ONE CAME BACK
By GEORGE WHITLEY

The freighter's crew was ready to rescue the survivors of the first two-way rocket trip to the moon, until—

IT WAS one of those distressing meals. Personally, I can sympathize with the Old Man. We all have our pet aversions (mine is snakes, real ones) and to find such an object in one's food makes one inclined to take the ship apart with one's bare hands.

In the Old Man's case it was insects.

And he found a cockroach in his soup.

The Mate didn't improve matters. He suggested that it would have been worse, much worse, if he'd found only half a cockroach.

I thought that Pop was going to be literally, physically sick. A greenish pallor overspread his usually ruddy features, and he gulped once or twice.

But he regained control.

"Tell the Chief Steward I want him. At once!" he barked at Watson, who was waiting at table.

Just then the *News* came on.

The speaker on the after-bulkhead had been ladling out music, dreamy, Viennese waltzes that had formed merely a pleasant background to the conversation. But when the smooth voice of the announcer informed us that the *News* would follow in just under half a minute, Watson turned up the volume control and all of us fell silent. Strange, how these wartime customs still persist. . . .

This time, however, the *News* was such as to make it well worth our while to belay the chatter and listen—just like old times, when we were thrilled to hear of the collapse of Italy, the invasion of the strongholds of the Axis, the flight of the Austrian paper hanger, the fall of Berlin.

The set was tuned to the B.B.C., in some ways rather a pity. The Americans would have made this news item sound as thrilling as it actually was. Even so, one could sense the intense undercurrent of excitement just beneath the announcer's calm, too calm, voice.

"It has just been revealed," he said, "by Doctor William Hendry, the Astronomer Royal, that a small object has been detected which is, undoubtedly, en route from the Moon to Earth. Dr. Hendry refused to make a definite statement, but admitted it seems probable that the object is one of the seventeen manned rockets that have made the trip from the Earth to the Moon only to vanish into the unknown.

"It is, of course, too early to hazard an opinion as to whether it is one of the British ships or one of those launched by the Americans and Russians, but the astronauts, whatever their nationality, can be assured of a welcome such as no son of this planet has ever before received.

"When interviewed, Dr. Hendry gave it as his opinion that the ship will fall in the Pacific Ocean. All vessels in this area will be warned to keep a good lookout for the explorers. The Admiralty announces that British and American naval units and aircraft are standing by to institute a thorough search should the rocket fall far from shipping lanes.

"Listeners will recall. . . ."

But the rest of the news was drowned by an excited babble of conversation from the officers' table.

"So they've done it at last!" said the Old Man. "Who'd have thought, in the days of the war when we were all playing around with all kinds of rocket weapons, that it would lead to this in so short a time?

"Think of it, gentlemen, the first men back from the Moon.

"The reception they get will make Lindbergh's look like the Vicar's tea party."

"Oh, do you think that it'll be us that picks them up, sir?" excitedly squeaked little Chadwick, the

junior cadet. "Just think of it, we'll see them and talk to them and hear their stories. We might even get our pictures in the papers, too."

"Wonder what the chances of salvage will be?" growled MacMaster, the Chief Engineer. "Those Moon Rockets must cost a tidy penny."

"Perhaps we shall find out what happened to all the other rockets," suggested Wayne. "I still think they came up against something hostile."

"Rubbish, Sparks!" Thornton, the Third Mate, put in rudely.

HE WAS one of those young men who knew everything.

"The Moon has no atmosphere, no water, no life. They just made a mess of the landing, that's all. Now, this fellow who's coming back now will probably have too much sense to try to come down on his main drive through an atmosphere.

"He'll almost certainly have no fuel left, anyhow. He'll use the braking ellipse technique. A pity, as that means that we shan't see him if he comes in at night. The first we'll know is when we find his parachute draped around the mainmast."

Captain Sinclair listened to the argument with an amused smile on his broad, fleshy face. He might have been some god, at ease and secure on the summit of Mount Olympus, listening with condescension and amusement to the bickerings of the mortals below. At last he deigned to take part in the conversation once more.

"I hope you realize, gentlemen," he said heavily, "that Dr. Handry only *thinks* that this suppositious Moon Rocket is coming down in the Pacific. Furthermore, I would point out that even if it does, this same Pacific is a very large stretch of water.

"This ship is very small by comparison, and a manned rocket will be even smaller. For us to expect to see the landing, let alone salvage the ship, is like one black beetle hoping to find another black beetle in a coal mine at midnight."

The unfortunate metaphor brought us back to where we came in.

"Watson!" he roared, "tell the Chief Steward that I want to see him at once!"

I looked at the clock. My lunch half hour was over, well over. The Fourth Mate, who was doing the meal relief, would think that I had died, or something. Time that I was getting on top.

I excused myself from the table and rushed up to the bridge.

"Sorry I'm late, Four-O," I gasped, "but I've been listening to the news. They've done it!"

"Done what?" growled Lath. "Made a decent drop of pea soup for a change?"

"No, you mug. The first rocket's on its way back from the Moon, and they reckon that it will fall in the Pacific. Think of it, man, we might even see it!"

"So what? I want my lunch. She's going as you left her."

I don't know why, but all of us were convinced that we were going to see that blasted rocket. Probably the crews of every ship in the Pacific were equally convinced that *they* were going to be the lucky ones.

But never since the war had we seen such keenness among the men on lookout duty. And Sparks spent all his waking hours at the D.F. on the off chance that the Moon Rocket would land with its radio intact and send signals to guide surface craft to its relief.

But the day wore on without any signs or wonders in the heavens and without anything further over the radio than an official message to all ships in all areas to keep a good lookout for the first two-way space ship.

That "all areas" damped our ardour somewhat—but not for long. The Astronomer Royal had announced that the rocket would fall in the Pacific, and fall in the Pacific she would. Every time the Third Mate started getting all technical and talking about braking ellipses he was shouted down.

But nothing happened during the daylight hours.

After dinner, the conversation got back on the one, all-important topic, but I had the Middle Watch to keep. I excused myself, retired to my virtuous couch and lay for a while trying to read and listening to the buzz of voices from the saloon.

Then I tried to sleep. I suppose that I must lave dozed off, for when the stand-by man of the Eight-to-Twelve Watch switched on my light, hammered on my door and shouted *`One Bell!"* I was at the controls of a rocket ship trying to make a descent into a sea of cool, foaming beer. She just refused to come down.

Without much enthusiasm. I climbed the lee ladders to Mount Misery. In the chartroom, I clutched eagerly at the cup of strong, black tea proffered me by young Chadwick, gulped it down to take the dark brown taste from my mouth. Feeling more or less human, I turned to the Night Orders.

"Cyro Course two seven three," I read. "The Radar is switched on, call me at once if it gives indication of *anything* on the surface. Keep a sharp lookout in the sky, and let me know if anything is observed falling from any part of the heavens—J. Sinclair, Master."

I went outside. "Any sign of 'em, Peter?"

"Any sign of what?" demanded Thornton, rudely. "Pink elephants? I've never seen anything like this in all my sea experience. The whole ship is crazy."

"You've only been to sea a dog watch." I reminded him. Then—"What's that?"

"A shooting ..." began Thornton and shut up.

IT WASN'T a shooting star. Shooting stars don't drift down with deliberate slowness. Shooting stars don't emit a continuous, whistling roar, audible for miles.

"Call the Old Man!" I yelled. *"This is* it!"

In a couple of jumps I was on Monkey Island and, with the standard repeater, grabbed a bearing of the distant, fiery monster just before it dipped below the western horizon. "Bring her round to three-o-five," I shouted down the speaking tube.

When I got down, the Old Man was on the bridge.

"Did you get a bearing on it, Mr. Dale?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Three-o-five. And I took the liberty of bringing her round to that course."

"Good. But you're quite sure?"

"Yes. I saw a rocket coming down that way once during the war. It wasn't supposed to, of course, but it made quite an impression on me. It was one of those beastly—"

"Never mind that now. Slip inside and see where this course takes us. I don't want to pile her up."

—

"Very good, sir."

I was out again in a couple of minutes.

"Good. I suppose you have no idea as to how far distant it was when it landed?"

"No, sir, but its rockets were still flaring when it dipped."

"A pity. Mr. Thornton, you can make out a message. Give our position and the bearing of the Moon Rocket when it fell. Get Sparks to send it at once, if any other ship saw it come down and got a bearing, it will give a fix. You'd better ring the engineers, Mr. Dale, tell them what happened and ask them to open her out."

They didn't need to be told.

"She's been going full belt since just after midnight," said Massey, the Third Engineer. "The galley wireless has beaten you to it."

Meanwhile the Old Man was sweeping the horizon ahead of the ship with his powerful Zeiss night glasses. You know the things, big, beautiful prismatics that'll pick up a black cat in a coal mine at midnight at ten miles range.

Finally he realized the futility of his actions. But it is hard for those of us who were at sea before the war to accept the fact that the electronic eyes of Radar will save wear and tear on eyes of flesh and blood.

"I'm not doing much good up here," he grunted, at last. "I can never get used to all the fancy gadgets we have these days. But I'll be on my settee if you want me. If you don't pick anything up, pass the word on to the next watch at four.

"Oh, and let me know if any other ship sends a bearing or distance, or if we get any instructions from

the Admiralty. Goodnight."

Then he was gone, leaving me alone with the silent stars.

Yes, the stars—they didn't seem distant that night.

There was Mars, hanging low and ruddy in the west, a fixed, unwinking light beside the ruddy flame that was Aldebaran.

"You're next," I whispered. "You're next."

There to the south'ard, was the Cross, with its two bright pointers, blazing beacons to lure men out into Space. Alpha and Beta Centauri—which one was the nearest star? And how far was it? I could never remember. But it wasn't far.

How long would it take if one could maintain a constant acceleration of, say, two gravities? But you'd want atomic power for that. And suppose one worked up to the speed of light—what then?

Merridew, my cadet, came across from the other wing of the bridge and brought me back to earth with a jolt.

"Light on the port bow, sir!" he yelled. But it was only Canopus setting.

Eight bells came at last, and still the little alarm bell of the radar was silent, and still the little lights remained unlit.

"Give me a yell if you pick anything up, sir," I asked the Chief Officer. "I'd hate to miss seeing the thing."

"You've seen too much already," said Gregory. "You'll never live it down if it *was* a shooting star."

But I knew it wasn't. And so, I think, did he.

Surprisingly, I slept very well until the steward came in with my morning tea. Oh, I admit that when I turned in I was really excited, and the words "With daylight we're going to see the first men back from the Moon!" kept chasing themselves through my mind.

But I was tired. I hadn't slept much before midnight, and the excitement on the Middle Watch seemed to have exhausted me. Nevertheless, the first question that sprang to my mind when Watson called me was "Have they picked it up yet?"

But I never asked it.

WATSON himself volunteered that information before I had a chance to open my mouth.

"No sign of it yet, sir," he said. "And there's nothing through from any other ship." "Hm, I said, reaching for my tea.

Then, just audible in the officers' flat, came a hail from the crow's nest to the bridge.

"What was that?"

"I didn't catch it, sir," replied Watson, and was out of my room like a shot from a gun.

He didn't return.

"This is it!" I told myself and was out of my bunk with an alacrity unprecedented even in the days of World War II. We were in the tropics, and it was the work of seconds to shed pyjamas and jump into shorts and shirt.

When I arrived on the bridge. I found everybody staring ahead through their glasses. Unfortunately, I hadn't brought mine up with me. So I grabbed the ship's telescope.

On the lower bridge and boatdeck, one deck below, were the Bos'n and most of the deck crowd, ostensibly there to clear away the accident boat. They too were staring ahead. Everybody except the engine room watch on duty must have been on deck.

At first, I had a little trouble picking it up.

Once I had it in the telescope's field of view, and the telescope properly focused, however, it was impossible to lose.

It was, I remember, a clear, cloudless morning. Sky and sea were both a flawless blue. There was no wind, but there was a long, low swell, the aftermath of some storm that must have passed well to the south'ard.

And there, right ahead, bobbing up and down on the low, watery hills, was a little conical object.

Sometimes black against the blue it was, sometimes silver as it caught the light. It looked for all the

world like an aluminum-painted starboard handbuoy that had broken adrift from its moorings and drifted far out into the Pacific.

Its very shape, at first, caused us to doubt.

We had expected, somehow, to find a long, streamlined hull, with great vanes and driving tubes aft, floating, almost like a balloon, on the sea surface. Then we realized that, like an iceberg, the Moon Rocket was showing us only a tiny portion of its volume—its nose.

The minutes dragged by, and the distant silvery shape grew more and more distinct.

Sparks came out of the Wireless Room.

"I've got the message off, sir," he told the Old Man. "And I've tried to raise the Moon Rocket on every frequency known to radio technology, and a few that aren't. But there's no answer."

"Their set probably got smashed up with the initial takeoff," put in Thornton. "The escape velocity from Earth is seven miles per second, which implies . . ."

Captain Sinclair froze him with a glance.

"Nobody aboard *this* vessel," he said, heavily, "is concerned with escape velocities or their implications. Our job, as seamen, is merely to rescue fellow humans cast adrift miles from the nearest land. Mr. Wayne!"

"Sir?"

"You needn't go back to the radio office."

"Thank you, sir."

Sparks took his place among those lining the bridge rail.

Now we were close to the rocket.

Even at this short range, she still suggested a buoy. A ringbolt recessed into the very tip of the nose, heightened the illusion. It seemed that her builders had foreseen that she might have to be taken in tow.

There were ports, too, but these all appeared to have been tightly shuttered from the inside. Thornton, almost recovered from his snub, ventured to suggest that these had probably been secured in place against the landing and that the crew had not yet sufficiently recovered to remove them. This blinding glimpse of the obvious passed unrebuked.

"Put her on Stand-by, Mr. Thornton," said Captain Sinclair. Then, a little later, "Stop Both."

THE tinkle of the telegraph as the engineer replied broke what had become an oppressive silence.

Losing way all the time, we glided quietly up to the first spaceship to return to Mother Earth.

Everyone could read the big black letters, half submerged by the calm clear water, painted boldly on the silver hull.

M R 5—Moon Rocket No. 5

On the bridge, we could hear the murmur running around the decks.

"M R, she's one of ours! Yes, old England was the first to do it. Wonder if they've brought any of the Yanks or Russians back with 'em."

As though we were rounding a fairway buoy we circled the rocket. There were no signs of life. Another circuit, and yet another. I don't know what the others were thinking, but I was beginning to have morbid visions of a metal coffin full of half-cremated corpses.

And then we lost steerage way.

Rising and falling gently as the long, low hills of water swept up from the southern horizon, the ship of Space and the ship of the sea lay in fantastic, anachronistic juxtaposition.

To a casual observer, we should have looked merely like a vessel coming up to *a* large silver-painted mooring-buoy, especially since some vagary of wind or current had swung us so that our bows were pointed directly at the rocket.

I don't know whose idea it was to blow the whistle.

Somebody pushed over the lever actuating the electric control, and a long mournful blast shattered the stillness.

"Who did that?" barked the Old Man. Then, "It might be a good idea. Give 'em another one."

"Shall I take the accident boat away, sir?" asked Gregory. "We could tap on the hull."

The Old Man took two slow paces away from the Chief Officer, his face heavy with thought. For a long moment he stood, head bowed, chin in hand, then turned.

"No," he said. "No. Not yet."

"But, sir . . ."

"I said no."

"It's opening!" shouted Merridew.

Once more the rocket irresistably compelled every eye.

A round door, a few feet above the thing's waterline, was swinging out with agonizing slowness. Below us, on the boatdeck, one of the deckboys started to whimper. The Bos'n cuffed his head, growled in a carrying whisper that if he didn't shut up he'd soon have something to snivel about.

The circular valve swung back till it was almost flush with the hull.

Still we saw nothing. It was very dark inside the rocket, and the sun was behind it.

Peering intently through the telescope I thought I saw a glint of metal, but I wouldn't swear to it. What I will swear to is the unmistakable, uneasy feeling that we were being watched.

Yes, there was somebody there.

Somebody, or ...

What was that?

It seemed that something like a long, thin whip flicked briefly across the pitch-black aperture, then vanished.

The lens of the telescope seemed to have grown misty. I withdrew the instrument from my eye, pulled out my pocket handkerchief preparatory to wiping it.

I saw Captain Sinclair let his expensive prismatic night glasses fall, unheeded, to smash on Number-2 hatch many feet below. His hands seized the telegraph handles, and from Stop those handles swung to *full ahead* with a double ring.

"Stop!" I cried, wildly. *"Stop* him!"

I yelled to the Quartermaster to port the wheel, but he, we afterwards discovered, had deserted his post and had his nose glued to the forward wheelhouse windows.

In that unseemly, undignified struggle around the engine room telegraph I didn't see the rocket go down. None of us on the bridge did. But they say that our bows crumpled her like an eggshell, and that only a large, oily bubble that came up right in our wake marked the spot where she had been.

When Captain Sinclair felt the shock of impact he let his deathlike grip on the telegraph handles relax. He faced our stern accusing faces with horror writ large on his. Not the horror with which a man realizes that he has thrown away his Certificate, his rank, his very means of livelihood.

No. Something much deeper, more dreadful.

"The blasted things were hairy," he said at last. "And they had feelers. And too many legs."