

# SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

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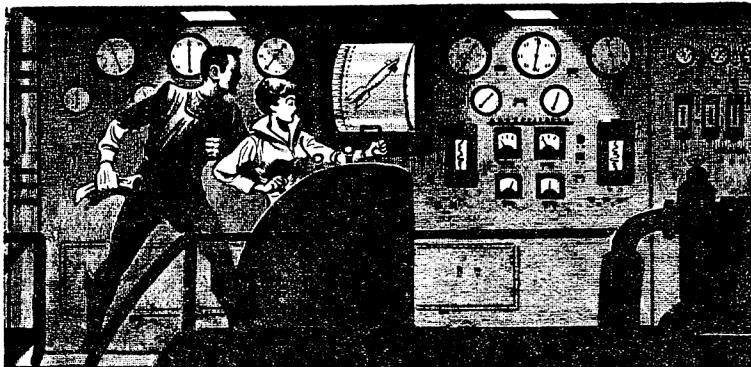
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*Naturally, occupying the first manned rockets into space  
will be a man's job . . .*

## **Barrier**

by THEODORE R. COGSWELL



**M**IKE SAID, "I'm moving her out another ten." "Check." The small red-headed physiologist didn't look up from the long row of indicators.

The red needle on the altimeter swung slowly to the right as the range-finders tracked the rising rocket. Mike made a quick adjustment on the control board and then leaned back in his chair and fished out a cigarette. "Let me know when you've finished checking your little beasties and I'll move her out again."

The physiologist nodded and went on checking the wavy lines the styluses were inking on the slowly-revolving recording drums. There were fifty recorders in the control center, one for each of the laboratory animals carried in the remote-controlled rocket. Without conscious thought, trained eyes translated each of the inked lines into respiration-rate, pulse-rate, blood-pressure—into each of the score of items

that described how the living organisms that were in free fall two hundred miles above were reacting to their new environment.

As the last entry was made in the log, the physiologist relaxed a bit. "Hey, Mike, light me a cigarette and toss it over. I think we'd better give the animals a five minute rest before we start them out again."

"Catch!" With a quick flick of his middle finger he sent a lighted cigarette arcing toward the red-head. A thin arm reached out with cat-like quickness and picked it out of the air.

"You've got good reflexes," Mike said; "you're faster than most men."

The other took a long slow drag on the cigarette before answering. "Fast—but not fast enough, eh?"

"What?"

"You know what I mean."

He looked slightly uncomfortable. "It isn't that. You're as quick as any of the men that are being sent out—and as smart, too. It's just that . . ."

He didn't get a chance to finish. "I know. I'm fast enough; I'm smart enough. I'm little, so that it would only take two-thirds as much food, oxygen, and water to keep me going. It's just that I'm a woman." She made no effort to conceal the bitterness that was in her. "It's all right for me to help out with the testing but when it comes to the big jump-off, I'm supposed to retire to the grandstands and wave my handkerchief to cheer our departing heroes."

"I didn't make the decision," he said defensively.

"But you agree with it, don't you?"

He didn't say anything.

"Don't you?"

He pretended to busy himself with his instruments. "You'll have your chance later," he said finally.

"As a passenger once the rough work is all done and the space lines start running? No thanks!" She threw the butt of her cigarette down on the floor and ground it viciously under one heel. "It's easy for you to talk, you're going."

He mumbled something.

"What?" she demanded sharply.

He looked at her in irritation. "I said it's a man's job; it always has been. Now let's get back to work. Ready to move out again?"

In an instant she turned from a person into a machine. "Ready. One more jump and she'll be in deep space. There's nothing left to go

through the but E-2 layer of the ionosphere; move her all the way out this time."

**H**E TURNED obediently to his controls and then threw the switch-  
es that recalled the great atomic engines of the rocket to throbbing life. Her nose raised slowly and as her driving jets flared white, she rushed farther out into the unknown. Five miles. Ten. Twenty. Forty.

"Mike!" Her voice was panicky. "Stop the ship; something's happening. Something terrible."

Braking-jets spouted as he killed the ship's forward speed enough to throw her into orbit at her new altitude. Not until she was riding smoothly did he leave the controls and rush over to the red-headed physiologist. "What's the matter?"

"Look! They're dying."

On chart after chart the jerky line that registered the heart pulsations of the animals far above wavered erratically and then straightened out as no more impulses came through.

Mike's face went white as he stared down at the record of failure. He licked his suddenly dry lips. "The moving finger writes," he said thickly.

She moved quickly down the long row of recorders. "Mike!" Her voice was like a sudden glad trumpet. "Here's one that's coming out of it! And another! And another!"

His own heart thumped momentarily out of phase as it reacted to the sudden charge of adrenalin that was dumped into his blood stream. "Which ones?" he whispered. "Did the chimps make it? They're the most like us. If it's just the lower forms that went under, if it's just the rats and the rabbits, maybe we've still got a chance."

Her face was an expressionless mask when she finished her check and turned to face him. "There's something in the E-2 layer that went through all our shielding. I don't know yet how it does it but it seems to scramble up the neural impulses originating in the autonomic nervous system. The heart runs wild, and..."

"To hell with the lecture! Did the chimps make it?"

When she didn't answer he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her violently. "*Did the chimps make it?*"

She stood passively until his emotional explosion exhausted itself and he let her go. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Some of them did," she said.

His face suddenly changed and took on a look of savage excitement.

"I'll get that ship down right away. You get your staff together and as soon as I land it you can start checking the animals still alive for survival characteristics. Once you've found what they are, we'll screen the crew and make what replacements are necessary. Every man is already trained to handle three jobs. Even if you guess wrong and a few of us are knocked out going through the E-2 layer, there'll be enough left to get the ship on through to Mars."

He jumped back to his controls and sent the distant rocket screaming earthward. "Come home, baby," he shouted. "You'll take us out on the long hop yet."

**T**HE PHYSIOLOGIST didn't say anything; she just went on methodically making entries in her log book. When at last Mike's skillful fingers brought the rocket gently down on the landing apron beside the fortress-like control center, he slumped back with a sigh of exhaustion.

"Get into your radiation armor," he said, "and get those specimens into the lab fast. There's a lot of work to be done in a hurry and you're just the gal to do it."

She hesitated for a moment and then came slowly over to him. "There's no rush, Mike; I already know the answer."

He pulled himself to his feet and stood looking down at her from his full six feet three. Aside from a slight tremor in his legs, he had complete control of himself. "You know the crew. Which of us qualify?"

She looked at him compassionately. "I'm sorry, Mike."

Only a convulsive stiffening betrayed the sudden racking torment her words released within him. "I'm replaceable," he said. "Do any of the others have to be eliminated?"

"All of them, Mike. But there will be replacements who will be able to stand the shock of the E-2 layer crossing; I can take over as ship's physiologist."

He shook his head sadly and put a comforting arm around her. "You know the regulations, honey; I guess we're both grounded."

There were tears in her eyes as she pulled away from him. There was something else there too. "I'm afraid the regulations are going to have to be changed, Mike. The rats, and the rabbits, and the chimps that made it through . . ." Her voice caught in her throat.

Mike looked down at the little figure.

"The females," he said.

It was a statement, not a question.