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FACTORY in the SKY

The basic weapon of future wars will be Production, not guns . . . and no holds barred to sabotage a plant!

THE spacebus from the suburban asteroid, Norwalk, was barely crawling through space. The great hulk swung clumsily out around a stalled space coupe and headed again toward the gleaming spot of light that was *Factory in the Sky*.

Impatiently I looked at my watch and swore. We had been late twice last pay period.

"Overtime next period, Mike," red-faced old Neal Hutter said cheerfully. "This war between the Jovian moons—the Confederacy—and Mars, has boomed the construction of space cruisers. Earth has cancelled or back-ordered the fleet we were building for her and is giving every assistance to Mars. Says Mars is her first line of defence, just as though Mars was always between Jupiter and Earth!"

"Inner circles have to stick together," I grinned. "I can stand a little extra money too. After working several months in Zuber's Canning Factory on Lundar, hothouse asteroid belt y'know. . ."

"I've been there," nodded Neal Hutter knowingly.

"Well, after that," I said, "it seems wonderful to have a few dollars in your pocket and some place to spend them. I feel like a human being again. In another pay period or so I am going to invest in a used space coupe and rocket to work."

"Not for me," Hutter shook his bald-domed head sagely. "Traffic is too congested here among the asteroids. Another space car smacks you; your old bus springs a leak, and there you are—gasp-

ing like a mudfish in the middle of the Martian desert. Nope, I'm sticking to the bus."

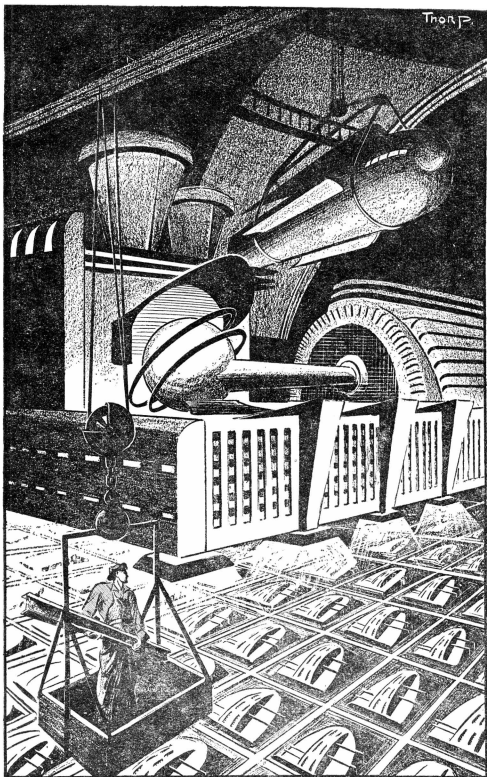
The vast spinning sphere of *Factory in the Sky* loomed above and ahead of us, gleaming white against the unfathomable jet depths of surrounding space. About the thirty-odd miles of The Factory's circumference, anchored securely to its vast metallic skin, were spaced a score or more smaller half-spheres where experimental, executive, production, personnel, advertising and various other departments had their headquarters.

Here on the rim of the clustering asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter were the mammoth shuttle ships—luxurious globe ships for passengers—the swift cruisers of the Patrol, and the grubby little ships of the asteroid prospectors and freighters constructed, serviced and repaired at *Factory in the Sky*. Twenty million men, women and children lived here in the airless void, dependent for their living upon the continued construction of new and better space ships.

Less than half a million of the workers were employed in the construction of the great ships; the balance worked on the hothouse worlds where vegetables, fruit and animals were grown, or in the three outer levels of The Factory where a thousand small factories leased space and produced their own specialized products.

"FOUR minutes!" I snorted, hooking my fingers through the plastide strap of my lunch kit as the bus eased upward toward the ceiling of the parking lot.

By Basil E. Wells



The bus slipped between two hanging squat brown towers. Its magnetic anchor gripped the Factory's metallic skin securely; twin hollow tubes of metal snapped outward to contact and seal against the reversed towers, and the locks swung open. Air whooshed softly between the tower locks and the ship.

A seething mob of men and women poured out of the bus, a numbered metallic gate badge—bearing the clear-cut reproduction of each employee's features—on each outthrust wristband. Hurriedly they passed beneath the invisible eyes of the robot scanners and analyzers . . . Only once had I seen a spurious badge detected and its owner arrested by the guards.

Up a moving ramp we rode in a concerted smooth flood of close, wedged human heads, upward for three levels through a drowsy murmur of buzzing, humming machines.

Abruptly the sensation of climbing upward ceased and we stepped off the ramp upon the fourth level of the gigantic sphere. A firm pressure was beneath our feet now, an artificial, centrifugal sort of gravity.

I weighed almost five pounds on the fourth level!

The long line of men and women snaked past the clock. Even as I reached it and my card clicked its intricate mechanism, the hoarse throaty shriek of the shift whistle sounded above the incessant roar of acre upon acre of whirring clattering mechanisms.

I took a swift-moving band set flush with the floor, a conveyer for raw material and the finished products alike, and opposite my set of three machines I stepped off. A skeleton-thin, dark-skinned man, Wolfe, nodded jerkily.

"Machine Three's having fits," he growled as he snatched up his lunch kit and stepped upon the moving band moving in the opposite direction, "dies all shot.

Inspectors rejected the last order of cases I sent over."

MOST of the first half of the shift I spent working on Number Three and tending the two other automatic machines. An hour before lunch period I finished changing the dies; heaved a sigh of relief, and leaned back against the slender vertical girder beside Number One.

Beneath my feet lay the three outer levels of the Factory where the thousands of articles for domestic consumption were produced—refrigerators, electric stoves, solar generators, shoes, cloth and furniture. . .

We were, and are, self-sufficient in space, the twenty millions of us living about the Factory, what with our transparent hothouse planetoids, our inexhaustible supply of metallic space debris for raw materials, and the frozen drifting spheres of oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen and the other gases to replenish our atmosphere as it leaks gradually away.

Above my head, inward from the vast hollow globe's outer skin, a dozen more levels were located where the various bulky parts of the space ships and their powerful little tenders were stamped-out, machined and finished. Inside the great hollow shaft that pierced the ten-mile diameter of the Factory from artificial pole to artificial pole there were a dozen ships in the process of construction by space suited workmen—great half-mile spheres of metallic alloys and cold resistant, sturdy plastics that would never feel the oxidizing, corrosive atmospheric blanket of a planet pressing against their thick sides.

Pioneering rockets had blasted directly between Earth, Mars, and Venus, a procedure requiring a prohibitive amount of liquid fuels. Later the short jump from Terra to Luna, and from Mars to Phobos and Deimos, was made in a light cruiser, and the passengers were there

transferred to a luxurious space liner—still at an excessive cost. Finally, the procedure so well-known in this year of 2160, came into being—the majestic rounded ships from the Factory picked up their passengers from sturdy little planet ships a few thousands miles above the surface of the worlds.

Like planets in miniature were these globe ships, their interiors a green riot of oxygen-freezing plants, trees and flowers. Out in the void gravity was practically non-existent and their massive bulk weighed practically nothing—fuel consumption, consequently, was very slight. . . .

All this I thought as I leaned back against the post watching the glittering clacking cams and eccentrics of my machines blurring with speed as they stamped out empty rocket cases for the Martian space fleet's small rocket guns.

Idly I opened my tool box and lifted a dull-surfaced box from it to the top of Machine One. Small it was, smaller than the palm of my hand, but in the square, glassed aperture in its center a light glowed as I twisted an inset knob.

The little box was a spy ray that had come into my possession a few months before while I was working in Zuber's Canning Plant on Lundar. And spy rays are forbidden by interplanetary law, a law stringently enforced by the Interplanetary Patrol Corps. If the snoop-window, as all criminals called it, was found in my possession—well, I would not be working long in the Factory!

I shifted the tiny dull block around, centering its X-ray eye upon a sleepy looking operator across the aisle. I regulated the range. . . .

Adams, the other proprietor, had a silver plate covering a hole in his skull, trepanning operation, and a knot of silver wire showed in his right knee. Apparently Adams had had a few accidents in his lifetime. There was a knife and

two nickel alloy coins in his pocket and the zipper along the side of his single overall-like garment of bluish spun glass was made of aluminum.

I had shifted the spy ray around to another operator, a hard-eyed mustached man named Yaeger, and had noted that a key-ring and a zippered billfold were the only metallic objects in his pockets, when I saw the assistant foreman of Section 27-F-4 come drifting down the narrow aisle between the sets of machines. I dropped a handful of waste over the snoop-window where it rested on the machine's unscrapped rough surface and was gauging the rocket cases as they clicked out of the dies when he came up beside me.

"Dies changed?" he shouted above the chatter of the hundreds of machines about us.

"Yes sir!" I called back at him. "Cases smooth as velvet now."

"Good thing," the assistant growled sourly. "Production is howling about too much scrap. Watch it."

The bronchial squawk of the whistle sounded out across the sea of surging, rhythmic sounds. Lunch period! Electric motors clicked off and stopped. Silence rang deafeningly in my dulled ears. Men hurried between the idle rows of machines to the time clock; then returned to eat their lunches.

I TOOK a last bite of the raisin pie—asteroid-grown grapes they came from—drained the thermos bottle of coffee, and closed the bucket with a click.

Neal Hutter and two of the older men always ate together a few machines away; so now I joined them.

"Sure we'll be in the war," buck-toothed scrawny Hites mumbled from behind a huge bite of sandwich. "Here we sit, exposed between Mars and the Jovian moons. If Mars gets licked we're outside her sphere of influence. Earth

can't see that happen. The Factory produces nine-tenths of all the spacecraft engaged in interplanetary service. If the Confederation wins, the plant will be dominated by it. Where will that leave Earth and Venus?"

"We're safe enough here," grunted Adams, he of the trepanned skull and the wired-together knee. "Our fleet of rocket destroyers and robot torpedoes make us invulnerable from attack."

"From the outside, yes," drawled old Neal Hutter. "Ever hear of sabotage, boys?"

"Not here," scoffed Hites, gulping down an unchewed slab of Martian thiland pie. He belched politely before continuing. "All the men from Ganymede, Io and Europa have been deported or put to work hollowing out the vacant asteroids about us. Besides, the I. P. C. keeps men planted all through The Factory."

"Point one of them out to me," I laughed scornfully. "That's just a story going around to freeze up any Jovian sympathizers!"

"Maybe so," Hutter muttered, his eyes intent on the floor, "but these patrolmen, or I-men as the newsrags have it, are masters of disguise. Adams, here, might be one."

"After working here with us for the last ten Earth years?" Hites snorted. "Huh! I've worked beside him for the last seven. More likely be some new fellow like Mike Terry here. If he wasn't so mouthy I might think so. I. P. C. men don't blast their jets all over the place like he does."

Why, you. . . " I began, doubling up my big-knuckled fists.

Hutter winked at me and I let my called fists unknot.

"Cool off, Mike," he said quietly. "Hites is just kidding."

"Okay, okay!" I replied. "Better get back to my machines. See you later, Hutter."

"Oil my machines up too," Hites called after me with a shrill cackle of laughter.

I PULLED aside the waste that concealed the snoop-window and pressed the automatic button. By some slight movement of the box, perhaps the machine's vibration, it now cut across Yaeger's middle where he sat on an inverted scrap can with a greasy-looking runt named Ensen.

I whistled and adjusted the spy beam carefully. Two luminous capsules, one end of them alight with a peculiar radiance, showed clear against the shadowy outlines of Yaeger's crouched body. They had been in his metal lunch kit! I had not spotted them before.

I wondered what they were as I shifted the snoop-window's invisible probing finger toward Ensen. I started and my jaws clicked together. Two more of the strange rounded objects showed around Ensen's waist!

From an idle game of illicit prying this was fast becoming something else, something grim and terrible. . .

I palmed the tiny case in a handful of waste and stuffed it into my pocket as I oiled my machines. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Yaeger and Ensen drift into the washroom and after a few moments emerge again. I chanced a brief flash of the snoop-window.

The four glowing objects were gone!

Automatic presses chattered and roared lustily about me half an hour later as I nodded to Adams to watch my machines and headed for the washroom. The doors swung inward. I smiled grimly. The place was empty.

Swiftly I produced the spy ray and held it close against my stomach, shielded from the outer door. A second's swift circle of the walls showed me the location of the glowing capsules—among a cluster of waterpipes and an exposed

metal girder in a neglected corner.

"Good Lord!" I gasped as I fished out the four, finger-like tubes, "enough iron catalyst to blast The Factory wide open!"

The slender rounded rods were simply soft plastic containers divided into two sections by a wax plug. Powdered iron was in one end of the little bomb and the iron catalyst (first discovered on Luna in 2078) packed into the other end. Some tiny mechanism, timed probably for the end of the shift, would open the plug between and the catalyst would unite with the ferric dust to produce a raging, unquenchable flare of terrific heat. The pipes would provide more fuel for the spreading atomic conflagration and then all of *Factory in the Sky* would gush outward in an intolerable, exploding wave of cosmic flame.

Yaeger and Ensen—saboteurs in the pay of the Jovian Confederacy! It was hard to realize that the men of the outer moons, claiming common ancestry with men of Earth and Mars, could contemplate such a hellish mode of waging war. I knew that it was not the common people of Jupiter's moons who wanted war—the rank and file never want war until their leaders wave the hot red flag of Jovian, or Venerian, or Aryan superiority. . . .

My jaw hardened stonily and ice ridged chill along my backbone.

Then I considered. What if I reported their treachery? Other agents would be warned; my purpose in gaining a job inside The Factory would be revealed, and my life would be constantly in danger. I could not afford to have my secret mission inside The Factory revealed this late in the game.

I couldn't even prove that Yaeger and Ensen had planted the bombs. I might even be accused of planting them there myself!

I slipped the deadly little packets of destruction gingerly into the pocket of

my coverall garment, atop the illegal snoop-window. It would take some tall explaining now if a company guard were to search me!

"NEAL!" I said to the red-faced old operator a short time later, "how about helping me pull a joke on Yaeger and Ensen? They planted a couple of—uh-rotten eggs in my tool kit a while ago. Here they are, wrapped up in paper towels. How about slipping them in their hip pockets as they ring out? You're right beside the clock."

"Why sure, Mike," Hutter agreed, his keen old eyes level and squinted curiously. "Sure it was them?"

"Saw them," I told him.

"Dirty trick to play," Hutter growled. "Mess everything up for a long time if the eggs happened to break, in your tool kit."

"Yeah," I agreed, "lucky I caught it in time."

A thin-bladed sliver of steel that Hutter used to clean bits of loose metal from his dies snapped off short in his tense fingers against the machine. The ridges along his long jaw softened and then he winked at me.

"Your two machines have stopped," he told me. "Better get busy before old Foghorn sees that only Number Three is going."

Once the three machines were again busily engaged in snapping out rocket cases I slipped the snoop-window back into the false bottom of my tool box and finished cleaning up the machines until time for the next shift. I hung back until I saw Yaeger and Ensen bolt for the time clock and then hurried to get there a split-second before them.

I fumbled with my card in the machine while they impatiently shoved against me. I swung around belligerently.

"What's eating you two guys?" I demanded. "Got the space litters?"

"Get a move on, Windy!" snarled Ensen nervously, his eyes on the square, numbered face of the time clock.

"Windy!" I yelled angrily, pulling back my fist threateningly.

Hutter winked imperceptibly at me over their shoulders. My arm dropped and I moved out of the way. No telling how long it would be until. . . .

Hutter and I joined the swift-moving line of homeward bound workers. Down the ramp we were swept along down to the bus magnetically anchored below us.

I took a seat next to the dulled transparency of the porthole and a moment later watched Yaeger and Ensen, in a sleek scarlet-hulled space-coupe, blast swiftly downward away from the tough outer husk of the Factory.

Then the bus was dropping away from the spinning bulk of The Factory, heading toward suburban Norwalk, five hundred miles away. I watched the fading

red blasts of the traitorous workers' coupe until it was lost in the congealing murk of surrounding space.

Suddenly a vast mushroom of light blossomed soundlessly out there in empty space. I settled back in my seat. That was the end of them. *Factory in the Sky* was safe for the moment. . . .

THAT night I. P. C. Operator CY-1178, Neal Hutter by name, sat grimly in my room watching as I flashed a coded message to the I. P. C. base on barren Aison, a fortified asteroid nearby.

"WC220 reporting," I told them. "Plot to destroy Factory averted. Catalyst bombs. Check recent shipments of catalyst. CY1178 and myself accounted for agents and bombs without detection. . ."

"Simple and sweet," nodded Hutter. He smiled. "You talk too much, Windy," he added, "to be an I-man!"

THE END