

PLANET STORIES



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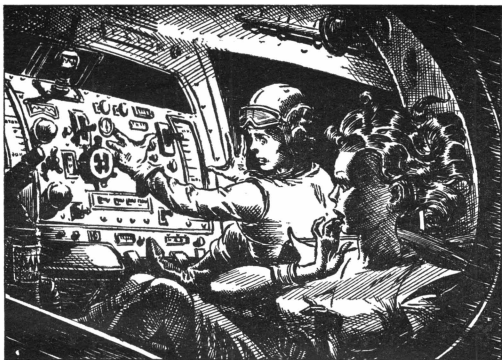
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The scream of the jets was almost inaudible.

EARTHBOUND

By HENRY GUTH

**Never was there a spaceflight more daring!
Virgil and Lanya sought what everyone else
their age had given up in despair.**

Illustrated by ASTARITA

L ANYA GREGGOR, HOLDING tightly to her brother Virgil's hand, sauntered with deliberate and exaggerated nonchalance through the great halls of the Martian Museum of Science. Her eyes were wide with excitement and pleasure. She was ten years old and Virgil twelve and this was her first visit to the museum. Hand in hand, always under the watchful eyes of strategically-placed uniformed attendants they walked ecstatically through the innumerable fascinating rooms, stopping to gaze with equally undisguised admiration at mammoth and complex industrial machinery and minute, hypersensitive instruments of obscure function.

The attendant smiled warmly as they walked past him and entered the biggest room they had yet been in.

"There she is," Virgil said proudly. "Just like I told you."

Lanya looked. She was dwarfed by the colossal metal hulk that loomed ponderously before her. She leaned back to scan its immense bulk from top to bottom.

The bronze inscription plate divulged the information that it was the "Ghost", the first ship to land safely on Mars from a foreign planet. That was the Von Erickson expedition from Earth almost two centuries ago. According to the history texts that Lanya had read, that event brought about the almost overnight transformation of Mars from an agrarian to a scientific civilization. Trade and exchange of ideas with Earth, and later with other planets, had accomplished seeming miracles on Mars.

The ship seemed comically primitive to little Lanya. Its huge bulk was almost entirely made up of rocket-drive engine and fuel compartments. She studied the elongated shape that stretched to the valuted roof like a spear head and rested solidly on the rear jet clusters. High up in the nose she could see the tiny cabin just big enough for three astronauts.

Compared with the sleek, beautifully-designed atomic craft in the rest of the museum, it was grotesque.

"Gosh," breathed Lanya, "it's big, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Virgil, with the full confidence of two years at the Technological Institute. "Very crude design, but necessary because there is so much engine to it. Simple to construct, though, and with a few refinements . . . oh boy!"

Lanya was properly awed. She wouldn't start at the Institute until next year. No matter how hard she studied or how fast she learned, Virgil was always two years of knowledge ahead of her. She had just struggled through higher mathematics and physics, thinking she was getting ahead at last, only to find that Virgil, from the vantage point of his engineering studies, considered the laws of mathematics and physics merely basic.

In the old days, Grandma had said, one didn't matriculate at the Institute until one was as old as fifteen. "How they learn today!" she was always saying when Lanya accidentally exhibited her knowledge. "All so fast you would think they haven't as much time to live as before." She would throw up her hands in mock despair. "This new generation! I don't know what Mars is coming to." But she usually laughed so Lanya knew that Grandma didn't really despair for Mars' future.

Lanya was vague about her father Jonathan Greggor's origin. He seemed to be a physicist and they said he had been sent to Mars from Earth to assist in the development of uranium and plutonium deposits. But her mother, Klee, a beautiful Martian, had induced Jonathan to stay. Lanya knew little more than that.

"Do you think we can do it?" Lanya asked with just the right shade of admiration in her voice. Virgil was much pleasanter company when she took pains to appreciate his masculine superiority.

"Sure," he boasted. "Even better than this one. This old tub is simple . . . we can make ours smaller and faster."

They had a last long, lingering look at the "Ghost", then swaggered out past the grinning attendant.

He wouldn't be grinning if he knew what they knew, Lanya thought.

IN THE Greggor workshop, out away from the house, Virgil and Lanya worked diligently on the ship. A launching rig jutted up out of a pronounced dip in the red Martian sand a quarter of a mile away. Fascinating blueprints, over which Virgil pored learnedly whenever Lanya happened to look at him, littered the shop. Their father's shop equipment was switched on every afternoon to assist in the work. After five months the ship, with rocket engines already installed, was nearing completion.

Lanya's confidence in the venture had been on the wane lately. Before it had been only an exhilarating idea, safely remote in the future. But now, as the ship actually grew before her eyes, it was losing its secure vagueness. It was becoming terrifyingly real.

"Do you think we ought to do it?" she asked sheepishly and hopefully. She trembled at the derision in her brother's voice.

"Girls!" he said. "Always afraid of everything."

"I am not afraid!" Lanya protested indignantly. "I just wondered if we ought. Maybe father *will* buy us an aircraft *this* year."

"Huh! Fat chance! He's so darn busy all the time he doesn't even realize that we're probably the only kids on Mars who haven't a plane. Even Book, the poorest guy at the Institute, got a copter for his birthday last month." He frowned as he always did when talking about how unfairly he had been treated. "We'll show 'em! We'll be the envy of all Mars with this ship." His face lit up in a grin and he gloated, "Muuck thinks that new atom-powered cruiser of his is the best jalopy going, jut because it can range in outer space. He's getting a temporary space-pilot's license this year and all he does is brag. Wait'll he sees this job! We'll make his cruiser look sick, Lanya!" He was apparently carried away by the vision.

Lanya was none too excited about the prospect of excelling Muuck's cruiser. "But, Virgil. *You* haven't a license. How can we make Earth if we can't even leave Mars?"

Virgil scoffed, "They have to catch us first! Besides, they hardly ever stop you, unless you mess up traffic patterns."

"But do you think we should go so soon, Virgil? And do we *have* to go to Earth?"

Virgil turned on his distressed sister impatiently. "Look, Lanya. We agreed to run away from home, didn't we? You haven't forgotten why?"

"Because father neglects us!" Lanya piped emphatically, as though she had been practicing that statement for a long time—which she had.

"Right! And we've never been to Earth, have we? Even though father promises every year to take us."

"No. We haven't."

Virgil's inoffensive domination of his sister was too deeply ingrained for her to shake off now. She usually enjoyed complying with his suggestions because his ideas were always much more imaginative and much more fun than her own.

"All right. But I don't know . . ." she sighed, trying to agree and yet not commit herself too completely.

"Well, what's going on in here!" It was Jonathan Greggor, wheeling his speedy copter into the shop. "Give me a hand, will you?"

Lanya rushed to help push the copter beneath the overhead crane.

"Going to try out that new rotor I bought last week," her father explained. "Virgil, send the magnet down, will you, and we'll take this one off."

Virgil leaped to the crane controls. The powerful electromagnet rolled along the high mono-rail and fell into position above the slack copter blades. The rotor was unlocked and the magnet lifted it lightly into the air and deposited it across the room. The magnet dropped hungrily down on the slick new blades.

"What are you kids doing in here?" Jonathan asked automatically as he worked. He glanced at the ship set in its cradle. "Oh, looks like a space ship of some kind. Ancient model though, isn't it? Klee was telling me you were tinkering around out here at something." He reached up to guide

the rotor as it came swinging down. "I remember when I was a kid. Always fussing around with things. Built an amphibious car when I was about your age, Virgil." He grinned across the room at Lanya over the copter blades. "I was the envy of our city . . . until Joe Morgan got an expensive custom-built job from his father. What do you two expect to do with that ship when it's finished? Explore the solar system?" He chuckled at his own crude joke.

"We expect to rocket to Earth," said Lanya, who was unaccustomed to lying and thought that an answer to this question was necessary. Virgil scowled at her darkly.

"Earth, eh?" Jonathan said in a way that indicated he was preoccupied and hadn't grasped the significance of the words at all. "Easy there, Virgil . . . all right. Off!" The power left the magnet and it floated up to the ceiling and locked into position.

Virgil looked immensely relieved, but Lanya was puzzled. Their father never seemed to hear a word they said. It was this indifference to the importance of their existence that was the cause of their bold resolve. Maybe running away from home was a good thing to do. Maybe they wouldn't be taken for granted after that.

THE kids seem to be building a space ship out in the shop," their father said that evening as he watched the newcast on the telescreen. "Said they were going to Jupiter or some place." He lapsed into silence to follow the announcement on the telescreen,

"Earth," Lanya corrected from the floor where she was idly fitting together a chain reaction with a three-dimensional atom construction kit. It was an old toy she had long ago outgrown but, because of her father's indifference, she had none of the more advanced educational-therapy playthings.

Klee smiled indulgently. "That's nice," she said. "Have a good time. Jonathan, who was that economist I thought so much of last year?"

"You mean Gulgar?"

"Oh yes. Well, he's a candidate again in this election. I think I'll vote for him. He's such a good talker."

"Hmmm."

Lanya looked across the room at Virgil and met his eyes with deep understanding. They were the only sane people in this household. Virgil's eyes glittered with the knowledge of their mutual secret. In a few weeks they would be on Earth, and then their parents might not be so dense and disinterested!

"We going to Earth this year, father?" Lanya asked suddenly and experimentally.

"Sure thing! I'll have everything straightened out in a month or so, then we're free to do anything we like. I'd like you kids to see Earth." He turned to the telescreen as the scene switched to the sports arena. "I think Canal City will win again. Beautiful strategy!" He leaned forward expectantly.

"Yes, I've always wanted to see Earth," Klee said without much conviction. "It must be much prettier than Mars. Isn't Desert City ahead, dear? Last week you said their team was the best on Mars."

"Oh, that was last week," Jonathan scoffed. "Just watch this strategy! Unbeatable!" His eyes glowed as he watched the swift, intricate pattern fluctuations of the game.

The same old thing, Lanya thought dejectedly. Always the same insincere answer and then the subject was changed. Virgil crawled across the floor toward her as she connected spheres and rods in a complicated molecular design. He studied the schematic system with lazy curiosity. "This electron is in the wrong orbit," he said at last and removed the offending sphere and inserted it in its proper position in the pattern. "Remember?"

"Thanks," said Lanya without much feeling. "I can't keep my mind on this silly thing anymore." And she added dreamily, "I'll bet they have wonderful scientific toys on Earth. Naddi Cruz has an electronic telescope her parents got on their vacation there. I wish I had one."

"We'll get one of everything when we get to Earth." Virgil promised magnanimously.

KLEE helped pack the food supplies in metal containers, very obviously humoring her children in this game they were playing.

"Why so much, Lanya? You seem to be

going on a long journey." Her eyes twinkled amusedly.

Lanya peered at her mother in blank astonishment. Had she forgotten already?

"We're going to Earth, mother. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes," Klee said hastily. "And how was it you were going to get there?" She glanced across the dry, desolate span of desert to the distant bulwarks of the canal. "I wonder if it will rain this year."

"The rocket ship we've been building out in the shop," Lanya said with keen disappointment. Her mother didn't remember a thing!

"That's nice. A rocket ship." Klee paused, as though searching for just the right word to express her approval and enthusiasm. "How cute."

Lanya forced back the tears of disappointment that surged involuntarily to her eyes. She grabbed a large container and shuffled out, feeling, not altogether happily, that now the last possible barrier and objection to the running away had been removed. Her mother hadn't taken the slightest interest.

The ship stood now in the launching rig, a gleaming, purposeful projectile, reflecting the red hue of the Martian desert in the blazing sun.

"Mother thinks we're just playing games," she told Virgil who hovered expertly and solicitously about the ship, finding flimsy excuses to polish here and rub there. It didn't seem to shine quite to his satisfaction.

"Games!" he bellowed indignantly. "They'll soon find out it's no game. We'll run away for good. They'll be sorry they didn't pay attention to us!" He rubbed furiously on the metal plates.

"Here are the last of the supplies," Lanya intruded irrelevantly. They had already rehashed, many times, their plan to return to Mars in ten or twenty years as diplomats to negotiate with the highest executives in the Martian government. The splendor of their positions would flabbergast their parents. They would beg to be decided yet whether they would forgive them or not. Perhaps eventually they would.

Virgil lugged the supplies into the ship and packed them rigidly in the storage compartment. He came out and stood with

his sister gazing up at the gleaming hull. "That does it," he said with apparent satisfaction, "Tomorrow we leave, Lanya."

Now that the venture was so close at hand, Lanya's confidence was less serene. Maybe it was rather risky after all. If nothing else, Virgil might be arrested for charting in space without authorization. Maybe he couldn't fly this ship at all. His piloting had been mostly theory so far. Application was something else again, she feared.

Virgil's face showed doubt too. "You sure you're not afraid to go?" he asked almost hopefully.

"No. It's the only way we'll ever get any recognition around here," Lanya said stoutly.

"Right! I hope Muuck is watching tomorrow. We'll blast out of here like a comet! Make his cruiser look like a freighter."

"I'll bet they have *everything* on Earth," Lanya said with forced enthusiasm as they walked across the dry sand to their flat, rambling house. She looked up to see their father's copter skimming in from the direction of the city. It hovered over them momentarily, then streaked toward the house and settled lightly to the ground. Lanya began to run after Virgil who was galloping across the sand.

"Hello, father," they said breathlessly as they tore into the house behind him.

"Hello, kids. What's new?" Jonathan asked automatically as he always did.

Lanya screwed up her courage. Here was one last opportunity to have someone stop their running away.

"We're all set to take off for Earth tomorrow."

"Oh? That's fine. Wasn't that a rocket launching rig I saw out in the hollow?"

"Yes. That's where we take off at 0900 tomorrow. We'll probably be gone for months and months. Maybe years!"

Jonathan switched on the telescreen. "Is that so? Well, well. Ummm! These blasted commercials!" He snapped the screen off angrily, then turned it back on to the government-sponsored channels.

Lanya looked at her brother and shrugged hopelessly. It was out of their hands now. They had made every reasonable effort to halt the thing—now it would just go ahead on its own momentum.

AT 0830 Lanya trotted beside her brother with determination across the scorching sand to the ship nestled in the launching tower.

"I wonder what we forgot," Lanya said, wishing she could remember something.

"We didn't forget anything! Not a thing! Let's get going now!" Virgil climbed in deliberately without a backward look. He was trying to impress her, Lanya knew.

The girl, feeling suddenly very small and afraid, glanced apprehensively at the metal hull of the ship, then lingeringly at the familiar landscape. Finally, setting her face into a mask of unflinching determination that successfully hid the palpitations of her heart, she climbed into the open port and sealed the lock.

In the tiny pressurized cabin, air-cushioned against acceleration, Virgil was already seated and watching the erratic instruments with absorbed interest. Lanya dropped into the cloud-like softness of her seat and snapped the safety straps securely about her small body.

"I hope Muuck is watching," Virgil muttered under his breath. He turned to his sister. "You ready?"

She smiled sickishly.

They watched the hand sweep slowly across the chronometer and approach 0900. A steady vibration pulsed rhythmically, throughout the hull.

"Are you sure you're ready?" Virgil asked, grinning bravely. "Here we go"

The scream of the jets was almost inaudible in the cabin. They floated with eerie slowness from the ground . . . then rose faster and faster. Below, the details of the desert merged into a dull red haze. The horizon began to have a noticeable curvature, which became more and more pronounced. A thick, bunched mass of cloud flicked by in an instant.

A strange pressure knotted Lanya's stomach. Then she blacked out.

* * * * *

"You what?"

"We rayed the thing out of space as a menace to navigation."

"Why'd you stop us?" Virgil's voice was shrill with annoyance and frustration. "We were rocketing to Earth!"

"Earth!" the other voice rasped. "Great

god Bongo! What loony stunt will you kids think up next?"

Lanya forced her eyes open and looked toward the voices. A large, red-thatched man in a space-police uniform was chuckling at Virgil who sat on the edge of a bunk. They were on the inside of a sleek-atom-powered police interceptor.

"Next time you try this stunt, kid," the old space-dog was saying, "paint some identification on the hull. And install a radio, if you do nothing else."

Lanya crawled out of the bunk and approached the two speakers.

"Oho!" the burly space-policeman roared. "The little lady!" He became suddenly serious. "Don't you kids know that at the rate you were accelerating you wouldn't have come out of the fog until your fuel was gone and you were past Earth? If ever. I've been a space-pilot for twenty years but I don't think I could have taken that kind of acceleration for long."

Lanya looked silently at Virgil who seemed kind of sick.

"We thought the air-foam cushions in the cabin were enough. Besides I'm pretty tough."

"Ho ho! Tough, he says!" The red-headed man slapped his knee. "The next time you try it, install some gravity plates and don't expect to defy the laws of nature. You would have been in a fine pickle if the patrol hadn't spotted your flaring jets and put a scanner on you."

"I'm hungry," Lanya said suddenly.

The space-pilot laughed. "She's hungry! Say, you two didn't blast off on an empty stomach on top of everything else?" He groaned as Virgil nodded his head sheepishly.

Lanya accepted the big man's proffered hand and followed him into the galley. The fright and confusion left her as the pleasant savor of food filled her nostrils. She ate hungrily but with proper lady-like delicacy.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Home," the big space-dog said.

"Oh. But aren't you going to arrest us, or something?" Lanya made her eyes big and round to show her apprehension.

"Well, ordinarily I would. But I think you two have had enough for the time being. You look fairly intelligent to me. Do

you think you've learned anything from this crazy expedition?"

"Identification, communication and gravity plates," Virgil muttered.

"Oh, yes!" Lanya cried quickly. "We'll never do it again. Absolutely never!" She gave an inward sigh of relief as she saw that the man hadn't heard Virgil's careless remark.

Outside the quartz viewport the flat plane of red Martian desert was growing swiftly larger.

WHY did you do it? Why? Klee demanded tearfully.

They were seated about the dead and silent telescreen. It was a crucial moment. They could not abandon their principles now.

"We were going to Earth," Virgil said obstinately, "because you always break your promise to take us!" He looked extremely self-righteous as he spoke his feelings at last.

Lanya, inspired by this unexpected outburst, plunged recklessly, "All the other kids have aircraft and we don't have anything! You never listen to anything we say or care about anything we do . . ." Then she was stricken dumb by her own courage.

Klee and Jonathan searched each other's eyes. The father switched on the telescreen, then switched it back off. He cleared his throat five or six times, scratched his elbow, worked the muscles of his jaw, then leaned forward in the chair.

Lanya waited breathlessly. Would he be chastened or angry?

"Supposing I buy you a new copter?" he said. "Will that straighten things out?"

Lanya nodded eagerly. She glanced at Virgil who sat with a stiff face.

"Make it an atom cruiser," he said with finality.

Jonathan's face clouded for a moment. Lanya almost dropped through the floor. She saw her mother nod silently.

"A cruiser it is!" their father cried. Then he burst into a loud peal of laughter, and switched on the telescreen.

Lanya relaxed limply. Then she looked at Virgil. Very firmly and dignifiedly he folded his arms.

But the eye turned away from his parents winked back at her, very solemnly.