

# SPACE SCIENCE

## Fiction Magazine

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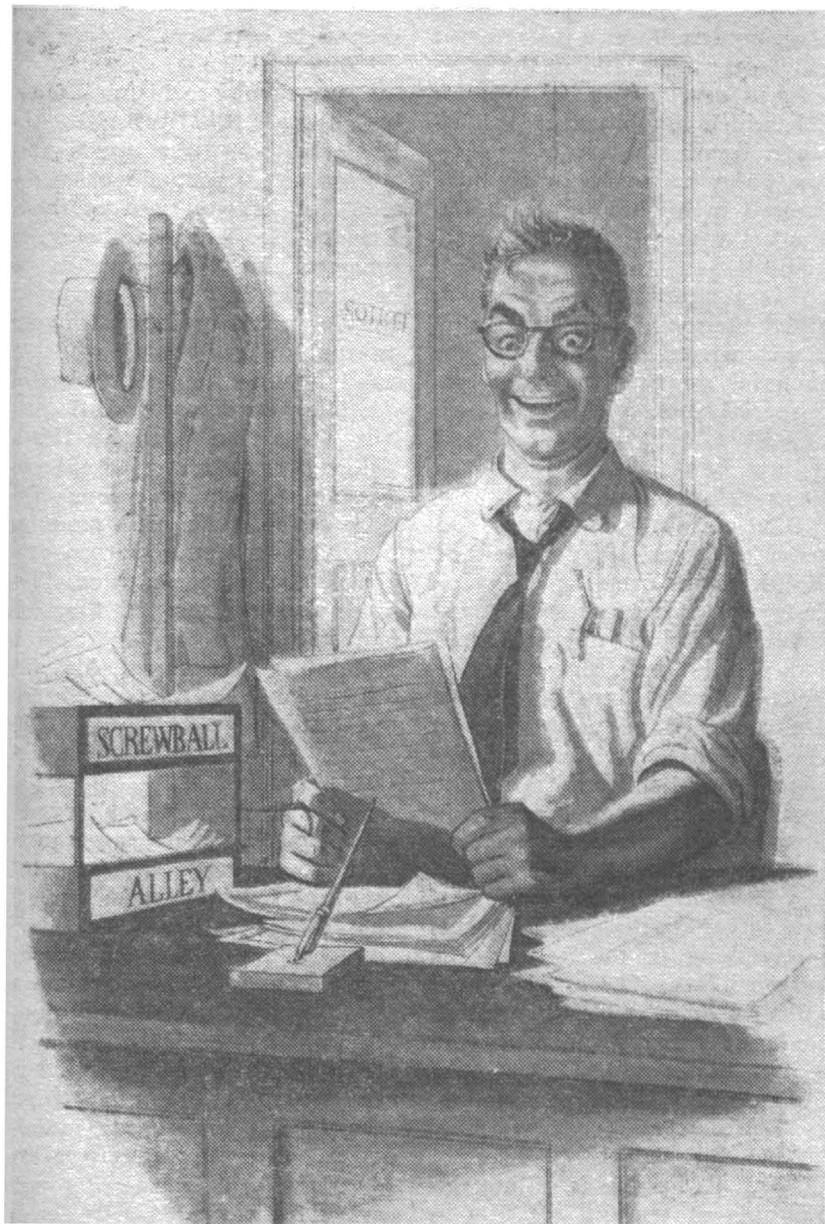
# A PRACTICAL MAN'S GUIDE

by JACK VANCE

Ralph Banks, editor of *Popular Crafts Monthly*, was a short stocky man with a round pink face, a crisp crew-cut, an intensely energetic manner. He wore gabardine suits and bow-ties; he lived in Westchester with a wife, three children, an Irish Setter, a pair of Siamese cats. He was respected by his underlings, liked not quite to the same extent.

The essence of Ralph Banks was practicality—an unerring discrimination between sound and sham, feasible and foolish. The faculty was essential to his job; in its absence he could not have functioned a day. Across his desk flowed a tide of articles, ideas, sketches, photographs, working models, each of which he must evaluate at a glance. Looking at blueprints for houses, garages, barbeque pits, orchidariums, offshore cruisers, sailplanes and catamarans, he saw the completed project, functional or not, as the case might be—a feat which he similarly performed with technical drawings for gasoline turbines,

hydraulic rams, amateur telescopes, magnetic clutches, mono-rail systems and one-man submarines. Given a formula for weed-killer, anti-freeze compound, invisible ink, fine-grain developer, synthetic cattle-fodder, stoneware glaze or rubber-base paint, he could predict its efficacy. At his fingertips were specifications and performance data for Stutz Bearcat, Mercer, S.G.V., Doble and Stanley Steamer; also Bugatti, Jaguar, Porsche, Nash-Healey and Pegasco; not to mention Ford, Chevrolet, Cadillac, Packard, Chrysler Imperial. He could build lawn furniture, hammer copper, polish agate, weave Harris tweed, repair watches, photograph amoeba, lithograph, dye batik, etch glass, detect forgeries with infra-red light, and seriously disable a heavier opponent. True, Banks farmed out much of his work to experts and department editors, but responsibility was his. Blunders evoked quiet ridicule from the competitors and sardonic letters from the readers; Banks made



few blunders. Twelve years he had ridden the tiger, and in the process had developed a head for his job which amounted to second-sight; by now he was able to relax, enjoy his work, and indulge himself in his hobby, which was the collecting of freakish inventions.

Every morning his secretary sifted the mail, and when Ralph Banks arrived he would find the material arranged by categories. A special large basket was labelled SCREWBALL ALLEY—and here Editor Banks found the rarest gems of his collection.

The morning of Tuesday, October 27, was like any other. Ralph Banks came to his office, hung up his hat and coat, seated himself, hitched up his chair, loosened his belt, put a winter-green Lifesaver into his mouth. He consulted his appointments: At 10, Seth R. Framus, a highly-placed consultant to the AEC who had agreed to write an article on atomic power-plants. Framus had obtained a special clearance and proposed to hint at some new and rather startling developments—something in the nature of a planned leak. The article would enhance *Popular Crafts'* prestige, and put a handsome feather in Editor Banks' cap.

Banks pressed the intercom key. "Lorraine."

"Yes, Mr. Banks."

"Seth R. Framus is calling this morning at ten. I'll see him as

soon as he gets here."

"Very well."

Banks turned to his mail. First he checked SCREWBALL ALLEY. Nothing very much this morning. A perpetual-motion device, but he was tired of these. Replete . . . This was better. A timepiece for blind invalids, to be strapped against the temple. Needle pricks notified of the passing quarter-hours, while a small hammer tapped strokes of the hour against the skull . . . Next was a plan to irrigate Death Valley by installing cloud-condensing equipment along the ridge of the Panamint Mountains . . . Next—a manuscript on pebbled beige paper, entitled, "Behind the Masque: A Practical Man's Guide."

Ralph Banks raised his eyebrows, glanced at the note clipped to the title-page.

Dear Sir:

I have learned in the course of a long life that exaggerated modesty brings few rewards. Hence I will put on no face of humility—I will not "pull my punches" as the expression goes. The following document is a tremendous contribution to human knowledge. In fact it knocks the props from under the entire basis of our existence, the foundation of our moral order. The implications—indeed the bald facts—will come as a shock supreme in its deva-

station to all but a few. You will observe, and I need hardly emphasize, that this is a *field not to be pursued lightly!* I have therefore prefaced description of techniques with a brief account of my own findings in order to warn any who seek to satisfy a dilettante's curiosity. You will wonder why I have chosen your periodical as an outlet for my work. I will be frank. Yours is a practical magazine; you are a practical man—and I submit the following as a practical guide. I may add, that certain other journals, edited by men less able than yourself, have returned my work with polite but obtuse notes.

Yours sincerely,  
Angus McIlwaine,  
c/o Archives, Smithsonian  
Institute,  
Washington, D.C.

An interesting letter, thought Banks. The work of a crack-pot—but it gave off an interesting flavor . . . He glanced at the manuscript, thumbed through the pages. McIlwaine's typography made a pretty show. The margins allowed two inches of pebbled beige space at either side. Passages in red interspersed the black paragraphs, and some of these were underlined in purple ink. Small green stars appeared in the left-hand margin from time to

time, indicating further emphasis. The effect was colorful and dramatic.

He turned pages, reading sentences, paragraphs.

"I have had serious misgivings (read Banks) but I cannot countenance cowardice or retreat. It is no argument to say that Masquerayne is unrelieved evil. Masquerayne is knowledge and men must never shrink from knowledge. And who knows, it may lead to ultimate good. Fire has done more good than harm for mankind; so have explosives, and so ultimately, we may hope, will atomic energy. Therefore, as Einstein steeled himself against his qualms to write the equation  $E = mc^2$ , so I will record my findings."

Banks grinned. A bona fide crack-pot, straight from the nut-hatch. He frowned. "c/o Archives, Smithsonian Institute." An incongruity . . . He read on, skimming down the paragraphs, assimilating a line here, a sentence there.

"—a process of looking in, in, still further in; straining, forcing; then at the limits turning, as if in one's tracks, and looking out . . ."

Banks looked up suddenly; the intercom buzzer. He pressed the key.

"Mr. Seth R. Framus is here, Mr. Banks," came Lorraine's voice.

"Ask him to have a seat, please," said Banks. "I'll be with him in just one minute."

Lorraine, who had, "Please go right in, Mr. Framus," formed on her lips, was startled. Mr. Framus himself looked a little surprised; nevertheless he took a seat with good grace, tapping at his knee with a folded newspaper.

Banks returned to the manuscript.

"Sometimes it is very quiet (he read) but only when the Ego can dodge behind these viscous milky pillars I have mentioned. It is easily possible to become lost here, in a very mundane manner. What could be more ludicrous, more tragic? A prisoner of self, so to speak!"

Banks called through the intercom to Lorraine, "Get me the Smithsonian Institute."

"Yes, Mr. Banks," said Lorraine, glancing to see if Seth R. Framus had heard. He had, and the tempo at which he tapped his knee with the newspaper increased.

Banks leafed on through the pages.

"Naturally this never halted me. I steeled myself; I composed my nerves, my stomach. I continued. And here, as a footnote,

may I mention that it is quite possible to come and go, returning with several of the red devices, many of them still warm."

The telephone startled Banks. He answered with a trace of irritation: "Yes, Lorraine?"

"The Smithsonian Institute, Mr. Banks."

"Oh . . . Hello? I'd like to speak to someone in the Department of Archives. Er—perhaps Mr. McIlwaine?"

"Just a minute," replied a female voice, "I'll give you Mr. Crispin."

Mr. Crispin came on the line; Banks introduced himself. Mr. Crispin inquired how he could be of service.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. McIlwaine," said Banks.

Crispin asked in a puzzled voice, "McIlwaine? In what department?"

"Archives, I believe."

"That's odd . . . Of course we have a number of special projects going on — research teams and the like."

"Could you possibly make a check for me?"

"Well, certainly, Mr. Banks, if it's necessary."

"Will you do that please, and call me back collect? Or perhaps I can just hold the line."

"It'll take five or ten minutes."

"That's perfectly all right."

Banks turned the key on the

intercom. "Keep an ear on the line, Lorraine, let me know when Crispin gets back on."

Lorraine glanced sideways at Seth R. Framus, whose mouth was showing taut lines of petulance. "Very well, Mr. Banks."

Seth R. Framus spoke in a polite voice, "What's Mr. Banks got on with Smithsonian, if I may ask?"

Lorraine said helplessly, "I'm really not sure, Mr. Framus . . . I guess it's something pretty important; he gave me orders to show you right in."

"Mumph." Mr. Framus opened his newspaper.

Banks was now skimming the final pages: "And now — the inescapable conclusion. It is very simple; it can be seen that we are all victims of a gruesome joke —"

He turned to the last page: "To demonstrate for yourself —"

Lorraine buzzed him on the intercom. "Mr. Crispin is back on the line; and I think Mr. Framus is in a hurry, Mr. Banks."

"I'll be right with Mr. Framus," said Banks. "Ask him to be good enough to wait just a moment." He spoke into the telephone: "Hello, Mr. Crispin?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Banks; we just don't have an Angus McIlwaine with us."

Banks thoughtfully scratched his head. "There's the possibility he's using a pseudonym."

"In that case, I assume that he

wishes to preserve his anonymity," Crispin responded politely.

"Tell me this: suppose I wrote to Angus McIlwaine, care of Archives, Smithsonian Institute. Who would get the letter?"

Crispin laughed. "No one, Mr. Banks! You'd get it back! Because we just don't have any McIlwaines. Unless, of course, whoever it is has made special arrangements . . . Now just a minute; maybe I know your man. That is, if it's really a pseudonym."

"Fine. Will you connect me?"

"Well, Mr. Banks, I think I'd better check first . . . Perhaps — Well, after all, perhaps he wants to retain his anonymity."

"Would you be good enough to find if Angus McIlwaine is his pseudonym; and if so, have him call me collect?"

"Yes. I can do that, Mr. Banks."

"Thank you very much."

Banks hesitated by the intercom. He really should see Mr. Framus . . . but there wasn't much left to the manuscript; he might as well skim through it . . . McIlwaine, whoever he was, was ripe for the booby-hatch — but he had a flair; a compelling urgent style. Banks had read a little — a very little — of abnormal psychology; he knew that hallucinations generated a frightening reality. McIlwaine doubtless had a dose of everything in the book . . . Well, thought Banks, just for ducks, let's see how he recommends unmasking this "grisly joke

on humanity"; let's check the directions for exploring Masquerayne . . .

"To demonstrate the whole shoddy terrible trick is the task of few minutes — simple and certain. If you are daring — let us say, reckless — if you would tear the silken tissue that binds your eyes, do then as I say.

"First, obtain the following: a basin or carafe of clear water; six tumblers; six pins; a steel knitting needle; a four-foot square of dull black cardboard —"

Lorraine called in through the intercom. "Mr. Banks, Mr. Framus says —"

"Ask him to wait," said Banks rapidly. "Take a list, Lorraine. I want a quart of water in a glass jug — six glasses — a steel knitting needle — a sheet of black cardboard; get this from Art, dull, not gloss — a piece of white chalk — a can of ether —"

"Did you say *ether*, Mr. Banks?"

"Yes, I said *ether*."

Lorraine made a hasty notation; Banks continued down the list of his needs. "I need some red oil and some yellow oil. Get these from Art too. A dozen new nails; big ones. A bottle of perfume good and strong. And a pound of rice. Got that?"

"A pound of rice, yes sir."

"What in thunder does he want with all that junk?" growled Framus.

"I'm sure I don't know," said

Lorraine a little breathlessly. "Will you excuse me, Mr. Framus? I've got to get this stuff."

She ran out of the room. Framus half-rose to his feet, undecided whether to stay or whether to stalk from the office. He slowly settled back, now slapping his knee with measured resonant blows. Fifteen more minutes!

In the inner office, Banks came to the final sentence.

"Following these instructions will take you past the barriers of Sight, Direction, Confusion, and the Fallacy of Pain. You will find twin channels — advisedly I call them arteries — and either one will bring you safely inside the Cordon, and here you can watch the progressions, these events that fill you with disgust at the thought of returning, but from which you recoil in worse disgust."

That was all. The finish. Lorraine came in with the equipment. A boy from the Art Department assisted her.

"Mr. Banks," said Lorraine, "maybe I shouldn't mention this, but Mr. Framus is acting awful impatient."

"I'll see him in just a minute," muttered Banks. "One minute."

Lorraine returned to the outer office. Looking over her shoulder on the way out the door, she saw Banks pouring water into each of the glasses.



Fifteen minutes were up. Seth R. Framus rose to his feet. "I'm sorry, Miss — I simply can't wait any longer."

"Mr. Banks said he'd only be a minute, Mr. Framus," said Lorraine anxiously. "I think it's some kind of demonstration . . ."

Framus said with quiet force, "I'll wait exactly one more minute." He took his place, and sat gripping the paper.

The minute passed.

"There's a funny smell in here," said Seth R. Framus.

Lorraine sniffed the air, and looked embarrassed. "It must be something on the wind — from the river . . ."

"What's that noise?" asked Framus, staring at Banks' door.

"I don't know," said Lorraine. "It doesn't sound like Mr. Banks."

"Whatever it is," said Framus, "I can't wait." He clapped his hat on his head. "Mr. Banks can call me when he's free."

He left the office.

Lorraine sat listening to the sounds from Banks' office: a gurgling of water, mingled with a hissing, frying sound. Then came Banks' voice, subdued and muffled; then a vague roaring sound, as if someone momentarily had opened the door into the engine room of a ship.

Then a murmur, then quiet.

The telephone rang. "Mr. Banks' office," said Lorraine.

Mr. Crispin spoke. "Hello, please put Mr. Banks on the line.

I've got the man he was looking for."

Lorraine buzzed Mr. Banks.

"Hello, Mr. Banks?" a voice from Crispin's end, the deepest, most melancholy voice Lorraine had ever heard.

"He's not on the line yet," said Lorraine.

"Tell him it's Angus McIlwaine Hunter speaking."

"I will, Mr. Hunter, as soon as he comes on." She buzzed again. "He doesn't answer . . . I guess he's stepped out for a minute."

"Well, it's not too important. I wonder if he's read my manuscript."

"I believe so, Mr. Hunter. He seemed fascinated with it."

"Good. Will you tell him that the last two pages will be along tomorrow? I foolishly omitted them, and they're very important to the article — crucial, if I may say so . . . In the nature of an antidote . . ."

"I'll tell him, Mr. Hunter."

"Thank you very much."

Lorraine once more buzzed Mr. Banks' office, then went to the door, knocked, looked in. The stuff Mr. Banks had ordered was scattered around in an awful mess. Mr. Banks was gone. Probably stepped out for a cup of coffee.

Lorraine went back to her desk, and sat waiting for Mr. Banks to return. After awhile she brought out a file and began to work on her nails.