEVER IT IS ON THAT PERSON'S BACK INTO A NET.



IT'S FANTASTIC ENOUGH TO WORK, RICK.

WORTH GIVING A TRY, ANYHOW.

A FEW DAYS LATER, RICK VISIOPHONED THE PRIME MINISTER TO SAY THAT "OPERATION SPOOK" WAS READY TO GO TO THE ELECTRONIC COMPUTER.



"OPERATION SPOOK"? SO YOU'RE USING THAT NAME, TOO, RICK?

MAY AS WELL, MARIUS. IT'S AS GOOD A NAME AS ANY.



WE'RE GOING TO USE "BIG - JUMBO" AT SCIENCE CITY. WANT TO COME ALONG?

YES, RICK - I THINK I WOULD.

AND SO THEY SET OUT TO SEE WHAT RESULTS THEY'D OBTAINED FROM THEIR GIGANTIC ENQUIRY INTO THE NATURE AND ORIGIN OF "THE MADNESS".

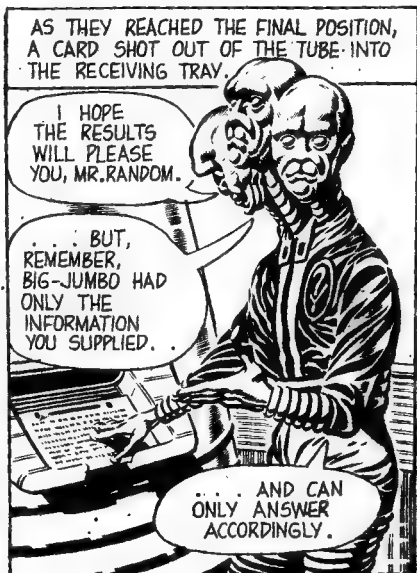
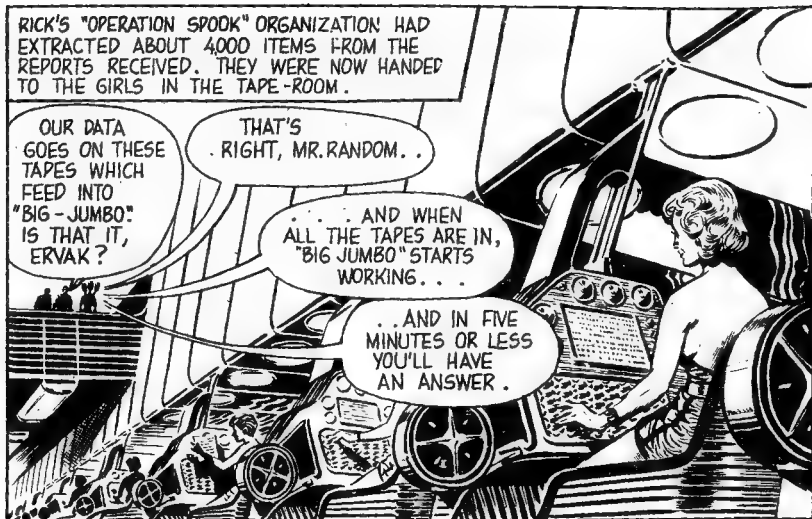
"BIG-JUMBO" WAS THE GIANT ELECTRONIC BRAIN AT SCIENCE CITY. WHEN RICK AND DOCTOR FISHER ARRIVED THERE THEY WERE MET BY ERVAK, THE OFFICER IN CHARGE OF "BIG-JUMBO". FROM THE DISTANT PLANET CRIFT, ERVAK HAD THREE HEADS AND THREE BRAINS. . .

WE HAVE
CLEARED "BIG-JUMBO"
FOR YOUR WORK,
MR. RANDOM.

HOW LONG
WILL IT TAKE
FOR THE COMPUTER
TO CO-RELATE OUR
4000 ITEMS OF DATA
AND REACH A
CONCLUSION, ERVAK?

ABOUT
FIVE MINUTES. . .
AFTER THE TAPES HAVE
BEEN FED IN, OF COURSE.

HE THEN LED THEM TO THE TAPE ROOM WHERE THE
INFORMATION WAS TO BE STAMPED ONTO PLASTIC TAPES.



THAT EVENING, ON THE ROOF GARDEN OUTSIDE ALTHA BERINS'S PENTHOUSE APARTMENT, RICK AND DR. FISHER DISCUSSED THE RESULTS WITH THE PSYCHOLOGIST.

YES, ALTHA - BUT THEY'RE ALL INTELLIGENT - AND OF COURSE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL - BUT THERE'S STILL NO INDICATION WHERE THEY'RE FROM OR WHY THEY'RE HERE.

SO, RICK - "BIG-JUMBO" SAYS THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF SPOOKS - ONE FRIENDLY, THE OTHER NOT.

EXCEPT THAT THE FRIENDLY ONES ARE TRYING TO MAKE CONTACT WITH US.

WHY CAN'T WE SEE THEM? ANY EXPLANATION FOR THAT?

BIG-JUMBO SAYS IT'S BECAUSE WE HAVE THE WRONG KIND OF LIGHT.

BUT APPARENTLY, THEY DO HAVE FORM AND WEIGHT - IF WE COULD ONLY SEE THEM.

THE FACT THAT THE SPOOKS HAD "FORM AND WEIGHT" JUSTIFIED RICK'S PLAN THAT HAD BECOME KNOWN AS "OPERATION BUTTERFLY-NET."

I LIKE THAT NAME - "OPERATION BUTTERFLY-NET" - IT'S CUTE.

TROUBLE IS, BIG-JUMBO RATES THE SPOOKS AS FEARING CONFINEMENT. THEY'LL RESIST CAPTURE FRANTICALLY.

AND MIGHT EVEN DIE OF FRIGHT WHEN CONFINED.

RICK' ADDED THAT A DEAD SPOOK WOULD BE OF INTEREST TO THE SCIENTISTS - BUT HE NEEDED A LIVE ONE.

DURING THE RETURN FLIGHT WITH DR. FISHER, RICK HARDLY SPOKE. WHEN THE LIGHTS OF LONDON WERE IN SIGHT, THE PREMIER BROKE THE SILENCE.

STILL DISCOURAGED, RICK?

NO, MARIUS. THE SOLUTION'S STILL REMOTE - BUT OUR INFORMATION'S BUILDING UP NICELY AND SHOULD LEAD SOMEWHERE.

MARIUS - I WANT A FAVOUR. I'D LIKE ALTHA BERINS TO HAVE LEAVE FROM HER POST AT SCIENCE CITY AND BE ATTACHED TO 181 HQ IN LONDON - AS MY SPECIAL ASSISTANT. CAN DO?

OF COURSE, RICK. BUT WHY ALTHA IN PARTICULAR?

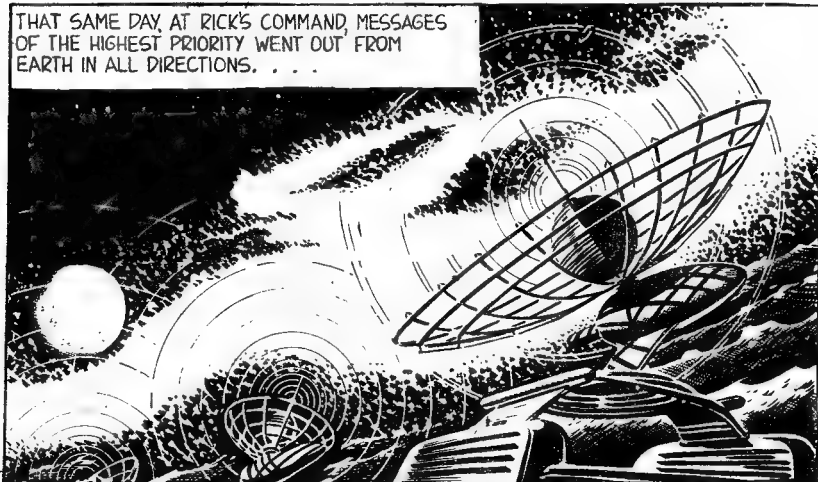
I HAVE A PLAN THAT CALLS FOR A GOOD PSYCHOLOGIST.

RICK ACTUALLY HAD THREE PLANS. ON LANDING, HE WENT DIRECTLY TO HIS OFFICE AND WORKED THROUGH THE NIGHT WITH HIS SECRETARY DETAILING ALL THREE OF THEM ON PAPER. IT WAS PAST DAWN WHEN THEY FINISHED. . . .

RICK -
THAT PLAN "C" -
I DON'T LIKE IT -
TOO DANGEROUS.

WELL - IT MAY NEVER
HAPPEN - DEPENDS ON TOO
MANY THINGS. BUT REMEMBER -
IT'S CONFIDENTIAL. MEANWHILE --
LET'S PUT "A" AND "B"
INTO THE WORKS.

THAT SAME DAY AT RICK'S COMMAND, MESSAGES OF THE HIGHEST PRIORITY WENT OUT FROM EARTH IN ALL DIRECTIONS. . . .



. . . MESSAGES TO ALL 181 AGENTS ON FAR PLANETS - TO ALL POLICE ORGANIZATIONS - TO ALL HEADS OF GOVERNMENT. THIS WAS RICK'S PLAN "A".

THE FIRST PART OF THE MESSAGES CONTAINED ALL THAT WAS KNOWN ABOUT "THE MADNESS"-THE SECOND WAS AN APPEAL FOR HELP WHICH, IN THE CASE OF THE NEARER PLANETS HE WAS ABLE TO SOLICIT BY DIRECT VIDEO BEAM.



RICK WASN'T HIGHLY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THIS - BUT OTHER SHOTS IN THE DARK HAD FOUND TARGETS IN THIS STRANGE CASE.

BECAUSE IT HAD TO CATCH THE PUBLIC FANCY TO SUCCEED, RICK TOOK A LESSON FROM THE NEWS AGENCIES AND GAVE PLAN "B" A CATCHY TITLE BEFORE HE ANNOUNCED IT. HE CALLED IT "OPERATION BUDDY-BUDDY"

SO - ACCORDING TO "OPERATION BUDDY-BUDDY", WE MUST NEVER BE ALONE.

THAT'S RIGHT. WE MUST ALL HAVE A "BUDDY" WITH US WHERE EVER WE GO.



RICK WAS HIGHLY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE CHANCES OF SUCCEEDING WITH "OPERATION BUDDY-BUDDY".

RICK DISCUSSED THIS PLAN WITH ALTHA BERINS WHO HAD COME TO LONDON AS HIS FULL TIME ASSISTANT ON THE CASE AND HAD AN OFFICE NEXT TO HIS AT IBI HQ ..

IT SOUNDS FINE, RICK - BUT WHAT IF SPOOKS TAKE CONTROL OF BOTH MEMBERS OF A BUDDY-BUDDY TEAM ?

SO FAR, THEY'VE ALWAYS SEEMED TO WORK ALONE - NEVER ATTACKING TWO PEOPLE WITHIN SIGHT OF EACH OTHER AT THE SAME TIME. I DON'T KNOW WHY - BUT THERE IT IS.

SO IF A PERSON GETS "THE MADNESS", HIS "BUDDY" CAN SAVE HIM FROM HARM.

EXACTLY - AND MAYBE EVEN CAPTURE ONE OF THE SPOOKS FOR US.

RICK - WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU DO CATCH A SPOOK ?

THAT, ALTHA, IS WHY I WANT YOU HERE. IT'S ALL IN MY PLAN "C" - BETTER READ IT.

WHEN SHE'D READ IT, ALTHA AGREED WITH RICK'S SECRETARY THAT PLAN "C" WAS MUCH TOO DANGEROUS. . .

THE NEXT FEW DAYS WERE HEARTENING. RICK WAS NO CLOSER TO A SOLUTION - "THE MADNESS" CONTINUED AT THE SAME RATE - BUT THE NUMBER OF DEATHS AND INJURIES FROM IT DROPPED TO ALMOST NOTHING. . . THANKS TO "OPERATION BUDDY-BUDDY". . .

... FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN A HELICAB DRIVER TRIED TO GO FOR A WALK ON A CLOUD, HIS "BUDDY" WAS ABLE TO STOP HIM IN TIME. . .



... WHEN A GUNSMITH WANTED TO TEST A NEW WEAPON ON HIMSELF, HIS AIM WAS DEFLECTED BY HIS "BUDDY". . .



... WHEN A BAKER TRIED TO CRAWL IN TO HIS OWN OVEN, IT WAS HIS "BUDDY" WHO HELD HIM BACK.



WELL - RICK - "OPERATION BUDDY-BUDDY" IS A SUCCESS.

NOT COMPLETELY, MARIUS - UNTIL WE CATCH A SPOOK.

... AND, AS MANY SIMILAR REPORTS CONTINUED TO COME IN, THE PREMIER VISIPHONED HIS CONGRATULATIONS TO RICK.

BUT BY THIS TIME RICK WAS CONFIDENT THAT CATCHING A SPOOK WAS ALMOST A CERTAINTY. . . .

RICK'S CONFIDENCE WAS JUSTIFIED THE VERY NEXT DAY. WITH SOME EXCITEMENT HE USED THE INTERVIDEOM TO ALTHA'S OFFICE TO TELL HER ABOUT IT.

GOOD NEWS, ALTHA! THREE SPOOKS NETTED. IN NEW YORK - CAPETOWN AND HONGKONG. THEY'RE COMING IN BY CHARTERED ROCKETS.

IF THIS MEANS PLAN 'C', RICK - I'M NOT SURE IT IS GOOD NEWS.

RICK'S ENTHUSIASM LASTED EXACTLY TWO HOURS - UNTIL ALTHA VISIPHONED THROUGH FROM THE ROCKADROME.

BAD NEWS, RICK. YOUR SPOOKS ARRIVED ALL RIGHT - BUT THEY'RE ALL DEAD.

I'M BEGINNING TO THINK THERE'S A JINX ON THIS CASE SOMEWHERE. ALL RIGHT. TURN THEM OVER TO THE LAB BOYS TO SEE WHAT THEY CAN FIND.

WHEN ALTHA RETURNED TO IBI HQ, RICK'S OFFICE LOOKED LIKE A DRAPER'S SHOP.

RICK! WHAT ON EARTH! WHAT IS THIS?

LISTEN TO THIS, ALTHA. WE KNOW THE SPOOKS ARE TERRIFIED OF CONFINEMENT. THOSE THREE THAT WERE CAUGHT WERE SHIPPED IN CLOTH BAGS. AND LIKELY DIED OF FRIGHT AT BEING SHUT UP.



IN LESS THAN AN HOUR, A SAMPLE "BUTTERFLY-NET" WAS HANDED TO RICK - MADE FROM THE MATERIAL HE'D SELECTED. AS HE AND ALTHA WERE EXAMINING IT - A CURIOUS THING HAPPENED

. . . ONE MOMENT, THE BAG HE HELD IN HIS HAND WAS EMPTY . . .



. . . THE NEXT MOMENT THERE WAS A SUDDEN INCREASE IN WEIGHT - THE SIDES BULGED - AND RICK FELT MOVEMENT IN THE BAG . . .



. . . WITH A THRILL OF EXCITEMENT RICK SUDDENLY REALIZED THAT IT NOW CONTAINED ONE OF THE MYSTERIOUS CREATURES THEY'D NICKNAMED 'SPOOKS'! AT LAST THE SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY WAS CLOSER!

IT WAS AN EXCITING MOMENT. BOTH RICK AND ALTHA FELT THEY HAD ONE OF THE "FRIENDLY SPOOKS". . . .

IF IT ISN'T FRIENDLY, IT WOULD BE UNLIKELY TO GIVE ITSELF UP - WHICH IS WHAT IT HAS DONE.

... IT ALSO MEANS YOUR IDEA OF A TRANSPARENT BAG WITH LOTS OF BREATHING SPACE WAS QUITE RIGHT, RICK.

AND THAT WE WERE RIGHT, AS WELL, ABOUT IT WANTING TO COMMUNICATE WITH US. . .

I SUPPOSE YOU STILL INTEND TO CARRY OUT PLAN "C". . .



WELL, SURELY THIS REMOVES YOUR OBJECTION.

I'LL ADMIT. IT'S NOT SO BAD WITH A FRIENDLY SPOOK - BUT I STILL DON'T LIKE IT. . .



... BUT ALTHA - YOU'LL BE HERE TO OBSERVE AND CAN ACT AS MY "BUDDY" TO PREVENT ACCIDENTS. . .

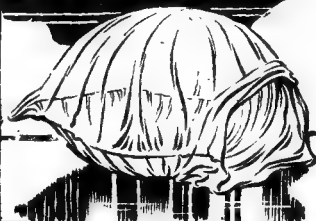
... BUT RICK - TO LET SOME ALIEN CREATURE TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR MIND. . . THE VERY IDEA FRIGHTENS ME. . . .

I KNOW, ALTHA - BUT IT'S THE OBVIOUS AREA OF COMMUNICATION. BUT WE MUST TEACH IT TO "TUNE-IN" RATHER THAN PUSH THE MIND ASIDE AND TAKE CONTROL.



... AND THAT WAS RICK'S PLAN "C" - TO DELIBERATELY INVITE "THE MADNESS" IN AN ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH MENTAL COMMUNICATION WITH THE STRANGE INVISIBLE CREATURES. . . AND, IN THE END, ALTHA AGREED TO HELP HIM. . .

DURING THIS DISCUSSION, THEIR VOLUNTARY "CAPTIVE" MADE NO ATTEMPT TO LEAVE THE LITTLE BAG WHICH HAD REMAINED OPEN . .



... BOTH RICK AND ALTHA HAD WONDERED HOW THEY'D BE ABLE TO INDUCE THE INVISIBLE CREATURE TO DO WHAT THEY WANTED BUT, WHEN ALTHA PUT IT BEHIND RICK, IT SEEMED TO KNOW WHAT WAS REQUIRED. SUDDENLY, THE BAG WAS EMPTY.

RICK WAS LOOKING AT THE CLOCK WHEN THE EXPERIMENT STARTED AND SAW THE HANDS AT 6 P.M.



... THEN, AFTER WHAT SEEMED TO BE A BLACK ETERNITY, HE WAS VAGUELY AWARE THAT IT WAS 8 O'CLOCK.

AFTER A LIFE-TIME OF CONFUSED AND MUDDLED HALF-IMPRESSIONS HE WAS SURPRISED TO SEE IT WAS ONLY 10 O'CLOCK . . .



... NEXT HE SEEMED TO BE MAKING SOME SORT OF EXHAUSTING SUPER-HUMAN EFFORT. THEN - QUITE SUDDENLY - EVERYTHING WAS CLEAR AND SHARP AGAIN. . AND IT WAS 12 P.M.

I FEEL AS THOUGH I'VE BEEN WRUNG OUT AND HUNG UP TO DRY - BUT I CAN'T REMEMBER A THING THAT HAPPENED. WHAT HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR THE LAST SIX HOURS, ALTHA?

OH, RICK IT WAS TERRIBLE. YOU WERE LIKE A MINDLESS IDIOT WITH ABSOLUTELY NO MUSCULAR CONTROL. I HAD TO TEACH YOU ALL OVER AGAIN - BUT IN THE END WE DID SUCCEED.



ALTHA MEANT THEY'D FOUND A MEANS OF COMMUNICATING WITH THE SPOOKS. . . .

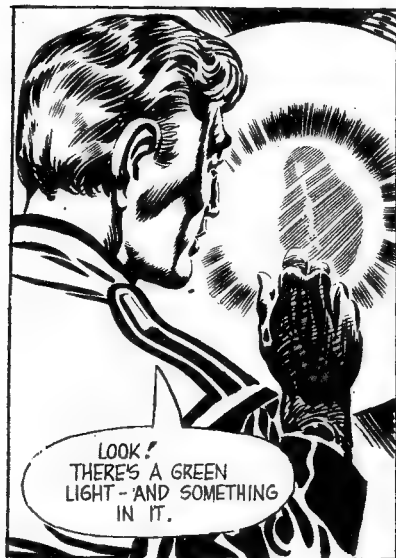
WITHIN AN HOUR, RICK HAD A TEAM OF ELECTRONIC EXPERTS AT WORK AND IT WAS FROM THEIR LAB THAT HE MADE HIS REPORT TO THE PREMIER—USING HIS WRIST-COMMUNICATOR.

SO YOU COULDN'T MAKE TELEPATHIC CONTACT-RICK-NO "THOUGHT-TALK"?

NO, MARIUS - BUT WHEN IT LEARN'T TO CO-ORDINATE MY MOVEMENTS, IT HAD ME DRAW SOMETHING RESEMBLING A CIRCUIT DIAGRAM.

RICK - TELL HIM WE THINK IT'S SOME SORT OF COMMUNICATOR.





I LEAD A PEACEFUL
DELEGATION - BUT SOME IVRAS,
THE PEOPLE WITH WHOM WE
SHARE OUR PLANET, ARE ALSO
HERE, CAUSING MUCH DAMAGE.
WE HOPE TO BE ABLE TO PUNISH
THEM FOR THEIR CRIMINAL
MISCHIEF.



MY MISSION
HERE IS OF THE GREATEST
IMPORTANCE TO ALL GRVITI.
BRIEFLY STATED, WE MUST
ABANDON OUR PLANET UNLESS
YOU CAN GIVE US THE
HELP WE NEED.

WE CAN'T
PROMISE ANYTHING
YET, OF COURSE.



ARCHIVE
RECORD
MONITOR

BUT WE'RE
PREPARED TO INVESTIGATE
IF YOU WILL EXPLAIN
YOUR PROBLEM.

IT CONCERNS
THE CLOUD - OR, AS WE HAVE
COME TO CALL IT, THE
"DEATH CLOUD."

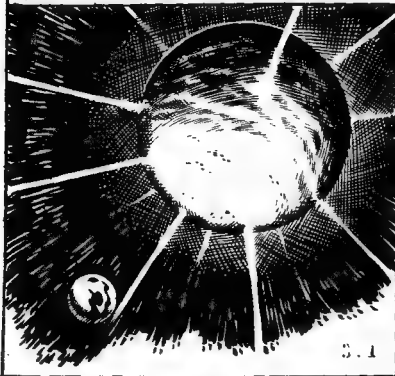


FRALG EXPLAINED THAT, 500 YEARS PREVIOUSLY, A TINY CLOUD HAD APPEARED NEAR HORVINTO, THEIR SUN. . . .

. . . . AND A MUCH WEAKER LIGHT CAME THROUGH THAT PARTICULAR SPOT. . . .



. . . . BUT FOR 50 YEARS, THIS GREW UNTIL IT ENVELOPED THE ENTIRE SUN. .



. . . . AND RECENTLY THEIR NOW TWILIGHT WORLD HAD STARTED TO DARKEN AS THE CLOUD THICKENED, SO THAT SOON THEY'D NO LONGER BE ABLE TO LIVE ON IT. . . .

FRALG SAID THAT UNLESS THE CLOUD WAS DESTROYED, THE GRIVTI WOULD HAVE TO EVACUATE THEIR PLANET.



BUT HAVE YOU A SPACE SHIP LARGE ENOUGH TO MOVE ALL YOUR PEOPLE IN TIME?

WE NEED NO SHIPS. . . . WE TRAVEL AS WE DID TO REACH HERE - BY TELEPORTATION.



WE "THINK" OURSELVES FROM PLACE TO PLACE BY MERELY CONCENTRATING ON A DESTINATION. NO MATTER WHAT THE DISTANCE, WE CAN TELEPORT OURSELVES IN LESS THAN 5 SECONDS. . . . SO - PERSONAL SALVATION IS NOT OUR PROBLEM.

FRAG TOLD THEM ABOUT THE IVRAS WHO SHARED THEIR PLANET AND WERE LIKE THE GRITVI IN ALL BUT THEIR APPEARANCE. . . .



... THESE WERE THE BEINGS WHO CAUSED WHAT THE PEOPLE OF TERRA WERE CALLING "THE MADNESS".

GRITV WAS RULED BY A DUAL MONARCHY. . . .

... JRINK

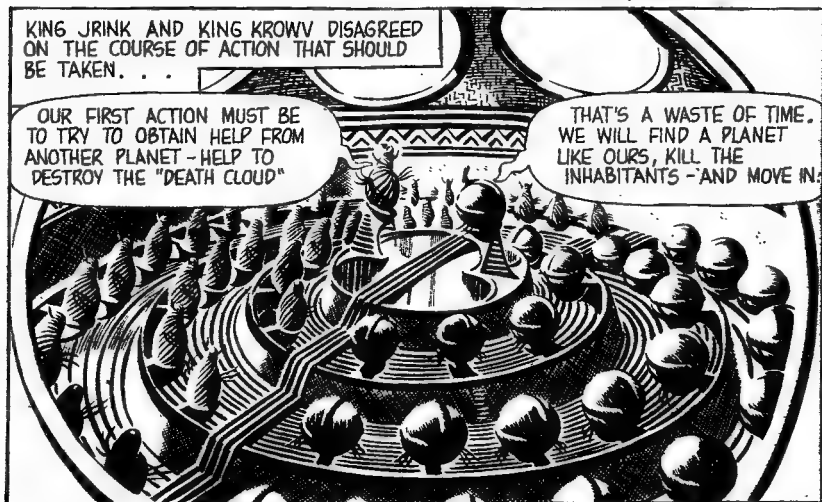


... AND KROWV.

KING JRINK AND KING KROWV DISAGREED ON THE COURSE OF ACTION THAT SHOULD BE TAKEN. . . .

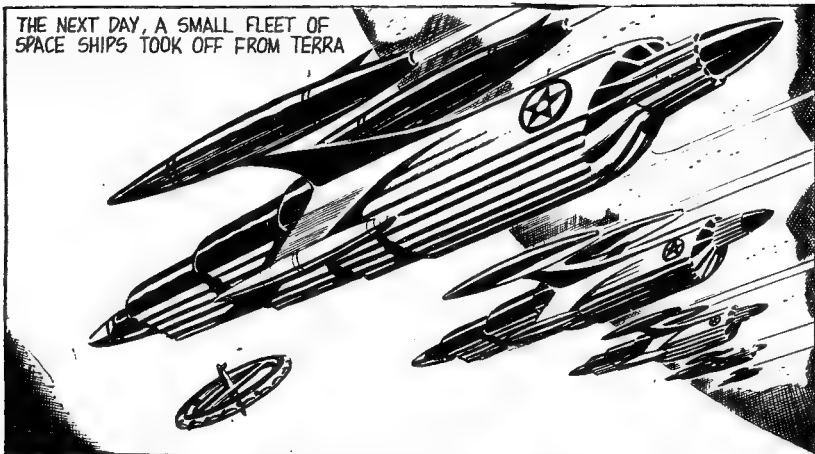
OUR FIRST ACTION MUST BE TO TRY TO OBTAIN HELP FROM ANOTHER PLANET - HELP TO DESTROY THE "DEATH CLOUD"

THAT'S A WASTE OF TIME. WE WILL FIND A PLANET LIKE OURS, KILL THE INHABITANTS - AND MOVE IN.





THE NEXT DAY, A SMALL FLEET OF SPACE SHIPS TOOK OFF FROM TERRA



... IT WAS A SCIENTIFIC AND DIPLOMATIC MISSION TO GRIVT.

RICK HEADED THE MISSION AND ALTHA WENT ALONG AS HIS ASSISTANT. FRALG TRAVELLED WITH THEM IN THE LEAD SHIP.

RICK - WHEN WE GET THERE, HOW ARE WE GOING TO BE ABLE TO TALK TO THEM?

IT'S ALL ARRANGED, ALTHA. ONE OF FRALG'S AIDES TELEPORTED AHEAD TO ARRANGE FOR SPECIAL EQUIPMENT. INCIDENTALLY - ON GRIVT, BECAUSE THE LIGHT IS DIFFERENT, WE'LL BE ABLE TO SEE THEM NORMALLY.

ALTHA - ALSO - BECAUSE WE'RE TELEPORTS - OUR CITIES HAVE NO STREETS.

ON ARRIVAL - WHILE THE FLEET REMAINED IN ORBIT ABOUT THE PLANET - RICK AND ALTHA SET OUT FOR LEROV, THE CAPITAL CITY. FRALG TELEPORTED AHEAD TO ANNOUNCE THEM.

SINCE THE NATIVES WERE TELEPORTS -
NEITHER REQUIRING OR POSSESSING VEHICLES -
RICK AND ALTHA HAD TO RELY ON THEIR
FLY-BELTS.

HOW GLOOMY
IT IS, RICK.

YES, ALTHA -
CAUSED BY THE CLOUD
AROUND THE SUN. NO
WONDER FRALG CALLS
IT A "TWILIGHT
WORLD".

THIS MUST BE
THE COUNCIL HALL,
RICK. HOW LARGE
EVERYTHING IS
CONSIDERING HOW
SMALL THEY ARE.

YES,
ALTHA - BUT REMEMBER
THESE PEOPLE ARE
CLAUSTROPHOBIC AND CAN'T
STAND CONFINEMENT. THAT
EXPLAINS THE HUGE ROOMS
AND SO MANY OPENINGS.

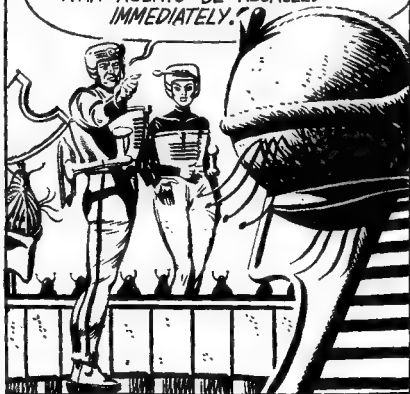
WEARING SPECIAL ELECTRONIC HEAD-UNITS THAT ENABLED THEM TO BE HEARD AND TALK TO THE GRIVTI AND THE IVRAS, THEY LISTENED TO FRALG'S INTRODUCTION. THEN RICK GOT UP.



AND SO - IN ANSWER TO FRALG - WE ARE HERE TO INVESTIGATE YOUR PROBLEM AND SO SEE IF WE CAN HELP YOU. HOWEVER - THERE IS ONE SERIOUS POINT . . .

RICK THEN SPOKE SHARPLY ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES OF THE IVRAS ON TERRA THAT CAUSED "THE MADNESS".

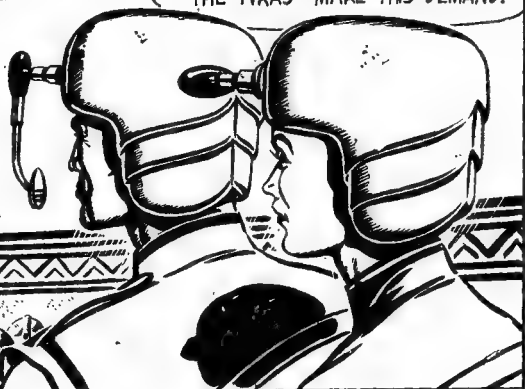
THEREFORE -
ON BEHALF OF MY GOVERNMENT -
I DEMAND THAT THESE IRRESPONSIBLE
IVRA AGENTS BE RECALLED
IMMEDIATELY."



THERE WERE SOUNDS OF APPROVAL FROM THE GRIVTI SIDE OF THE HOUSE BUT ONLY HOSTILE SILENCE FROM THE IVRAS. THEIR KING, JRINK, WAS NOT SILENT, HOWEVER.



WE WILL HEAR NO SUCH DEMANDS! THESE CREATURES OF TERRA HAVE NO AUTHORITY HERE! LET THEM LEARN COURTESY OR BE REMOVED. I - JRINK OF THE IVRAS - MAKE THIS DEMAND!





RICK, OF COURSE, WAS IN ONE OF THESE SCOOTERS WITH ALTHA IN THE SEAT BEHIND HIM . . .

BOTH THE SCOOTERS AND OUR SUITS ARE INSULATED, AREN'T THEY, RICK?

THEY HAVE TO BE, ALTHA. THE HEAT OUTSIDE IS MURDEROUS. THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS CLOUD THERE'S A SUN HOT ENOUGH TO FRY US TO CINDERS IN LESS THAN A SECOND.

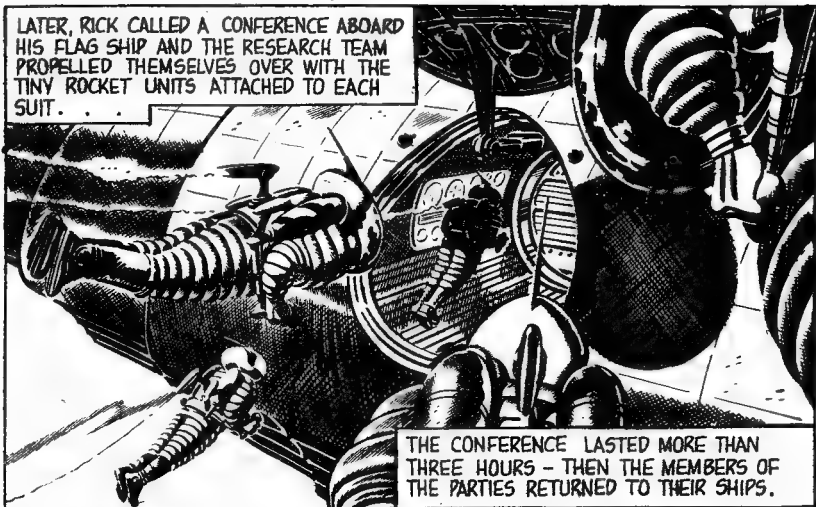
THEN THEY WERE THROUGH THE CLOUD AND THE FLAMES FROM THE SUN SEEMED TO BE REACHING OUT FOR THEM WITH GREEDY, CLUTCHING FINGERS.

RICK, ARE YOU LEARNING ANYTHING FROM THIS?

I'M A SORT OF SHEPHERD ON THE JOB, ALTHA. BUT EACH OF THOSE TEAMS HAS IT'S TASK AND THE TEST EQUIPMENT TO CARRY IT OUT.

AS THE TEAMS COMPLETED THEIR TESTS THEY RETURNED TO THEIR SHIPS. ONLY WHEN THE LAST SCOOTER HAD REPORTED OUT DID RICK ALSO TURN AND HEAD BACK THROUGH THE CLOUD. . .

LATER, RICK CALLED A CONFERENCE ABOARD HIS FLAG SHIP AND THE RESEARCH TEAM PROPELLED THEMSELVES OVER WITH THE TINY ROCKET UNITS ATTACHED TO EACH SUIT.



THE CONFERENCE LASTED MORE THAN THREE HOURS - THEN THE MEMBERS OF THE PARTIES RETURNED TO THEIR SHIPS.

WELL - THOSE REPORTS WERE ENCOURAGING, RICK.

YES, ALTHA - TENTATIVELY... BUT WE'LL GO HOME AND FEED OUR TEST RESULTS INTO BIG-JUMBO TO SEE WHAT HAPPENS.



ONCE WE KNOW ALL ABOUT THAT CLOUD, WE'LL GATHER THE PEOPLE AND EQUIPMENT WE NEED TO COME BACK AND TEAR IT APART.

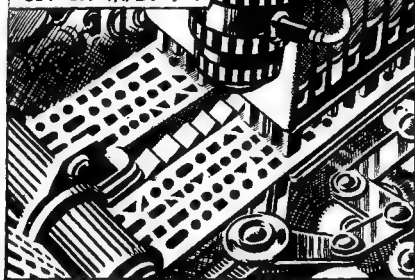


RETURNING TO TERRA, RICK HAD A WEEK OF EXTREMELY HECTIC ACTIVITY. . .

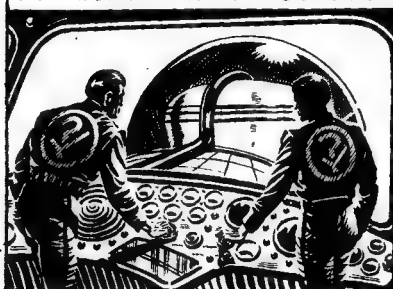
... IT BEGAN WITH A CONFERENCE WITH THE PRIME MINISTER. . .



... THEN THE TEST RESULTS WERE CUT ON TAPE. . .



... THEY WERE FED INTO BIG-JUMBO



... THERE WERE EXPERIMENTS. . .



... AND NUMEROUS MEETINGS. . .



... AND FINALLY - ACTION. . .



THE FINAL WAR AGAINST THE DEATH-CLOUD WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN. . .

AT 0800 HOURS THAT MORNING, ACCOMPANIED BY ALTHA, RICK WALKED ACROSS THE GREAT SPACE PORT TOWARDS THE STAGING AREA OF HIS MUCH AUGMENTED FLEET.

RICK - THAT LOOKS LIKE A FOREST OF SHIPS.

NOT SURPRISING, ALTHA - WE'VE GOT 52 OF THEM THIS TIME.

AT 0845, RICK GAVE HIS LAST ORDER BEFORE BLAST-OFF.



IN THE CONTROL ROOM OF EVERY SHIP, THE MECHANICAL VOICE OF THE VOCO-CLOCK WAS HEARD COUNTING DOWN THE MINUTES...



... AND THEN THERE WERE ONLY SECONDS LEFT - COUNTED OFF WITH MECHANICAL REGULARITY.



... AND IN THE QUIET EFFICIENCY OF EACH SHIP COULD BE HEARD THE SOFT CLICKING AS AUTOMATIC RELAYS BEGAN TO WORK...

...MINUS
10 SECONDS
...9...8
7...6...
MINUS 5
SECONDS
4...3...2...
1...ZERO!

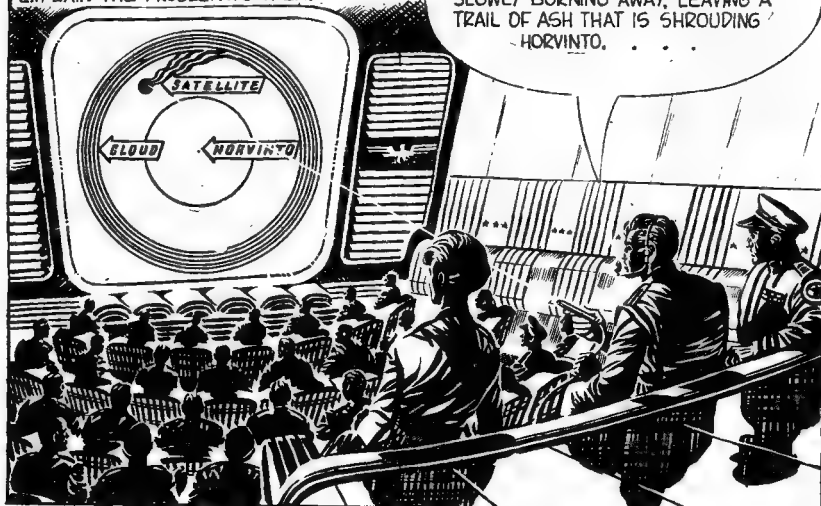
IN 52 SHIPS THE QUIET HUM OF MACHINERY WAS
LOST IN A WHINE THAT GREW IN RISING CRESCENDO
AS 52 SHIPS STREAKED ACROSS THE GREAT DEPTH
OF SPACE TOWARDS THE FAILING SUN OF THE
TWILIGHT WORLD...



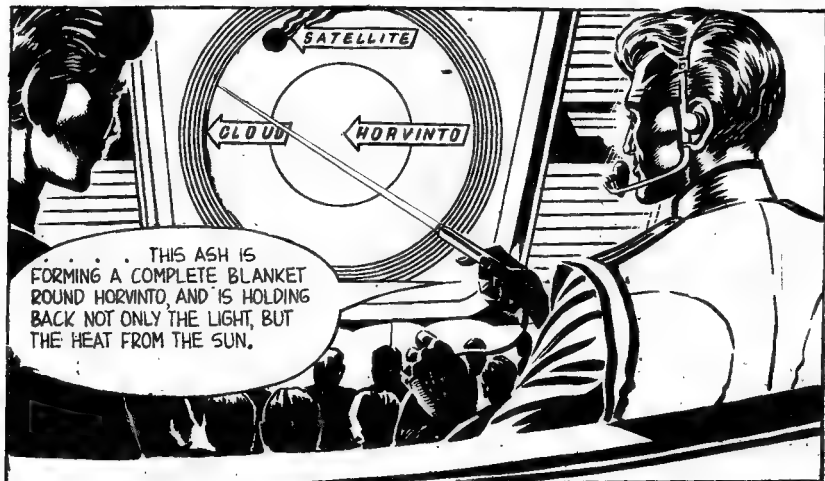
... GATHERING SPEED, THE MERCY FLEET SOON OUT-RAIDED ITS OWN SOUND AND,
THE CREWS RELAXED IN THE QUIET SERENITY OF SPACE...

WHEN HIS FLEET WAS IN ORBIT A SAFE DISTANCE FROM HORVINTO, THE SHROUDED SUN OF THE PLANET GRIVT, RICK GATHERED HIS GROUP LEADERS TO EXPLAIN THE PROBLEM TO THEM.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IS THIS. A TINY PLANET HAS BEEN ATTRACTED TO HORVINTO, THE SUN OF THE PLANET GRIVT. IT IS SO CLOSE THAT IT IS SLOWLY BURNING AWAY, LEAVING A TRAIL OF ASH THAT IS SHROUDING HORVINTO.



THIS ASH IS FORMING A COMPLETE BLANKET ROUND HORVINTO, AND IS HOLDING BACK NOT ONLY THE LIGHT, BUT THE HEAT FROM THE SUN.



RICK ADDED THAT THE HEAT ACCUMULATION BEHIND THE CLOUD WOULD MOST LIKELY BE TOO GREAT FOR EVEN THE REFLECTIVE AND INSULATING QUALITIES OF THEIR SUITS AND SPACE-SCOOTERS. . . .



IT WAS DECIDED THAT THE CLOUD COULD BEST BE DISPERSED BY THE SIMULTANEOUS FIRING OF SMALL CHARGES "ANCHORED" AT REGULAR INTERVALS AROUND AND THROUGH ITS ENTIRE AREA.

IT WAS A GIGANTIC TASK REQUIRING EVERY PERSON IN THE EXPEDITION, INCLUDING RICK AND ALTHA.





... AND, IN A FEW MINUTES, THE DEATH-CLOUD HAD VANISHED ENTIRELY.

AT RICK'S COMMAND, THE ARMADA OF TINY SPACE SCOOTERS SHOT OUT FROM THE FLEET TO TACKLE THE MORE DANGEROUS JOB OF DESTROYING HORVINTO'S BURNING SATELLITE.

RICK -
I CAN'T SEE
THE
SATELLITE.

IT'S
HIDDEN BY
FLAMES, ALTHA.
WE'RE GOING TO
HAVE TO PENETRATE
HORVINTO'S ENVELOPE
OF BURNING GASSES.

SOON, AS RICK PREDICTED, THEIR
LITTLE COCKLE-SHELL VEHICLE
WAS DIVING THROUGH FLAMES
THAT LEAPED A THOUSAND
MILES OR MORE INTO SPACE.

THERE IT IS,
RICK - RIGHT
UP AHEAD.

GOOD.
NOW TO PLACE
OUR CHARGE AND
GET OUT OF HERE.

THESE LARGE CHARGES WERE MOUNTED IN OTHER SPACE SCOOTERS WHICH WERE TOWED INTO PLACE AND SET TO HOVER IN POSITION.

WHEN HE'D RETURNED AGAIN TO HIS FLAG SHIP, RICK WENT IMMEDIATELY TO THE SPACE BOMBER IN THE BELLY HANGER OF THE LARGER VESSEL . .

ALL CHARGES HAVE BEEN PLACED, RICK - ALL THE OTHER SCOOTER HAVE BEEN TAKEN IN-BOARD AGAIN.

RIGHT, ALTHA. THAT MEANS I'M ON MY WAY.

A MOMENT LATER THE GREAT DOORS SWUNG OPEN AND RICK'S BOMBER DROPPED AWAY FROM THE MOTHER-SHIP.



AT TOP SPEED, RICK'S BOMBER STREAKED DOWN TOWARDS HORVINTO'S BURNING SATELLITE - DROPPING A LARGE NUCLEAR BOMB AT THE BOTTOM OF IT'S CURVING FLIGHT . . .



... BEFORE RETURNING AT TOP SPEED TO ITS SPACE-BORNE BERTH.

BECAUSE OF THE BOMB'S DELAYED ACTION, RICK WAS BACK IN HIS COMMAND POST IN TIME TO SEE THE FIRST EXPLOSION . . .

THERE IT IS,
RICK - THE FIRST
EXPLOSION . . .

WAIT FOR IT,
ALPHA - THE BEST
IS YET TO COME.

THE FIRST EXPLOSION SET OFF ALL THE
OTHER CHARGES LIKE A CHAIN-REACTION
AND FOR 10 MINUTES THEY BURST LIKE
FIRE-CRACKERS, LITTERING SPACE WITH
THE DEBRIS OF THE STRANGE SATELLITE.

AND WHEN IT ENDED THE BURNING CANCER THAT HAD ATTACHED
ITSELF TO HORVINTO NO LONGER EXISTED . . .



FLAG SHIP TO
ALL UNITS. THIS IS
RICK RANDOM...
MY CONGRATULATIONS AND
THANKS TO EVERY MEMBER
OF THE FORCE. OUR MISSION
HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL -
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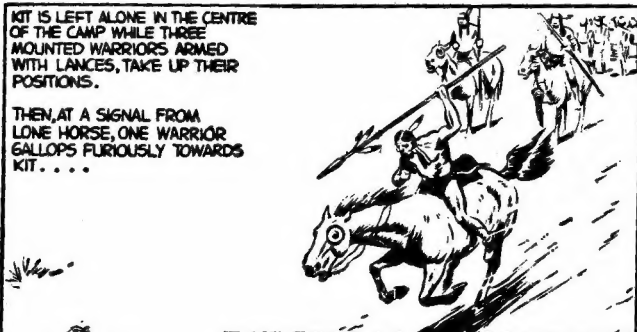
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