



VOL. 5, No. 3 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • NOVEMBER, 1951

▶ *Novel of Strange Worlds*

SWORDSMAN OF LOST TERRA Poul Anderson 4
 Proud Kery of Broina felt like a ghost himself, shade of a madman flitting hopelessly to the citadel of Earth's disinherited to recapture the fierce, resonant Pipes of Killorn—weapon of the gods—before they blared out the dirge of the world.

▶ *Novelet of the Devil's Island of Space*

THE PIT OF NYMPHONS Stanley Mullen 88
 Locked in the mutant jungle of Venus were the horror-secrets of the universe. Here, into these thousand deaths, with a Tihar-trotting convict to lead her, went luxury-soft Kial Nasron.

▶ *Short Stories from All the Galaxies*

HALFTRIPPER Mack Reynolds 32
 Perhaps the saddest and most fearful of all those terrorized cowards of space was the space-bum known as Micheal.

PALIMPSEST Roger Dee 37
 Care to sire a brand new race? Then hop aboard the Terra IV and enter the new-born Venusian sweepstakes.

GRIM GREEN WORLD John Starr 45
 Why had five spaceships, each tested again and again right down to its tiniest rivet, started for the moon and ended up in Hell?!

THE LAST LAUGH Bryce Walton 48
 Often the distance between humor and terror is too short to be funny. Ask any Earthman who knew Zeke, the buffoon from Mars.

THE ILLUSIONARIES Eric Frank Russell 60
 Every master-Neshanian knows a dream-maker is proof against dreams . . . yet a passel of bow-legged, fun-lovin', half-pint cowboys shot the theory to a stink-star.

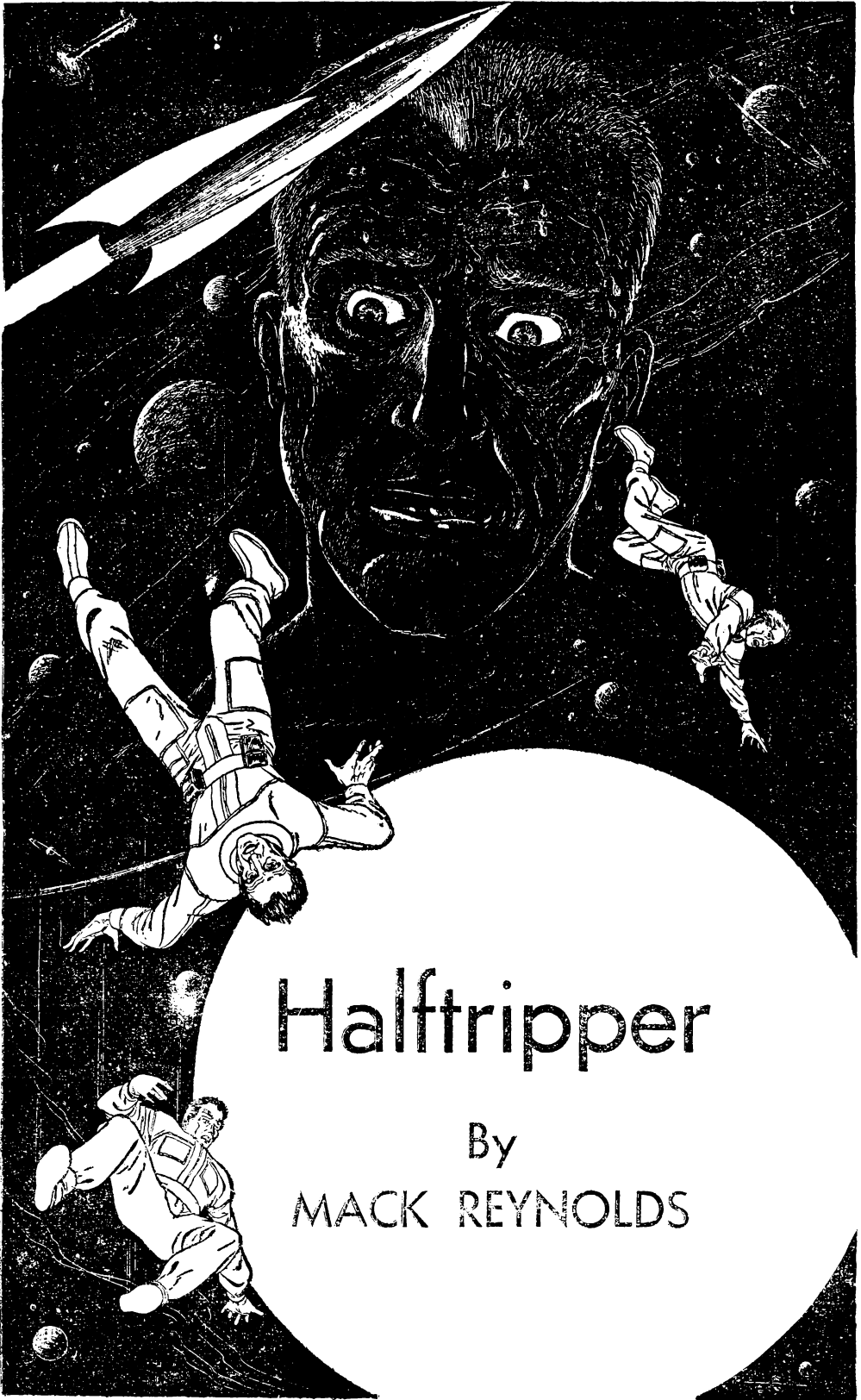
WRECK OFF TRITON Alfred Coppel 73
 The schemer sometimes schemes too well. Like Ron Carnavon, notorious space convict, who thought he had the EMV triangle whipped.

THE CONQUISTADORS COME M. E. Counselman 79
 The handsome, fair-haired Conquistadors were welcomed to S'zeinu with open arms—the grasping, grotesque arms of a lost race of beauty-worshippers.

THE VIZIGRAPH Get into the bout of ballots, blasts and battles. 2 & 108

T. T. SCOTT, *President* MALCOLM REISS, *General Manager*

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Halftripper

By

MACK REYNOLDS

Mars was strewn with the human wrecks of halftrippers—terrorized cowards of space travel. But perhaps the saddest, and the most fearful of all was the immortal spacebum called Micheal.

THIS SECTION of New Sante Fe was off my beaten track. I've been on Mars a long time and am more than usually familiar with the various centers where we Terrans do our congregating. However, it'd been years since I'd come through here.

I was sitting in an obscure tavern, called, with commendable restraint, simply Sam's Bar, lapping up Martian brandy and facing the prospect of returning to the spaceport in a few hours with no particular enthusiasm.

I only half-noticed the old man who got up on the stool next to me. Sam came over and asked him what he'd have.

The oldster carefully counted out some coins on the bar and said, "Wine, Sam; a glass of Martian wine."

"You know I don't want your money, Joseph," Sam told him.

The old man answered reproachfully, "The wine would taste that much the less, my friend, if I had not earned it by the sweat of my . . ."

"Okay," Sam sighed. He poured the wine and rang up the money and went off to wait on someone else.

A halftripper sidled up to me. "How about a drink, spaceman?" he whined. "I'm a graduate of the academy myself, class of '72." He must have noted my United Space Lines uniform.

"Sorry," I said gruffly, keeping my back to him. Any spaceman can tell you that if you talk to a halftripper for long you'll soon be showing symptoms of space cafard yourself. The underlying terror in him; the mind shattering fear of space; the way he stares at you, thinking that you can go home, while he is afraid to risk the trip. There are few of them that can hide their disease.

"I need a shot bad," he whispered urgently. He probably did, too. Few halftrippers are able to secure jobs on the planets of their exile. Most of them become beachcombers of space. Of course, there are some

exceptions, especially if they have money and connections.

I shuddered. "Beat it," I grated, hating myself and him.

The fear of space cafard must be somewhat similar to that of seasickness every new sailor had back in ancient days when man sailed the oceans of Terra. He never knew until he made his first voyage if he was going to be susceptible; and, if he turned out to be, it meant the sea wasn't for him.

OF COURSE, space cafard goes tragically further. A new man usually succumbs his first few hours in space, if he is going to get it at all. He probably makes it to the next planet, sometimes not; sometimes he goes incurably mad, right off the bat. But even if he does make it, wild horses could never get him on another rocketship. He becomes a halftripper, marooned on an alien world. Usually, although I have known of several exceptions, if you don't get it on your first trip, it seldom bothers you; you're immune for the rest of your life.

He repeated, "How about it, spaceman?"

Sam began to approach threateningly. He couldn't afford to have halftrippers hang out in his place. For one thing, the shipping lines would soon declare him out of bounds for their crews. You just can't let good men come in contact with obvious victims of space cafard.

The old-timer Sam had called Joseph was distressed. "You know not what you say," he told me gently.

I managed a sneer. "Am I supposed to buy a drink for every spacebum that comes along?"

The halftripper's eyes lit up and he came closer to the old man. "How about it, pop? Could you loan me the price of a nip of woji?"

Joseph's face was compassionate. "I am sorry, brother, I myself have nothing, but I commend you to the generosity of the tavern keeper."

I snorted at that. I could imagine how much generosity the space leper would get from the bartender.

That's where the surprise came. Sam sighed. "Okay, halftripper, what'll it be?"

The spacebum ordered a double woji, got it down quickly, as though he was afraid Sam might change his mind, and then beat it to find a place to have his dreams when the full force of the also-narcotic drink hit him.

I finished my brandy, ordered another, and grinned wryly at the old-timer. "You give me kert for telling him to beat it, but you give Sam the high sign to let him have woji with which to rot out his brains. I'd think I was being the kinder of the two of us."

"Each man's salvation is within himself," Joseph said softly. "You won't redeem him by attempting to keep him from his weaknesses."

"You talk like a saint but I notice you're sitting here at a bar."

He looked at me penetratingly, and there was vast emptiness behind his eyes. "There is little to enjoy in life," he said softly, "but I have had ample time to investigate all of the supposed pleasures. At one time I drank greatly and kept myself in a state of continual intoxication for a period longer than you could believe. Then I went through a state when I let nothing pass my lips but water. Now I see the mistake of both extremes and can enjoy an occasional glass without feeling the need of swilling it down until intoxication dulls me."

He had me interested now. I said, "You sound as though you've found the way in which to get the greatest satisfaction from everything in life but I notice that you don't appear particularly happy."

He was silent for a long time. Finally he sighed and answered, "Happiness is not to be found in wine, nor in food, nor in beautiful women, nor even in wealth and power. It is from within, what you have done, what you are in the eyes of your fellow man."

He looked as though he was about to say more, but he fell silent, his eyes on something far away, although he seemed to be looking directly into my face. Then a light returned to them and he came back to our conversation. "I am sorry," he said. "For a

moment you reminded me of someone I knew long and long ago. But now I must be on my way." He left his drink half-finished on the bar and walked wearily to the door.

Sam took his glass away and wiped the bar reflectively. "Whenever he's here, I can't turn down any halftrippers or other spacebums," he complained. "I tried it once, and the old boy looked so pathetic that I damn near cried myself."

"He seems to be quite a character," I said, only half-interested.

"Sure," Sam said. "Haven't you heard about Joseph? He's immortal."

"What?" I said, startled.

"IMMORTAL. You know, he lives forever." He poured me another brandy and leaned on the bar. His other customers had left and he was obviously in the mood for talking.

"I thought everybody knew about Joseph," he went on. "He was one of the first spacebarons, a real bigshot, controlled the whole of Calypso; him and his brother. They not only personally owned all of the satellite, but even all of the space lines that served it. When it came to law there, he was judge, jury, and owner of the courthouse and jail. Brother, that was one monopoly."

"You mean that old man that was just here?" I said in amazement.

"That's right. Joseph, we call him now. He probably had a longer name then. It was a long time ago.

"Anyway, to get back to the story, one day a space liner radios in that it wants to make an emergency landing on Calypso for medical assistance. They had some virulent disease on board and the passengers and crew were dying like flies.

"Well, this brother of Joseph, Micheal, or something like that his name was, advises Joseph not to give them permission to land. The captain of the liner pleads with him, but Joseph tells him to move on, he doesn't want to take any chances. The ship tried to make the next port, I forget just what it was, but, anyway, to cut it short, they all died. That's what started things churning in Joseph's bailiwick; a full-scale revolution, no less."

"You missed something there," I said. "The people wouldn't have been expected

to be so upset. After all, no matter how mistaken, he must have thought he was acting in the interests of everyone on Calypso."

"Yeah," Sam pointed out, "but the thing is that among the passengers was Joseph's own boy, the most popular person on the satellite and the apple of his old man's eye. Nobody had known it, but the kid was playing hookey from his school on Terra and was making a cruise of the Jupiter moons."

"Joseph himself had never been very popular with his people, neither had this younger brother of his, Micheal. Too strict, see. But everybody liked the boy and were looking forward to the day when he'd take over the reins of government. When it came out what happened, they went berserk. They cornered Joseph and Micheal and a dozen or so of their close associates in the palace, which was actually more of a fortress than anything else."

Sam wiped the bar again without need, and said reflectively, "It must've been quite a fight. Not that Joseph himself participated. The boy had been his whole life, and he just moved around like he was in a trance."

"They threw everything at that palace. Every weapon, every device, that had been thought up for centuries; but it didn't crack. Finally, the fight was ended by a fleet of battle cruisers from Terra. Joseph and Micheal and the rest were removed and brought here to Mars. None of them dared to remain on Calypso."

I poured myself another brandy from the bottle that Sam had left on the bar. "You make quite a story of it," I told him, "but you didn't tell me what you'd started to—about the immortality."

"Yeah," he said, "that's right. Well, it seems that in the atomic bombardment of the palace something happened that wound up with Joseph and his friends all immortal. Don't ask me what; I don't know and neither did these scientist guys when they tried to figure it out. Of course, it didn't become known for years; not until it became obvious they weren't dying, or even aging. They continued to appear as they had at the time of the fight. I don't mean they couldn't die at all; one by one they dropped away. Two were lost in space; one was blown up in an explosion on Terra; another was

burned to death; but the only way they could die was through accident—or suicide. After a few hundred years they were all gone but Joseph, and, of course, he'd gone batty."

I interrupted. "You mean he's insane?"

The bartender grinned. "Crazy as a makron."

I said slowly, "He seemed normal enough to me. Uh . . . perhaps a bit eccentric."

Sam said, "Brother, he's as far around the corner as you can get. You know what he thinks? He thinks that he's wandering through space, going from planet to planet, trying to find a situation similar to that in which he sent away the person he loved most to his death. He thinks that if he ever finds that similar situation, he'll be able to make the opposite decision from the one he made before and that will redeem him."

I FROWNED. "Where does he get the money for his wandering around the planets?"

"He don't need no money. He's good luck. There's not a captain in the system that would refuse free passage to old Joseph." Sam shrugged his beefy shoulders. "And who am I to say otherwise? That's why I give the bums free drinks when he's around; so does every other bartender."

Two customers had entered and Sam made his way down to them, leaving me alone.

A halftripper scurried through the door and cringed up to me. He whimpered, "How about a drink, spaceman? I . . ."

I flipped him a coin. "Sure, buddy," I said, repressing my usual nausea at the sight of him. I got down from my stool and made my way out. It was time for me to return to the spaceport and my job.

I suppose that I forgot to tell the cabbie to take me to the administration building entrance—the first time I'd made that mistake in years. I was preoccupied with thoughts of Joseph and the story Sam had told of him. The guards at the main gate must have let us through without question when they saw my United Space Lines uniform. At any rate, when I looked up, it was too late. Not only was I on the landing field and in full view of the concrete take-off

aprons, but one gigantic freighter was in the process of blasting off.

All the horror of it flowed over me with a rush. The careful training of years; the work of the doctors who had treated me; all my own self-discipline—were gone. I shook with terrified frenzy. The depths of space! The free fall! The black emptiness! The utter, uncontrollable terror!"

I screamed shrilly and the cabbie turned, wide-eyed, to stare at me.

He knew the symptoms. "Space cafard! A halftripper!" he gasped, and spun the cab about to get me to a hospital. He must have realized then that my uniform didn't necessarily mean that I worked on the liners themselves, but that I could be an office employee who only on rare occasions went near the ships.

He knew too, that the very sight of a spacecraft blasting off was enough to put me in bed for a week; and that I was uncommonly lucky to have the funds for the hospitalization. Mars was strewn with the human wrecks of halftrippers who hadn't.

As we whirled from the yard, we passed

the bent figure of Joseph walking unhurriedly toward a liner which was loading for the Venus run.

My heart cried out, even through my terror, my sickness:

Joseph, Joseph . . . So you too are still alive; and still seeking forgiveness. I had thought I was the last.

But you are by far the better off of we two, Joseph. For at least you have been free to wander while I have stayed on this one hated spot since all those centuries ago when we fled from Calypso and the wrath of the people who had loved the boy so. As though we hadn't loved him ourselves, Joseph.

Yes, you are the better off, you can seek throughout the stars for forgiveness. Then, too, your mind is forever dulled with your madness, while mine is horribly aware, always, of what we've been through and of the centuries ahead; it is only blurred when the space cafard comes.

Joseph, Joseph . . . you didn't even recognize your brother Micheal, nor I you, when we met.