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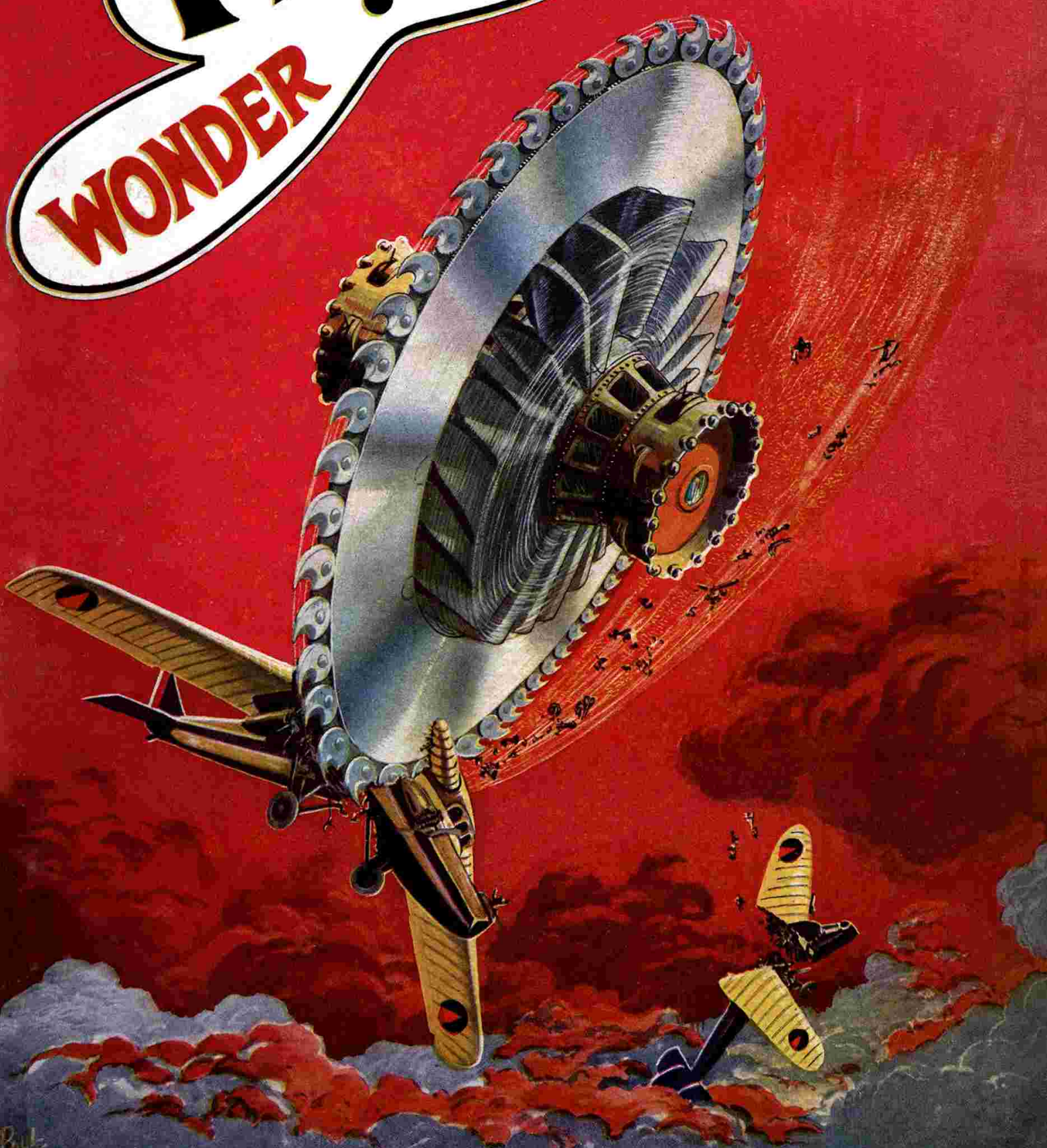
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HUGO GERNSBACK
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AIR STORIES

WONDER



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by H. MCKAY

Other Science-Aviation Stories by Edmond HAMILTON
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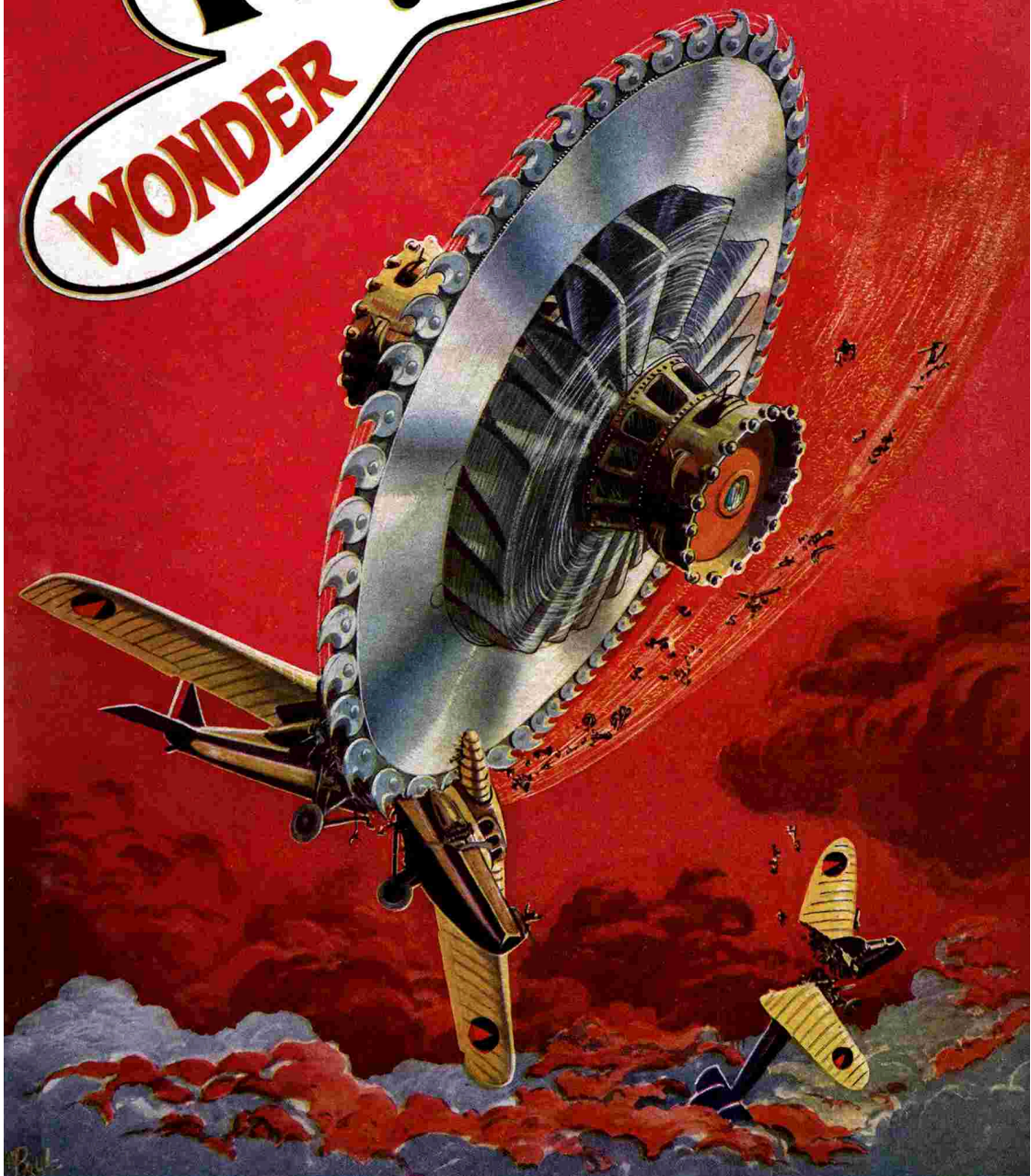


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**The Project Gutenberg eBook of Evans of the Earth-
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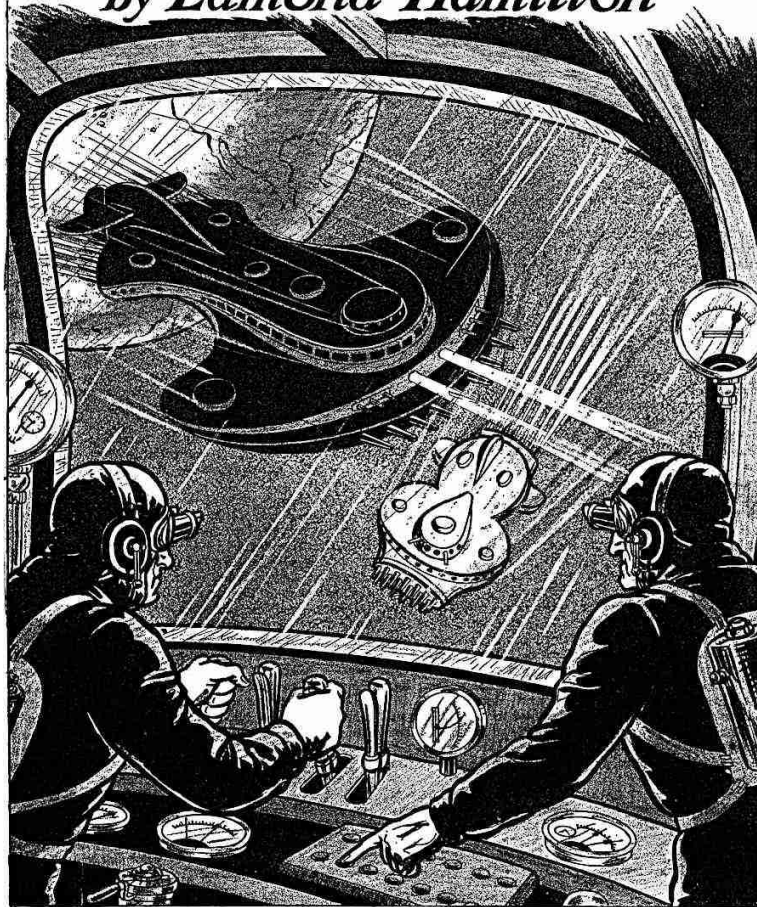
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK
EVANS OF THE EARTH-GUARD ***

EVANS of the EARTH GUARD

by *Edmond Hamilton*



The grim black rocket, whirling and dipping with an astounding swiftness, was endeavoring to bring the twisting little craft into the lines of its guns. (Illustration by Winter)

EVANS OF THE EARTH- GUARD

By EDMOND HAMILTON

*By the Author of "The Space Visitors," "Cities in the Air,"
etc.*



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The present likelihood is that the first interplanetary flight will probably be by means of a rocket-propelled ship. As far as our knowledge goes the rocket seems to be the most feasible means of propulsion because it will reach its greatest efficiency in the vacuum of inter-stellar space.

If the conditions on other planets, including our moon, are not too prohibitive, it is doubtless true that these planets will be explored for whatever mineral wealth or possibilities of life they may contain. The resulting interplanetary commerce will call into being a host of problems, such as the protection of cargo and passenger shipments against natural and human agents that might wish to destroy them.

In that case, the Earth-Guard that Mr. Hamilton describes so vividly will play a most important part in the protection of such commerce.

Mr. Hamilton, as is usual with him, has, in this story, developed it so that we were unable to predict from page to page what would happen next. And the editors were just as fooled by the surprising denouement as we believe our readers will be.

"All Earth-Guard rockets attention! One-man rocket *Pallas* speaking. Am pursued by pirate rocket believed to be that of the Hawk! I am running toward earth on space-lane 18, now in zone 44-6, but am being rapidly overtaken!"

As the clear voice came from the radiophone before him, Captain Wright Evans slammed over the reply-switch and

shouted back into it.

"Earth-Guard Rocket 283 answering. Standing toward you at top speed instantly!"

Then he was up and bursting into the great rocket ship's squat little pilot-house, where a man seated at the controls turned inquiringly to him.

"Full speed ahead, Calden!" he cried. "The Hawk's out again and after a one-man rocket not a thousand miles ahead—it's our chance to get him at last!"

"Full speed it is," rejoined Calden calmly, his hands flashing forth to flick down a half-score of the banked shining levers before him.

Instantly the great ship lurched and trembled as, from its rear, came thunderous explosion on explosion. In a moment every one of its rear-tubes was firing, and the speed-dial's arrow was creeping steadily forward until in a few minutes more it registered the ship's top speed of ten thousand miles an hour. The long gleaming craft, stubby of nose and stern and fully five hundred feet in length, was like a giant projectile, as it tore through the void, belching fire behind it.

From the squat pilot-house set atop it, Evans and Calden gazed ahead. The great gray disk of earth filled a quarter of the heavens before them, the outline of its continents and seas visible here and there through its shifting screen of clouds. Behind them the moon's silvery sphere was dwindling rapidly, as they had seen it dwindle now for hours. It was hours that the great Earth-Guard rocket with its half-hundred men had been hurtling toward earth after its weary week's vigil in space, before this call had come.

And weary enough indeed was the vigil that the rocket ships of the Earth-Guard kept around the earth and its moon, and had kept up for more than fifty years. More than fifty years it had been since, back in 1954, the first crude rocket had thundered out from earth into the great void toward its shining satellite. Neither that first rocket nor the twenty-first had reached their goal, but the next one had.

Thus had begun the commerce that now filled all the space-lanes between the earth and moon. In their first flame of exploration, men had headed out toward the nearer planets, too, but they had found them unapproachable because of the fierce guard maintained by their strange peoples. Every ship that had sought to explore another planet had been annihilated on reaching it and we had finally realized that our planetary neighbors were guarding fiercely their isolation.

There had remained to earth only its own moon. But that had become swiftly a lure to all adventurous earthlings. Upon the moon's other side were great mines in which men, dwelling in air-tight cities and toiling in hermetically-tight metal suits, worked the rare metals and minerals in which earth's satellite abounded. And upon the moon's earthward side were other great air-tight cities, glass-roofed and luxurious, to which went each year hundreds of thousands of the earth's wealthy—there to spend their vacations—enjoying the wondrous celestial views, the astounding strength and youth given them by the moon's lesser gravity, and the chance to view the earth from the outside.

So that there had grown gradually the commerce that kept endless streams of ships moving between earth and moon—great and luxurious passenger-craft laden with the wealthy and powerful of earth; and sleek private ships bound like the others for the luxurious lunar cities. Bulky and battered cargo-rockets had their own space-lanes, carrying metals and minerals to the earth, and returning with loads of supplies and tanks of the liquid rocket-fuel to the moon.

It was inevitable that all this traffic should need regulating, and so there had been formed the Earth-Guard, an organization corresponding to the old Coast-Guards of the nations, but controlled by an international commission of earth's powers. The Earth-Guard boasted five hundred gleaming rockets that patrolled ceaselessly the space between and around the earth

and moon, enforcing peace with their electric-guns and guarding the lunar commerce.

For there were those against whom it must be guarded—space-pirates who dashed forth from time to time from hidden bases on earth or moon to harry and hold up in the void the rich lunar commerce. The boldest and most dreaded of them all was that swift and flashing corsair of the void known to all on earth and moon alike as the Hawk, and who for years had been the despair of all the Earth-Guard.

"Lord, if we can get him!" Evans was praying as he gazed out of a port hole from the hurtling ship's pilot-house. "I get so tired of jabs about him that I'd lose an arm to get him."

"Well, everyone's turn comes sooner or later in that game," philosophized Calden. "It may be the Hawk's now."

Evans pulled a speaking-tube toward him and shouted down into it over the roar of the rocket's explosions. "Hartley? Put full crews on all the electric-guns and have them stand ready for action. Yes. And tell them it's the Hawk we're after this time—it'll put them on their toes."

Calden grinned as a moment later a muffled cheer came up from the gun-rooms beneath. "They're on their toes, evidently," he commented. "They're as crazy to get their hands on the Hawk as you are."

Evans made no answer but started ahead with teeth clenched upon his lower lip, glancing over now and then at the dials that recorded the rocket's position between earth and moon. This recording was automatic, being dependent on the change in the gravitational power of the two bodies. Evans saw by them now that the rocket was hurtling into the very zone in which the *Pallas* had reported itself.

Missed!

He reached to turn a knob and there clicked up into position against the lenses set in the pilot-house window two long

metal tubes with eye-pieces that formed powerful binoculars. Gazing ahead through these he kept watch, while with fingers on the firing-levers of the rocket's tubes Calden kept them steady on their course. Minutes passed before Evans uttered a cry.

"They're just ahead!" he exclaimed. Then, into the tube—"All batteries ready, Hartley, and use the port guns when we bank."

"Lord, look at that fellow!" breathed Calden as he too stared ahead. "He sure can handle a rocket—the Hawk can't get his guns on him!"

Far ahead of them in the void the scene of combat to which they had been summoned was rushing into view. A tiny and shining one-man rocket was dodging and twisting and circling in space, with its firing-tubes flaming first on one end and then on the other to keep it in an ever-changing course. And around it, like a great grim pike rushing a shining chub, was circling and swooping a long dead-black rocket of the same size almost as the Earth-Guard craft. It was the dreaded black rocket of the Hawk, reputed the swiftest craft in space.

The grim black rocket, whirling and dipping with a swiftness of maneuver astounding in a ship of its size, was endeavoring to bring the twisting little craft that evaded it into the line of its guns. As their own ship thundered down on the scene, Evans and Calden saw the one side of the Hawk's rocket stabbing forth a half-score slender jets of blue fire as its electric-guns blasted toward the smaller craft. But the latter had shot upward in time to avoid the fire, and in the next moment the Earth-Guard rocket was rushing down upon the ebon attacker.

"Fire!" As Hartley's voice below shouted the order, the Earth-Guard ship poured a deadly fire toward the black rocket of the Hawk. But at the very instant of firing, with a swiftness born of a hundred space-fights, the Hawk's rocket had shot upward.

"Missed him!" Calden cried. "Look out—he's tailing—!"

"Over quick!" Evans exclaimed. "Let him have the stern guns, Hartley!"

For in the instant after shooting upward to avoid their fire, the rocket of the Hawk had flashed back down on them in the familiar maneuver of "tailing," using all the firing-tubes placed in its nose for braking purposes to halt it and reverse it in a flash.

Evans had a lightning glimpse of the great black shape rushing stern-foremost down on them. Then he felt his own rocket dip and dive like light as Calden's hands flashed on the firing-levers, and for a moment Evans saw the white-lit pilot-house of the other rocket, with the tense figures inside it, before it whirled out of view. He sensed rather than saw the blast of the Hawk's guns above them as they dived just in time to avoid the deadly missiles.

Evans heard shouting voices from their own gun-rooms and had no need to cry to Calden the next order, for already the other was straightening out their course and sending their ship soaring upward again. But the long black craft of the Hawk was gone! After that one swift swoop and blow it had flashed off the space-lane into the uncharted void, and they glimpsed it only as a dwindling point of fire that vanished in the next instant.

Evans, filled by a blind fury, whirled to give Calden the order that would send them in wild pursuit, but checked himself as he realized, despite his rage, the futility of such a pursuit. Once out of sight, the Hawk in his immensely swift rocket could laugh at all pursuit, as he had laughed many times. His face a study of conflicting emotions, Evans turned back toward his second-officer.

"Back to our regular course on the space-lane," he ordered wearily. "He's got away again."

Silently Calden headed the great Earth-Guard rocket again toward the great disk of earth. But in a moment he motioned toward something outside and above them. "It's the rocket the Hawk was attacking," he said. "He's signalling for a contact."

"Let him come on, then," answered the other.

Calden pressed the studs that flashed from their own rocket's nose the answering colored signal-lights, and quickly the shining smaller craft drove down until it hung just over the big Earth-Guard ship. It settled smoothly then on the greater craft's back, its nose firing-tubes blasting it to a halt. The ring of metal contact-pins on its lower side fitted smoothly into the standardized ring of openings ready for them on the Earth-Guard's back.

Held thus to the greater craft, the little rocket was carried along through space like a pilot-fish clinging to a great shark. In a moment there was the clang of the contact-door opening, as the occupant of the *Pallas* passed into the Earth-Guard rocket through the latter's similar door. In a moment more Hartley, the third officer, was striding into the pilot-house with the man who had been the little craft's sole occupant.

He was a tall young man with dark hair and dark, laughing eyes. He came forward with hand outstretched to Evans and as the rocket-captain grasped it, he introduced himself.

"Francis Seaworth," he named himself, "and just now mighty pleased to see you! Indeed, if you hadn't come when you did, the Hawk would have had me in another minute—I didn't have anyone to work my gun and could only try to evade him till you came."

Evans laughed. "What in the devil made you start for earth all by yourself?" he demanded. "Didn't you hear two days ago that the Hawk was out?"

The other shook his head. "I heard," he said, "but that's just why I chose this particular time for the trip. No, I don't mean that as bravado," he added quickly, as he saw the incredulous smiles of the three officers. "What I mean is that I knew the Hawk was waiting for a chance to jump on me, and when I heard he was out on the space-lanes again, I thought he'd be too busy at his usual trade to think of me."

Evans regarded him with more interest. "But what's the Hawk after you for?" he asked.

Seaworth hesitated. "Well, I wouldn't want to spill too much." He nodded toward the other officers.

Evans straightened with interest. "Anything you want to say you can tell me in front of my officers."

"Well," said Seaworth, "I've been spending the last year as a secret agent of the International Commission, looking for the Hawk's base on the moon. They had an idea—just an idea—that the Hawk's base was really inside one of the lunar cities."

Seaworth Explains

"In a lunar city?" Evans repeated. "Whoever got that idea?"

Seaworth shook his head. "It seemed crazy to me at first too, but there were rumors that officials in one of the lunar cities were allowing the Hawk to come there, and to refuel in exchange for a share of his loot. I was sent up to investigate, and I found out enough to call the Hawk's attention to me, and this is the second time he or his men nearly got me. I couldn't find his base, but I did find that there's a man now on earth who was formerly in his service and who could tell me where his base is if he wanted to. So I started back to earth in my own ship to see him. Well, the Hawk was waiting, and if you hadn't been within call it would have been all up with me."

Evans considered. "It did seem mighty queer to us that the Hawk would stoop to holding up one-man rockets," he admitted, "but that explains it. So they've had a secret agent on his trail, eh?"

"A very secret agent," smiled the other. "My emblem," he smiled as he opened his jacket and showed a little card sewed onto the inside.

Evans nodded. The card of an agent of the International Commission merited any help he could furnish.

"In fact," continued Seaworth, "I doubt if a dozen men on earth outside of the International Commission know what I've been

doing. I've got no business, really, telling even you about it, but it's about all wound up now, for if I get the information I'm after on earth it means we'll catch the Hawk in short order."

"Seems like catching the Hawk is work for the Earth-Guard rather than for any secret agents," growled the bulldog-visaged Hartley. "We're good enough to chase after all the common scum of space-pirates that are always bobbing up, but when it comes to nabbing the Hawk someone else wants the glory."

"The glory's been there for the Earth-Guard to take for some time," retorted Seaworth acidly. "I haven't seen it doing it, though."

Hartley's face went dull red, and Evans intervened in time. "No use scrapping over it," he told them. "Anything that Seaworth finds out will help us, and I for one don't give a continental who catches the Hawk so long as he's caught. Every time I go into a teletheater nowadays, all I hear is a lot of musty old cracks about the Hawk and the Earth-Guard, and I don't mind telling you I'm getting tired of it."

Seaworth laughed. "Well, it was nearly a case of the catcher caught with me this time. I suppose I don't need to tell you that I'd rather make the rest of the trip with you?"

Evans nodded. "Of course. Though as a matter of fact the Hawk's probably ten zones off by now. That's always his way—he swoops and strikes and flashes off before anyone can get hands on him."

"Yes," said Seaworth, his eyes troubled, "but he happens to want me devilish bad, you see. I'll admit I'm not going to have much taste for the trip back to the moon—I wouldn't put it past him to hold up the biggest passenger-ship in space if he knew I was travelling on it."

"I wouldn't myself," Evans said. "But we're heading back next week after our relief-period. Why not go back with us?"

Seaworth's face cleared. "Thanks a lot, really, old man. It's a fact I've been worried about this trip back, for if I get what I'm after on earth, it means that when I get back to the moon we can find the Hawk's base and make a trap of it to catch him

when he comes in. And I want to see him put away before I check out—it's got to be something of a personal duel between us."

In the next half-score of hours in which they hurtled on toward earth, Evans saw that Seaworth was indeed getting more and more impatient and eager as the great disk grew large before them. He fretted at the delay as they moved in through earth's atmosphere at slackening speed, and down through the crowded converging space-lanes toward the huge New York inter-stellar station. And when the great Earth-Guard ship shot down into the funnel-shaped landing-framework and came to a halt with all its nose-tubes firing, Seaworth emerged from it with its first officers.

Briefly he assured himself once more that Evans was willing for him to make the trip back out to the moon in the Earth-Guard craft in the following week, and he also made certain that his own little rocket could remain attached to the greater craft and be refueled with it. Then he hastened away in the crowds that poured here and there across and around the great rocket-station.

Evans stood still for a few moments gazing around him, bewildered a little as he invariably was by the sudden transition from the silence and gloom of the great void to this brilliant and hurried scene. Across the great station at its departure-side a huge cargo-rocket was taking off, its firing-tubes deafening the ears as it thundered up into the sunlight and vanished. Already a great, sleek passenger-craft was being slid into the ascension-framework just vacated, and as its warning-bell rang out, the last belated passengers were hurrying toward it with their porters and luggage.

There remained to Evans the disagreeable task for which he had been bracing himself during the last hours of the trip—that of informing crusty old Commander Cain of his encounter with the Hawk. When he had been ushered into the office of the white-haired and white-mustached old space-veteran who

was head of the Earth-Guard, Evans made his brief report with the other's stare piercing him to the marrow.

When he had finished, the Commander, as he had expected, delivered himself of a furious blast of profanity.

He finally became articulate. "Evans, you must realize what a situation the Earth-Guard is in. You know and I know that the Hawk must have something new on his ship, whether a new fuel or a new firing-tube, that gives his ship a speed beyond anything else in space. You know as well as I do, too, that the Hawk is really the one outstanding space-pirate left and that in the last decades we've cleared up the others one by one.

"But the public doesn't see it that way! The public," and the Commander smote his desk furiously, "the public sees only this one pirate, the Hawk. They see him and his crew defying the whole five hundred ships of the Earth-Guard. That's all the blankety blank public sees, and as a result the Earth-Guard's getting to be a joke!"

"But sir!" Evans managed to say, "we have no hope of getting the Hawk so long as he has his bases for refueling and resting. We must get his lunar base before we can get him, and that's why I think this Seaworth may win for us yet."

"Seaworth—." The Commander frowned thoughtfully. "It may be—it may be. I didn't know that the International Commission had put secret agents after the Hawk, but it may prove useful at that. You say Seaworth's going back with you next week?"

"Yes, he thinks the Hawk is after him in dead earnest, and that if he takes a passenger-rocket the Hawk will hold it up to get him."

"It wouldn't be beyond him," the Commander warned. "But we've another thing to think of, too, Evans. If the Hawk wants this man Seaworth badly enough, he may not even stick at holding up an Earth-Guard ship to get him! I see you smile—you think it is incredible that even the Hawk should ever try taking an Earth-Guard—but remember that he has a reputation for doing things no pirate ever dared do before, and that in this case he has the best reason in the world for trying it. And if he

ever took an Earth-Guard rocket—good-bye! No matter what we did after that, the Guard would never be able to live it down!"

Evans Endures It

Evans was impressed. "I'll keep a close watch for him going back, sir," he promised.

The Commander's warning rang in Evans' ears all the week that followed, and he was forced during that week to admit that his superior's view of the situation was correct. The Earth-Guard was suffering a distinct loss of prestige. It seemed to Evans that wherever he went his blue Earth-Guard uniform, once an envied garb, was greeted with titters and derisive comments that made his ears burn.

The newspapers and teletheaters were exploiting the situation to the utmost. If Evans watched a troupe of dancers he was met with the spectacle of a nimble black-garbed figure, representing the Hawk, eluding with ease the slowly-moving blue-garbed figures symbolic of the Earth-Guard. If he was introduced to anyone by a joking friend it was always with a jesting reference to his imminent capture of the Hawk. Small boys called after him that the Hawk was coming, and then delightedly ran away.

The Hawk, indeed, was coming to have far more of the public sympathy than the Earth-Guard. It was true that he held up defenseless passenger-craft between earth and moon, forcing them under the menace of his guns to cast loose for him in their life-rockets whatever of value they carried. All knew that he was an outlaw of the void, and would meet swift death at the hands of a firing-squad were he captured.

But if he was a space-pirate, he was not one like the earlier space-buccaneers whose atrocities had roused a fury that had swept them out of existence. He was, if anything, a gentleman-corsair of the void, and though few had ever looked on his face, it was rumored that he was exceptionally handsome. It

was small wonder that by the end of his week of relief Evans' nerves were ragged and he was longing for the peacefulness of the space patrol.

When on the last day of their relief he found Calden and Hartley at the New York station, inspecting the great Earth-Guard rocket, preparatory to its start back out into space, he found their nerves as raw on the subject as his own. They too had felt the whips of the public laughter.

"You know," growled Hartley as he ran a practised eye over the looming rocket's stern firing-tubes, "I'm just about praying that we meet up with the Hawk this trip. I'm not thin-skinned—but when my little daughter begins to ask daddy why he doesn't catch the Hawk, I'm getting to the busting point!"

Evans and Calden laughed despite themselves. "Well, you may get your wish, Hartley," Evans told him. "Remember, Seaworth will be with us, and the Hawk wants him bad."

Hartley looked at him blankly. "You don't mean that he'd ever try holding us up? *Us*? An Earth-Guard rocket?"

Evans shrugged. "It's Commander Cain's idea, not mine. Here he comes now, to see us off. Evidently going to give us a final warning."

And that proved in fact to be the white-haired Commander's purpose when he reached them through the throngs of hurrying mechanics around the giant ship. He drew Evans aside from the others.

"Don't forget what I told you, Evans," he warned. "Keep double-watches in the lookout-cells at all times, and if the Hawk does appear, send out a general radiophone alarm before you engage. Remember, it isn't a question of personal glory, but a matter of catching him."

"I'll remember," Evans promised. "I guess we're set to go—here comes Seaworth now."

The secret agent's eyes were shining as he strode across the station to them. When he reached Evans and the commander he tapped the black leather case he carried.

"Got it!" he exclaimed. "My tip was a straight one and I've got the dope from beginning to end. You're ready to go?"

Evans nodded, and Commander Cain shook hands with him and with Seaworth, as he turned away.

"Good luck to the both of you," he told them, "and if you've really got anything that will enable you to nab the Hawk, I'll resign cheerfully on the day he's taken and you can shoot dice between you for my job!"

Evans and Seaworth laughed together as the commander strode away. "The old man's nutty about the Hawk these days," Evans commented.

"Well, if I can get back to the moon with the information I have here," the other said, "it means the end for Mr. Hawk. I found the man I was hunting for—he'd been one of the Hawk's crew and had left him on account of some squabble over the division of loot. He was pretty much afraid of his old chief still—I guess the Hawk's got a deadly record as regards traitors—but he gave me all I wanted for a price. I have the exact location of the Hawk's base in one of the lunar cities, the names of the officials who've been harboring him and selling him fuel—all that we need."

"Once back on the moon we can set a trap there that will spring on the Hawk the first time he comes into his base. There's only one queer thing about it all, and that is that the man who told me all this disappeared on the very next day. No one has the slightest idea what became of him, though some of the officials I talked with thought he'd merely decamped with the price of his information. I don't know, though—it may have been something else."

"The Hawk?" Evans questioned, and the other slowly nodded.

"I'm afraid so—his way with traitors is short and sweet. It only worries me because if it was he, then he knows what I've learned and knows I'm taking back that information with me."

Ready to Start

Evans frowned. "That would make him desperate, all right. The Commander has an idea that he might even attack our rocket to get you, Seaworth."

"You mean that he'd even try to take an Earth-Guard rocket?"

"Yes, but it's just an idea. We'll keep a mighty sharp lookout for him, and whatever else the Hawk may have done, I think he's too wary a bird to try tackling Earth-Guard rockets."

They were interrupted by a thunderous blast of firing-tubes as a battered cargo ship of the tramp class, a quarter of its tubes out of commission, hurtled upward from the great ascension-framework. At once the huge machinery beside it that held the Earth-Guard rocket was sliding it smoothly into the ascension-framework to go out also. The warning-bell was jangling again and Calden and Hartley came up to the two men.

"All ready," Calden reported, saluting. "The starter's given us 9.40—that's eight minutes from now."

Evans nodded. "Time to go, Seaworth," and they strode toward the stern-door of the big, upreared craft.

"I see you've still got my little ship tacked on," Seaworth commented as they moved across the station.

"Yes, refueled and ready for you whenever we're near enough the moon for you to leave safely."

They passed inside and the stern-door closed and whirred as Hartley spun it carefully shut. Climbing the light metal ladders inside the upreared craft the four men gained the pilot-house, where Calden took his accustomed seat at the controls. Strapped into their shock-absorbing seats, the four men looked down over the station and its swarming throngs, a busy scene in the morning sunlight.

Just beside the ascension-framework rose the starter's tower, from which, at intervals, the streams of ships were allowed to start out into the various space-lanes. Lights were flashing and

changing color on it each moment as the minute for the departure of the Earth-Guard ship drew near. Already the machinery beside the ascension-framework was ready to move into it the next rocket to start, a great passenger-craft into which hundreds of passengers were hastening, crowds of friends waving them bon voyage. Few in the station were paying any attention to the routine departure of the Earth-Guard's craft.

The lights on the starter's tower had flashed from yellow to green, and then to red. Calden was watching them imperturbably, his hands resting on the main firing-levers, while Evans, as always at the moment of starting, involuntarily drew a deep preparatory breath. Then the lights flashed suddenly pure white, Calden's hands depressed the levers with a single motion, and, as a thunderous blast of sound broke from the great rocket's stern beneath them, they were pressed with immeasurable force into their seats.

The sunlit station had vanished in a flash from around them, and there was a dizzy lurching and trembling of the great mass as it shot upward and outward. From outside came a steady roar of air against the rocket's walls that was audible even above the thunder of continued explosions from the rear; and the air grew suddenly warm about them. Then the roar of air had ceased, the walls of the pilot-house were cooling, and the diffused bright sunlight of the atmosphere was gone. For in the immensity of space the sun flared fiercely on one side, while a rayless gloom, gemmed with steady-burning stars, stretched away on the other.

Ahead, the moon's brilliant disk, almost completely illumined by the sun, gleamed calm and white amid the throbbing fires of the encircling stars. Evans and Seaworth contemplated its beauty with a silent wonder that not even long familiarity with the sight could dull. Calden, meantime, was calmly checking over dials and controls, while Hartley had already gone below to sleep against the next watch at the controls. This vital

station was filled by the craft's three officers in successive watches of four hours each.

In the hours that followed, Evans felt slipping away from him the hope that he had cherished of meeting the Hawk in straight battle in mid-space. Since Commander Cain's warning to him, he had persuaded himself that because of Seaworth's presence the Hawk might really attack. Like all others in the Earth-Guard, Evans desired nothing more ardently than a final battle with the elusive and dreaded corsair.

But though the lookouts at every one of the great rocket's observation-cells kept an unceasing watch through the void, no sign of the black rocket was to be seen. The Earth-Guard ship might have been alone in space, had it not twice caught sight of great cargo-rockets plowing their way moonward in the slower space-lanes, and once passed an earth-bound Earth-Guard craft closely enough in a neighboring lane to exchange with it a flashing "Salute" signal in passing.

When Evans ascended to the pilot-house for his third watch at the controls, thirty-two hours after their start from earth, the moon's gleaming sphere was huge in the heavens before them.

"A dozen hours more and we'll be there," he commented disappointedly to Hartley and Seaworth, as he relieved the former at the controls. "I guess there's no chance of your wreaking your wrath on the Hawk this trip, Hartley."

"I told you it was crazy to think he'd tackle us," Hartley rejoined, "though I admit I've been hoping he would."

"Well, I haven't," Seaworth told them, grinning. "It may be just play to you lads in the Earth-Guard, but the Hawk nearly settled me twice and I hate to think what he'd do if he got me now."

"No danger," Evans told him as Seaworth followed the yawning Hartley down out of the pilot-house. "We'll have you safe and sound on the moon in a half day more, and if you can nab the Hawk there, it'll punish him for not showing up this trip."

Left alone in the pilot-house, Evans sat at the control-board with eyes glancing from one to another of the recording dials above it. Now and then he depressed a firing-lever, firing one of the rocket's side tubes to keep it from leaving its proper space-lane, but for the most part the great craft hurtled steadily onward in its course, and he occupied himself in contemplating through the windows the moon's bright sphere and the dazzling light-patches on it that marked the position of the lunar cities.

Evans had been sitting thus in solitude at the controls for some minutes before he heard a strange popping sound from somewhere in the rocket's interior beneath him. He listened sharply, and heard other quick-following popping sounds, as of slight detonations; then came a babel of cries from beneath, cries that were cut sharply short! Evans sprang to his feet. There was silence below now, but suddenly the door of the pilot-house was flung open and Seaworth burst up into it, his face livid.

"The Hawk!" he gasped. And then, his eyes suddenly widening, he pointed out through the windows beyond Evans. "Look there!" he cried.

Evans whirled toward the window. In the next instant he seemed to see a curtain of flame descending before his eyes as something struck him a crashing blow on the head. The flame-curtain was succeeded instantly by the black depths of unconsciousness.

It was only slowly that he came back to himself. He became aware that he was sitting against the wall, that the thunder of the rocket's firing-tubes was coming to his ears, that his brain ached. He tried to move, but found that his hands were tightly tied, his feet were bound, and every movement made his head throb. He opened his eyes, then stared uncomprehendingly, as if stupefied.

He was sitting against the pilot-house wall, and a half-dozen feet from him, at the control-board, sat Seaworth. He was calmly manipulating the firing-levers, and he looked up and smiled as he saw Evans' astounded gaze upon him.

"It really was the Hawk after all, you see," he said. "Only instead of being outside the rocket he was inside!" He laughed with genuine amusement.

Evans struggled to speak. "Then you—you—"

"Yes, the Hawk, at your service," Seaworth calmly told him. "And as a word of friendly advice, Captain Evans—when someone tells you excitedly to look—look at *them*."

Evans, striving to understand, did not hear the mocking final words.

"You the Hawk! But we saw the Hawk's rocket attacking you there—we came and saved you—"

The Hawk laughed again. "I'm sorry to take the glory of your rescue away from you, Evans, but it was really no rescue at all. You don't understand? It's simple enough. I decided some time ago that the possession of an Earth-Guard rocket would give me very great advantages in my trade of—ah—buccaneering. You see, every rocket in space will stop at the command of an Earth-Guard ship, and since they all look alike we could do just about as we pleased with the rocket-commerce if we had one. Therefore I decided to get one.

"It was easy. I merely embarked in a little one-man ship and when I knew your craft would be on the space-lane returning to earth, I had my crew, in our regular black rocket, stage a faked attack upon me. I called for help, you came; after a brief clash my crew fled as instructed, and you took me aboard. You'd seen the Hawk attacking me, and so believed me implicitly when I told you I was a secret agent whom the Hawk was anxious to capture. Secret agents, you should be aware, are really not so communicative as that. And of course, I couldn't expect you to know that my card was forged.

"Then it was not hard for me to draw out from you the suggestion that I might return to the moon with you on this trip. That was just what I was playing for, of course—the chance to travel back in this rocket. My mission on earth was

the purest falsehood—the only thing I did there was to enjoy the witty remarks about the Earth-Guard and the Hawk which I heard all around me. That case I brought with me held enough gas-bombs to paralyze your whole crew. They're all down there now unconscious—I used a mask for myself, of course—but they're not hurt and will be coming to in an hour.

"But I'm afraid that will be a little late. For I waited to make this coup, to gas the crew and stun you, until we were just at this particular position in space. It is the prearranged position, and less than five thousand miles off this space-lane my own rocket and crew are waiting for me. We're heading toward them now, and before your crew wakes, Evans, we'll be with them and this rocket will be in their hands. You and your crew won't be harmed, of course—we can set you loose in a life ship near the moon—but this Earth-Guard craft we'll keep and it should prove highly useful. An ingenious plan, everything considered, don't you think? Nothing overlooked."

Evans' brain was spinning as the Hawk's amusement-filled voice ceased. The great rocket was out of the space-lane by now, he knew—was heading under the Hawk's guiding hands to the prearranged position in space where the black rocket of the corsair waited with its crew to take complete possession of the prize. And the Hawk had captured it, had captured an Earth-Guard rocket, alone!

Evans raged at his bonds in senseless fury. His hands, tied before him, were cut deeply by the cords holding them as he strained to break these. The Hawk looked up from the bank of firing-levers with which he was busy to shake his head in mocking reproof.

"Now, now, Captain Evans," he soothed, "don't take it so hard. Lots of captains have found themselves in your position before this, remember. Though I'll admit this is the first Earth-Guard rocket I've taken."

"No Earth-Guard rocket has ever been taken by an enemy," said Evans thickly.

"Not until now," the Hawk conceded, depressing two more firing-levers. "But there has to be a first time for everything—"

and from what I heard on earth I don't think the capture of an Earth-Guard rocket will excite any anger."

It would not, Evans reflected dully, sinking for the moment into an apathy of despair. It would be merely with scornful laughter, that the Earth-Guard would be met when this latest and greatest exploit of the Hawk became known. What derision would meet the news of this single-handed capture of a great rocket and all its crew, by the man they were hunting! Evans could picture at the moment as clearly as though a face were before his eyes, the shame and rage of fierce old Commander Cain when the news reached him, and the shame of all his companions in the Earth-Guard.

He could hear the thin, derisive laughter of the crowds; the new and side-splitting witticisms in the teletheaters, the laughter of all on earth and moon alike became audible to him. A fierce resolve, a last expedient of his despair, rose in Evans' brain. He rose to his feet, tied as they were, and swaying, leaned forward to catch at the control-board's corner with his bound hands supporting himself. The Hawk watched him curiously, with nothing to fear from this one man, who, bound hand and foot, alone remained conscious of the rocket's crew. Evans leaned across the control-board and its banked levers toward the Hawk, and as he did so his two bound hands were moving, slowly, unobtrusively, toward the control-board.

"No Earth-Guard rocket has ever yet been captured," he said slowly and hoarsely, his hands very near the black plug at the control-board's corner, "and none is ever going to be."

The Hawk's dark eyes, contemplating him, held something that seemed to be almost sympathy. "Sorry, Captain Evans," he said lightly. "I know how you must feel about it—but we're almost there now. My rocket will be showing up in a few minutes—we've almost reached it."

Evans laughed grimly. "Your rocket will never see us again nor will anyone else. You said you'd overlooked nothing, Hawk, but you did overlook one thing!"

"And that?" The Hawk's figure was suddenly tense.

"That is something that you didn't know—that is the fact that in every Earth-Guard rocket is placed a device for destroying the rocket in case it has to be abandoned in space. That device is a plug which when pulled out ignites the rocket's fuel tanks in six minutes. And that plug—"

The Hawk's hands flashed toward Evans but before they could reach his bound hands, Evans had seized with them the black plug at the control-board's corner and with a crazy laugh had jerked it out!

For an instant there was a supreme silence in the pilot-house of the hurtling rocket, the Hawk and Evans facing each other like two statues. Then with a single motion the Hawk had whirled, was out of the pilot-house. There came the clang of contact-doors above being opened and shut with lightning rapidity, and then a blast of firing-tubes as, in his own little rocket, the Hawk drove clear from the great Earth-Guard craft. Evans stood still for a moment, then dragged himself to the control-board's other side.

His bound hands pressed the firing-levers in quick succession and as the great rocket lurched beneath their impetus it was turning in space, turning back toward the space-lane from which the Hawk had taken it! Evans grasped the black plug on the board and thrust it back into its socket. A small ventilating fan at the other side of the pilot-house that had ceased running when he had withdrawn the plug began spinning again. Evans laughed weakly.

He straightened. There was a flash of fire above and he saw that it was the tiny rocket of the Hawk, driving back over the great Earth-Guard craft. Evans knew that the Hawk, from afar, had seen that the ship had not exploded, and he was coming back. Evans realized that although the Hawk could not make contact with the great Earth-Guard rocket thundering at full speed through the void, with rocket-gun available, he could still blast the Earth-Guard ship to pieces. Evans saw the little rocket swooping down until it was just before and above him, and braced himself with tight-set teeth for the blast from its electric gun.

It did not come. Instead, as the Hawk's little rocket dipped low, there flashed from it the vari-colored lights of a signal. Red—yellow—red—purple—Evans read the signal automatically, uncomprehendingly for the moment. It was "Salute!" And then he understood. The Hawk, knowing himself tricked, had come back not to take revenge but to give that sportsmanlike hail to the man who had tricked him. Evans' bound hands touched the signal-studs, and from the great Earth-Guard rocket's nose in its turn flashed the same signal "Salute!" Salute of the Earth-Guard's captain to the Hawk, as they roared past each other in space! And then the Hawk was gone, his little ship hurtling away into the chartless void outside the space-lanes where his great black rocket waited. Evans slumped weakly against the control-board.

They found him there when they burst up into the pilot-house a half-hour later, Calden and Hartley and the others, babbling excitedly and uncomprehendingly. They had just returned to consciousness. They found Evans against the control-board with hands and feet still bound, keeping the great rocket steady on the space-lane to which he had brought it. When he turned toward them they saw with amazement that he was laughing.

"I was just thinking," he said, "of what old Cain will say when he finds out that he shook hands with the Hawk!"

The End

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK
EVANS OF THE EARTH-GUARD ***

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