

The SKYLARK of VALERON

by EDWARD E. SMITH, Ph.D.

PROLOGUE

"Mother-r-r!" A sturdy, auburn-haired urchin of twelve—Richard Ballinger Seaton the fourteen hundred and seventy-first—turned to the queenly young matron who was his mother as the viewing area before them went blank. "You said that as soon as I was old enough you would let me see the rest of the 'Exploits of Seaton One.' Now grandfather's the chief of the Galactic Council, and I'm twelve, and I'm old enough."

"Perhaps you are, son." Into the beautiful eyes of the young woman came that indefinable, indescribable something; the knowledge that her oldest was no longer a baby. "Tell me the story as it is run for the holiday, and I shall see."

"Richard Ballinger Seaton the First was a Ph. D. in chemistry," the boy began. "He lived in the city of Washington, in what was then the United States of America. He was born—"

"Never mind dates and such things, sonny. It would take too long to give all the details. I just want to make sure that you really understand the story—conditions were *so* different then from what they are now."

"Well, Seaton One discovered Rovolon, which he called 'X' metal at first. He found out that it would turn copper into energy, and he and Martin Reynolds Crane One built the very first space ship that was ever known. But the World Steel Corporation wanted all the Rovolon that Seaton had found; so Dr. DuQuesne, a chemist of theirs, and a kind of a spy named

Perkins, tried to steal it away from him. They got a little of it, but it exploded some copper and killed a lot of people.

"When Seaton heard about the explosion he found out that some of his Rovolon was gone, and they hired some detectives and had an awful time. A lot more people were killed, and a Japanese assistant of Crane's, named Shiro, was almost killed, too. Then they went to work and invented a lot of new instruments, such as a compass that pointed at any one thing forever; and attractors and repellers and rays and screens and explosives and lots of things that are good yet.

"This DuQuesne tried for a long time to get the Rovolon and couldn't, so they built a space ship from Seaton's plans that they stole, and he carried off Dorothy Vaneman and Margaret Spencer, the girls that Seaton One and Crane One were going to marry—and they did marry them, afterward, too. Well, Dorothy kicked Perkins in the stomach, and the space ship ran away and kept on going until it got caught by the attraction of the Dark Mass that the First of Energy has always had so much trouble with, and while they were falling toward it that Perkins went crazy and tried to kill Margaret, but DuQuesne killed him instead, and then Seaton One caught up with them and rescued them and—"

"Just a minute, son; there is no great hurry. How did Seaton One get way out there?"

"Well, they had their big new space ship, the *Skylark of Space*, all built by then, and Seaton One had an object-compass set on DuQuesne, because he'd been watching him a long time since he'd been making lots of trouble for him. So Seaton One and

Crane One followed the object-compass and found them and rescued them all but Perkins, because he was dead already.

"They had an awful time getting away from the Dark Mass, but they did it, but they were about out of copper, so they had to hunt up a planet that had some. They landed on one that dinosaurs and things like that lived on, and got a lot more Rovolon, but didn't find any copper, so they hunted up more planets. One had poison gas instead of air, and another had people that were pure intellectuals, so that they had bodies whenever they wanted to, but not all the time. They pretty nearly dematerialized Seaton One and all the rest of them, and we're awfully glad they didn't.

"Well, anyway, they got away, but they had an awful time, and after a while they saw the green suns of the Central System. There's lots of copper there, you know; so much that Grandfather Seaton wouldn't let me swim in the ocean last year when we were there because it was copper solution and it would have made me sick. They went to Osnome first, one of the inside worlds, and landed in a country named Mardonale.

"They were bad people and wanted to kill Seaton One and steal his ship, and they had already captured Dunark, the Kofedix or crown prince of the other nation, Kondal. Then Dunark helped Seaton One get away, and they all went home with Dunark. But the *Skylark* was pretty nearly ruined in the battle they had getting away from Mardonale, so Seaton One and Dunark built it over out of arenak, which was much better than the funny, soft steel they used to use in the old days. Of course, arenak doesn't amount to much beside the inoson we have now, but even Seaton One didn't know anything about inoson then.

"Then they got married. Seaton married Dorothy, and they're our great-great—fourteen hundred and seventy times—grandparents. Crane married Margaret, and they're awfully famous, too. And Shiro is, too, especially in Asiatica. Well, anyway, after they got married they had a fight with a monster Karlon, and were just going to start back here for Tellus when the whole Mardonalian fleet attacked Kondal. The *Skylark Two* beat them all, and DuQuesne helped, too, and then of course Dunark's father was Karfedix or emperor of the whole planet of Osnome, and he made Seaton One the overlord. Then they came back home. Seaton One and Crane One didn't know just what to do with DuQuesne, but he jumped out of *Skylark Two* in a parachute and got away.

"They hadn't been back on Tellus very long when Dunark came to visit them, from Osnome, after some salt which they needed to make arenak, and some more Rovolon. He was going to blow up another planet of the Central Sun because they were having a war. But Seaton One didn't have enough Rovolon, so both *Skylark Two* and the *Kondal* started out to go to the 'X' planet after some, and on the way there they were attacked by a space ship of the Fenachrone, who were a race of terrible men who were going to conquer the whole universe. The Fenachrone blew up the *Kondal*, and pretty nearly destroyed the *Skylark*, too, but Seaton One could use zones of force as well as they could—I don't know much about zones of force because they're in advanced physics, but they're barriers in the ether and space ships use them yet because nothing above the fifth level can get through them—and finally Seaton One cut the Fenachrone ship all up into little pieces. Then he rescued Dunark, and one of his wives named Sitar, but one of the bad

men got away without being killed and DuQuesne picked him up—"

"But you haven't said anything about DuQuesne being out there, sonny."

"Well, he was. He kept on trying to get the *Rovolon* away from *Seaton One*, but couldn't, so he took his own space ship and went to *Osnome*. You see, while he was there he had found out something about the *Fenachrone* and was going to join them. Well, he got to *Osnome* and stole a better space ship than the one he had and started out to go to the *Fenachrone* System, but on the way he passed close to where *Skylark Two* was fighting the big *Fenachrone* ship, which was the flagship *Y427W*. The chief engineer of the ship got away, and DuQuesne rescued him, and he showed DuQuesne how to get to the *Fenachrone* world, and he installed his own super-drive on the *Violet*, which was the name of DuQuesne's ship. But when they got there something funny happened. A *Fenachrone* patrol ship apparently captured the *Violet*, and they burned up what they thought were DuQuesne and Loring—this Loring was DuQuesne's helper—and the engineer reported over the visirecorder everything that had happened to the flagship, and *Seaton* and *Crane* were listening in on their projector. Now's the funny part. Some of the visirecorder report was right, but some of it didn't really happen that way at all, because Dr. DuQuesne knew all the time what was going—"

"You are getting ahead of the story, sonny. You have heard that part, of course, but you haven't actually seen the record of it yet."

"Well, anyway, Seaton One found out the Fenachrone's plans by reading their brains with a mechanical educator, and he made Dunark's people make peace with the other planet, the one that they were going to blow up. He knew from some old legends that there was a race of green men somewhere in the Central System that knew everything, so he went hunting for them. They went to Dasor first, where those funny porpoise men live, and a Dasorian named Sacner Carfon was councilor then. A Sacner Carfon is councilor there yet, too, and I beat his boy shooting a ray, but he beat me all hollow swimming, because he's got web feet and hands. The Dasorians told Seaton One where to go, and that's how they found Norlamin, where the oldest and wisest men in the whole Galaxy live. Rovol, the First of Rays, and Drasnik, the First of Psychology, and Caslor, the First of Mechanism, and lots of the other Firsts of Norlamin helped them build things.

"Oh, yes; I almost forgot about the way the Norlaminian scientists learn things. When one of them gets old he makes a record of his brain on a tape, and when his son takes his place he just transfers all his knowledge to the son's brain with a mechanical educator, and then he—the son, I mean—knows everything that every specialist in that line ever did find out, and he goes on from there. Rovol and Drasnik and some of the others gave Seaton One and Crane One copies of their own brains that way, and that's why they knew so much. And then they built a projector that would take images of themselves clear across the Galaxy in a couple of seconds on fifth-order rays, and into the middle of suns and anywhere else they wanted to be or work, and then they built *Skylark Three*, a

space ship about five kilometers long. Not so much these days, of course, but she was the biggest thing in the ether then.

"But by that time the Fenachrone fleet had started out to conquer the Galaxy, and Seaton One and Crane One and all the other Ones and the Firsts of Norlamin hunted them up with the projector and blew them up by exploding their power bars, which were made of copper instead of uranium, like *Three* used. And then Dunark blew up the whole Fenachrone planet, so that they'd never make any more trouble, but one Fenachrone ship got away and started out for another Galaxy, 'way out of range of the projector. So Seaton One chased it and caught it out in space, halfway to the other Galaxy. They had a terrible battle, but Seaton One blew it up and the picture stopped, and I want to see some more of the 'Exploits,' mother, please!"

"Very well told, son—I believe that you are old enough to follow One and his friends of ancient times. You will have them next year, anyway, in your history classes, and you might as well see them now; particularly since it is our own family history as well as that of civilization." The young woman pressed a contact in the arm of her chair and spoke:

"Central Library of History, please.... Mrs. R. B. Seaton fourteen seventy. Please put on reel three of the 'Exploits.' Wave point one nine four six.... Thank you."

I.

Day after day a spherical space ship of arenak tore through the illimitable reaches of the interstellar void. She had once been a war vessel of Osnome; now, rechristened the *Violet*, she was bearing two Terrestrials and a Fenachrone—Dr. Marc C. DuQuesne of World Steel, "Baby Doll" Loring, his versatile and accomplished assistant, and the squat and monstrous engineer of the flagship *Y427W*—from the Green System toward the Solar System of the Fenachrone. The mid-point of the stupendous flight had long since been passed; the *Violet* had long been "braking down" with a negative acceleration of five times the velocity of light.

Much to the surprise of both DuQuesne and Loring, their prisoner had not made the slightest move against them. He had thrown all the strength of his supernaturally powerful body and all the resources of his gigantic brain into the task of converting the atomic motors of the *Violet* into the space-annihilating drive of his own race. This drive, affecting alike as it does every atom of substance within the radius of action of the power bar, entirely nullifies the effect of acceleration, so that the passengers feel no motion whatever, even when the craft is accelerating at maximum—and that maximum is almost three times as great as the absolutely unbearable full power of the *Skylark of Space*.

The engineer had not shirked a single task, however arduous. And, once under way, he had nursed those motors along with every artifice known to his knowing clan; he had performed

such prodigies of adjustment and tuning as to raise by a full two per cent their already inconceivable maximum acceleration. And this was not all. After the first moment of rebellion, he did not even once attempt to bring to bear the almost irresistible hypnotic power of his eyes; the immense, cold, ruby-lighted projectors of mental energy which, both men knew, were awful weapons indeed. Nor did he even once protest against the attractors which were set upon his giant limbs.

Immaterial bands, these, whose slight force could not be felt unless the captor so willed. But let the prisoner make one false move, and those tiny beams of force would instantly become copper-driven tornadoes of pure energy, hurling the luckless body against the wall of the control room and holding him motionless there, in spite of the most terrific exertions of his mighty body.

DuQuesne lay at ease in his seat; rather, scarcely touching the seat, he floated at ease in the air above it. His black brows were drawn together, his black eyes were hard as he studied frowningly the Fenachrone engineer. As usual, that worthy was half inside the power plant, coaxing those mighty motors to do even better than their prodigious best.

Feeling his companion's eyes upon him, the doctor turned his inscrutable stare upon Loring, who had been studying his chief even as DuQuesne had been studying the outlander. Loring's cherubic countenance was as pinkly innocent as ever, his guileless blue eyes as calm and untroubled; but DuQuesne, knowing the man as he did, perceived an almost imperceptible tension and knew that the killer also was worried.

"What's the matter, Doll?" The saturnine scientist smiled mirthlessly. "Afraid I'm going to let that ape slip one over on us?"

"Not exactly." Loring's slight tenseness, however, disappeared. "It's your party, and anything that's all right with you tickles me half to death. I have known all along you knew that that bird there isn't working under compulsion. You know as well as I do that nobody works that way because they're made to. He's working for himself, not for us, and I had just begun to wonder if you weren't getting a little late in clamping down on him."

"Not at all—there are good and sufficient reasons for this apparent delay. I am going to clamp down on him in exactly"—DuQuesne glanced at his wrist watch—"fourteen minutes. But you're keen—you've got a brain that really works—maybe I'd better give you the whole picture."

DuQuesne, approving thoroughly of his iron-nerved, cold-blooded assistant, voiced again the thought he had expressed once before, a few hours out from Earth; and Loring answered as he had then, in almost the same words—words which revealed truly the nature of the man:

"Just as you like. Usually I don't want to know anything about anything, because what a man doesn't know he can't be accused of spilling. Out here, though, maybe I should know enough about things to act intelligently in case of a jam. But you're the doctor—if you'd rather keep it under your hat, that's all right with me, too. As I've said before, it's your party."

"Yes; he certainly is working for himself." DuQuesne scowled blackly. "Or, rather, he thinks he is. You know I read his mind back there, while he was unconscious. I didn't get all I wanted to, by any means—he woke up too soon—but I got a lot more than he thinks I did.

"They have detector zones, 'way out in space, all around their world, that nothing can get past without being spotted; and patrolling those zones there are scout ships, carrying armament to stagger the imagination. I intend to take over one of those patrol ships and by means of it to capture one of their first-class battleships. As a first step I'm going to hypnotize that ape and find out absolutely everything that he knows. When I get done with him, he'll do exactly what I tell him to, and nothing else."

"Hypnotize him?" Curiosity was awakened in even Loring's incurious mind at this unexpected development. "I didn't know that was one of your specialties."

"It wasn't until recently, but the Fenachrone are all past masters, and I learned about it from his brain. Hypnosis is a wonderful science. The only drawback is that his mind is a lot stronger than mine. However, I have in my kit, among other things, a tube of something that will cut him down to my size."

"Oh, I see—pentabarb." With this hint, Loring's agile mind grasped instantly the essentials of DuQuesne's plan. "That's why you had to wait so long, then, to take steps. Pentabarb kills in twenty-four hours, and he can't help us steal the ship after he's dead."

"Right! One milligram, you know, will make a gibbering idiot out of any human being; but I imagine that it will take three or four times that much to soften *him* down to the point where I can work on him the way I want to. As I don't know the effects of such heavy dosages, since he's not really human, and since he must be alive when we go through their screens, I decided to give him the works exactly six hours before we are due to hit their outermost detector. That's about all I can tell you right now; I'll have to work out the details of seizing the ship after I have studied his brain more thoroughly."

Precisely at the expiration of the fourteen allotted minutes, DuQuesne tightened the attractor beams, which had never been entirely released from their prisoner; thus pinning him helplessly, immovably, against the wall of the control room. He then filled a hypodermic syringe and moved the mechanical educator nearer the motionless, although violently struggling, creature. Then, avoiding carefully the baleful outpourings of those flame-shot volcanoes of hatred that were the eyes of the Fenachrone, he set the dials of the educator, placed the headsets, and drove home the needle's hollow point. One milligram of the diabolical compound was absorbed, without appreciable lessening of the blazing defiance being hurled along the educator's wires. One and one half—two milligrams—three—four—five—

That inhumanly powerful mind at last began to weaken, but it became entirely quiescent only after the administration of the seventh milligram of that direly potent drug.

"Just as well that I allowed only six hours." DuQuesne sighed in relief as he began to explore the labyrinthine intricacies of the

frightful brain now open to his gaze. "I don't see how any possible form of life can hold together long under seven milligrams of that stuff."

He fell silent and for more than an hour he studied the brain of the engineer, concentrating upon the several small portions which contained knowledge of most immediate concern. Then he removed the headsets.

"His plans were all made," he informed Loring coldly, "and so are mine, now. Bring out two full outfits of clothing—one of yours and one of mine. Two guns, belts, and so on. Break out a bale of waste, the emergency candles, and all that sort of stuff you can find."

DuQuesne turned to the Fenachrone, who stood utterly lax, inanimate, and stared deep into those now dull and expressionless eyes.

"You," he directed crisply, "will build at once, as quickly as you can, two dummies which will look exactly like Loring and myself. They must be lifelike in every particular, with faces capable of expressing the emotions of surprise and of anger, and with right arms able to draw weapons upon signal—*my* signal. Also upon signal their heads and bodies will turn, they will leap toward the center of the room, and they will make certain noises and utter certain words, the records of which I shall prepare. Go to it!"

"Don't you need to control him through the headsets?" asked Loring curiously.

"I may have to control him in detail when we come to the really fine work, later on," DuQuesne replied absently. "This is more or less in the nature of an experiment, to find out whether I have him thoroughly under control. During the last act he'll have to do exactly what I shall have told him to do, without supervision, and I want to be absolutely certain that he will do it without a slip."

"What's the plan—or maybe it's something that is none of my business?"

"No; you ought to know it, and I've got time to tell you about it now. Nothing material can possibly approach the planet of the Fenachrone without being seen, as it is completely surrounded by never less than two full-sphere detector screens; and to make assurance doubly sure our engineer there has installed a mechanism which, at the first touch of the outer screen, will shoot a warning along at tight communicator beam, directly into the receiver of the nearest Fenachrone scout ship. As you already know, the smallest of those scouts can burn this ship out of the ether in less than a second."

"That's a cheerful picture. You still think we can get away?"

"I'm coming to that. We can't possibly get through the detectors without being challenged, even if I tear out all his apparatus, so we're going to use his whole plan, but for our benefit instead of his. Therefore his present hypnotic state and the dummies. When we touch that screen you and I are going to be hidden—well hidden. The dummies will be in sole charge, and our prisoner will be playing the part I have laid out for him.

"The scout ship that he calls will come up to investigate. They will bring apparatus and attractors to bear to liberate the prisoner, and the dummies will try to fight. They will be blown up or burned to cinders almost instantly, and our little playmate will put on his space suit and be taken across to the capturing vessel. Once there, he will report to the commander.

"That officer will think the affair sufficiently serious to report it directly to headquarters. If he doesn't, this ape here will insist upon reporting it to general headquarters himself. As soon as that report is in, we, working through our prisoner here, will proceed to wipe out the crew of the ship and take it over."

"And do you think he'll really do it?" Loring's guileless face showed doubt, his tone was faintly skeptical.

"I *know* he'll do it!" The chemist's voice was hard. "He won't take any active part—I'm not psychologist enough to know whether I could drive him that far, even drugged, against an unhypnotizable subconscious or not—but he'll be carrying something along that will enable me to do it, easily and safely. But that's about enough of this chin music—we'd better start doing something."

While Loring brought space clothing and weapons, and rummaged through the vessel in search of material suitable for the dummies' fabrication, the Fenachrone engineer worked rapidly at his task. And not only did he work rapidly, he worked skillfully and artistically as well. This artistry should not be surprising, for to such a mentality as must necessarily be possessed by the chief engineer of a first-line vessel of the Fenachrone, the faithful reproduction of anything capable of

movement was not a question of art—it was merely an elementary matter of line, form, and mechanism.

Cotton waste was molded into shape, reënforced, and wrapped in leather under pressure. To the bodies thus formed were attached the heads, cunningly constructed of masticated fiber, plastic, and wax. Tiny motors and many small pieces of apparatus were installed, and the completed effigies were dressed and armed.

DuQuesne's keen eyes studied every detail of the startlingly lifelike, almost microscopically perfect, replicas of himself and his traveling companion.

"A good job," he commented briefly.

"Good?" exclaimed Loring. "It's perfect! Why, that dummy would fool my own wife, if I had one—it almost fools me!"

"At least, they're good enough to pass a more critical test than any they are apt to get during this coming incident."

Satisfied, DuQuesne turned from his scrutiny of the dummies and went to the closet in which had been stored the space suit of the captive. To the inside of its front protector flap he attached a small and inconspicuous flat-sided case. He then measured carefully, with a filar micrometer, the apparent diameter of the planet now looming so large beneath them.

"All right, Doll; our time's getting short. Break out our suits and test them, will you, while I give the big boy his final instructions?"

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