

IMAGINATION

*Stories
of Science
and Fantasy*

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HEIR APPARENT

By

Alan E. Nourse

What drives a man to the stars on a life of high adventure and grave peril? Even more important—can a girl's love keep him home?



*W*E watched in silence as grim - faced, uniformed guards carried the small bronze casket down from the space ship. There were thousands of us standing there in the pouring rain, soaked to the skin. Yet somehow we didn't notice the rain or the discomfort. We had waited years for this moment, to honor a great man's triumphal return to Earth . . . He had waited too long. The odds he faced had finally cancelled out luck, skill, and the guts a brave man needs to face space alone . . .

They carried his casket by us, across the sopping field, boots sucking noisily in the heavy mud. Instead of smiles there were tears that even the rain couldn't hide. And many a woman sobbed openly now . . . perhaps thinking of her own

son or husband up there someplace . . .

I couldn't find any tears. And that was strange. For of all the thousands of people watching his casket move slowly by, I should have felt the deepest remorse.

At least, when you kill a man you're supposed to feel that way . . .

* * *

IT had been so hot that I was soaked through when I finished at the hospital, and could think of nothing more enticing than a hot bath and a long night's sleep. An interne's life isn't his own, and the evenings I could call mine came so seldom I couldn't remember the last time I'd been free. Still, there were those evenings, and tonight seemed to be one of them, when I used to think I'd been foolish to keep from entanglements that would interfere with my professional progress, and begin to envy guys like Bart, with their black haired, blue eyed girls. I was pleased when I saw the light on under my door, and found Bart and Marny there. Marny was at the refrigerator pouring some beer, and Bart was pacing back and forth like a tiger, his eyes bright with excitement. "You should get another hospital," he exploded when I opened the door. "Thought you'd never get here."

"Can't tell women when to have babies," I growled. "Nobody's passed any laws yet." I stripped off my shirt and disappeared toward the shower, winking at Marny as I went. "And as for using my flat for immoral purposes—"

"Fat chance," she grinned, jerking a thumb at Bart. "The boy's on a jag. He won't come near me." I heard the glasses clinking as I showered, and slipped on a cool, fresh shirt. I found them both with their noses in beer, Marny on the couch, Bart staring out at the dark street. And I noticed the suppressed excitement in Bart's eyes as I sank down in a chair.

"Ok," I said. "So you've got news. Spill it."

"I passed the test, Ben!"

I squinted at him, puzzled. Something tried to clink down into place in my mind. Test? It seemed to me I *had* heard something about a test. "That's nice," I said. "What test?"

"What test! Dillon's engineering competition, stupid! I told you about that—"

My eyes widened, and I sat bolt upright. "You mean the competition for *crews*?"

Bart nodded excitedly. "That's right. Dillon got the government to back his contracts and research, and he'll be tripling the number of ships in space within the next five years. He needs men — the best

men he can get to man those ships! And these tests are designed to pick the best part for Dillon's crew—" He sank down on the davenport, his hands trembling. "It was the only smart thing to do," he said. "Every mug on the streets thinks that he wants to walk in and ferry a ship to Mars. That wouldn't work — it takes too much knowledge, too much engineering skill, and lots more. The men who go have got to be the best bets on every score — the best to handle the long trips, the best for repairing, reporting, exploring — everything. You saw what happened to the first crews that went to Mars. There wasn't any provision for anything but technical skill, and they were at each other's throats before they'd cleared Earth's orbit. They practically killed each other — some went loopy, some wouldn't come back home — Dillon had a real mess on his hands. So the tests were set up for screening. The competition was really stiff —"

I stared at him. "And you passed the tests —"

He was grinning from ear to ear. "I passed them —"

I HEARD a swift breath, and Marny was on her feet, picking up the glasses swiftly, taking them to the kitchen. Suddenly there was a cold breath in the room, and I

caught the look on Marny's face. It was one of those unguarded moments, one of those looks no woman ever wants a man to see, but I saw it, and I saw the end of things in her eyes. A look of horror and fear. For one brief instant the shield was down, and I saw the terror and revulsion on her face and knew everything that was going through that mind of hers. And then the look disappeared, and she was walking back into the room, her face pale but composed, watching Bart with a kind of blank sadness in her eyes. "That's — that's wonderful, Bart," she said. "You didn't tell me you were taking it —"

He looked up reddening. "I hardly dared tell anyone. It was such a slender chance. I didn't see how I could possibly get through it — the psych part, particularly. I may have to go out and hang by my knees from the jets on the trips to keep myself from getting bored, but part of the test was interested in idle-time creativity, and they said I got through it better than anyone else —"

She was staring at him, her eyes wide. "That means you'll be going into Dillon's crew —"

"It means I have a chance! The final sifting hasn't been finished, there's a dozen more tests, a dozen performance checks, half a thousand

conditioning tests I'd have to take — but don't you see what it means? It means I can go to space, Marny! It's a chance in a thousand, and it's mine! Dillon's cut the ice, he's had half a dozen ships up, but the real work's just begun. This puts me in on the ground floor, Marny. There's no end to the possibilities —"

She stared at him wordlessly. "But they say Dillon's an exploiter, Bart — a madman. He's out for what he can make out of it, and nothing more. You can't trust a man like that . . ."

Bart shrugged indifferently. "Stories," he said. "Dillon's a pioneer. Those who are afraid of space spread dirty stories, sure, but there's no proof. Anyway, I won't fly *with* Dillon. He just builds the ships, and his ships are the finest that can be built —"

"But Bart, it's a fool's errand!" The girl's eyes were huge, filling with tears. "You have a good job, a good home — you just *can't* go —"

He blinked at her, unbelieving. "With a chance like this? To go to space? I couldn't stay home—"

She looked at him, and then at me, with the strangest baffled pain in her eyes. She looked, suddenly, as though the bottom had dropped out of her world. "You — you mean that, Bart?"

The bafflement spread across Bart's face as he looked down at her. "Marny, I — I don't understand this. You know what I've wanted. I've told you time and again—"

"Oh, yes, *talk!* But I never dreamed you *meant* it! Everybody talks about going to space."

"But not everyone gets the chance!" His voice was sharp in the still, hot room.

"But only a fool would go!"

"Then I'm a fool." He turned away, and sank down slowly in a chair. "I want it more than anything in the world."

THE silence was deafening. When she spoke, her voice was hardly audible. "Then I guess that's all there is to it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if you go, we're through. That's all."

Bart blinked, his face pale. I could see his knuckles whitening on the arms of the chair. "Marny, it's only a trip —"

She was shaking her head, and her lower lip trembled. Her voice was weak, and very, very tired. "No, Bart, not just a trip. A dozen trips, or a thousand. It wouldn't make any difference." She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Bart. I couldn't do it. Across the country, across the ocean, yes. But space —"

no, I couldn't."

"But you aren't being reasonable!" he exploded. "You act as though it's the end of everything, as if a trip to Mars was something to get excited about — look, Marny. We love each other — you know that, and I know it, too. We could be married — this week, right away — I wouldn't be going for at least six or eight months — why, I might not even make it at all! The tests aren't over, this was just the first screening, and I could flunk in a hundred thousand different ways —"

"But you'd pass," she burst out. "You know you would. And then you'd go, and go, and go — what kind of marriage would that be? What about a home, or children? Oh, Bart, you know what happened to the others! You'll die, you'll be killed — think of it! You don't know what you'd find out there, and I couldn't stand it —" She looked up at him, and her eyes were full of tears and bitterness. "It wouldn't be a marriage, Bart. It couldn't be."

Bart looked up at me, his eyes pleading. "Tell her, Ben — oh, tell her, somehow — I can't, I don't know how —" He broke off, and walked to the far side of the room, his whole body trembling — "You're not being reasonable," he broke out hotly. "You've got to

see —"

"Take me home, Bart." The girl stood up trembling.

"But Marny —"

Something in her eyes cut him off, and he took her coat, helped her into it almost savagely. "It's stupid," he said angrily. "It's stupid and unreasonable —"

"Please, Bart —"

They left without another word, walking slightly apart, the anger and hurt carving deep lines on Bart's face, Marny's eyes wide, her mouth tight as she wiped her nose, her face white as death. I walked to the window, my mind spinning, and saw them get into Bart's three-wheeler. Then they were gone, down toward the city. For a long time I stood and watched.

I KNEW that she'd come, sooner or later. She'd come to me many times before, with big problems and little, and she knew that doctors have a faculty for understanding some of the messes people get into. I wasn't surprised to see her, the next day, coming up the stairs in that blue dress that caught the blackness of her hair and the startling blueness of her eyes. Her face was just as pale as the night before, but her eyes were clear. As she sat down, a trifle uneasily, as though she couldn't quite make up

her mind whether she should have come or not, she looked like one of those perfect, exquisite pink-and-white china dolls. I sat down opposite, and offered her a smoke; she accepted, and took a small puff with nervous fingers. "I don't know why I'm here," she said, finally. "Oh, Ben, I just don't know what to do —"

"Bart?"

She nodded. "I didn't react so well last night, I guess —"

"No," I said. "I guess you didn't."

"But I didn't know what to say. It wouldn't have been right to have pretended to be happy about it."

I sighed. "That's true. There's no good in pretending — not at this point."

"But this was the first I realized he was really *serious*, Ben. Oh, you know how he talks." She stared at her cigarette for a long moment. "He's wonderful, Ben—" she said softly. "You know that, I think —"

"He's the most wonderful guy alive."

She looked up at me gratefully. "I think you mean that. I've known it — ever since our first date. He brought me into a new world, a completely new, wonderful, exciting world. I kept fooling myself that I could be part of it, I guess, that

somewhere he could find a place for me there, too. He loves me, I'm sure of it—but I'm only part of his world, just one tiny little facet —"

I snuffed out my smoke, and looked over at her. "And you?" I said. "What about your world?"

Her voice was very low. "Bart's my world. All of it. Nothing else really makes much difference to me."

I felt a little chill run up my back. "Which means?"

"I want to marry him anyway. Even if he goes, I want to marry him."

I stood up and walked across the room, my mind racing. "Are you here for advice, or did you just come to tell me this?"

"Oh, Ben, I don't know! I can't think, I don't know what to do. Do you think it could work, Ben? Somehow, could we *make* it work?"

I looked at her for a moment. "I don't know. I haven't got the sort of mind Bart has, or the sort of makeup. I actually don't know what makes him go, Marny. But I know that there's a fundamental difference between us. Me, I'm not anxious to go anyplace. Give me a quiet, middle-class practice, and a home, and a wife, and a family, and I'll never want any more. Give the same to Bart and he'd die. Ever since I've known him his eyes

have been on the stars. Can you understand that, Marny? That's his life, everything that he wants. He's been aiming at the stars since he was a kid, studying, working, getting into Rocket engineering, meeting people, talking — all with one idea. To get into space, to go places nobody has ever been. That's the kind of man Bart is. He's a wanderer, a rover. Tie him down and he'd die." I looked at her closely. "You'll kill him, Marny. No matter how much you try to give in, it'll be a losing game. It'll always be a fight between you, and going out on another trip. And you'll always lose. If you don't, you'll kill him. That's all there is to it."

There were tears in her eyes. "What should I do, Ben?"

"Tie him down, and he'll shrivel up and die. Turn him loose, and nothing in the universe can stop him. Let him go, Marny. Completely. You can find another life down here, the sort of life you need. But Bart could never find another life —"

Her eyes were wide with pain and sadness. "There's no other way, Ben?"

"If you love him, Marny, that's the only thing you can do —"

in from the hospital. He was lying on the couch when I closed the door. His shirt was open at the neck, and he didn't even move as I hung up my jacket in the closet. Then he said: "Hi, Ben. Been waiting for you."

"Beer?"

He shook his head and sat up. He looked like he'd been through the dishwasher. There were grey circles under his eyes, and he hadn't shaved for a couple of days. But, worst of all was the look in his eyes — a look of bewilderment and torture I'd never seen there before.

"You look like hell," I said.

"I feel like hell."

"Marny?"

He nodded, and lit a cigarette. After a puff or two he snubbed it out in distaste. "Let's get some dinner," he said. All the way down to the diner he sat in the car with his chin sunk in his chest. Finally he was facing me in a booth, and he couldn't avoid my eyes any longer. "Marny and I had a talk last night."

"That's nice," I said. "What did you decide?"

"Oh, it was awful. Why can't I keep my big yap shut once in a while? I tried to reason with her, Ben. And she was so damn calm and collected, and wouldn't budge an inch, so I started losing my

BART was waiting for me, several nights later, when I got

temper, and then she really blew up —" He looked at me miserably. "She's too good to lose, Ben. It doesn't matter what it involves."

I looked up, wide-eyed. "What?"

He couldn't meet my eyes. "I'm not going. I'm mailing my resignation to Dillon tonight."

I just gaped at him. "Say that again, slower."

"It's no go, Ben. I'm staying home."

"So you can marry that girl?"

He nodded silently.

"So that's it," I said disgustedly. "The kitty cat has really shown her claws. What are you, a puppet or something?"

"Aw, now Ben —"

"You silly fool. So it's stay home, or else no Marny, is it? You mean to tell me she had the gall to put it *just like that*? And you're swallowing it, like the world's prize sucker!"

He looked up puzzled. "I — I just decided not to go, Ben. Maybe after we're married she'll see things differently, but it just doesn't figure any other way."

I snorted. "It figures like a Hollywood production. Straight down the line. Get the brains to working, Bart! Do you really think she's going to marry you and let you go? Like so much baloney! What woman wants to be a space-widow? She's not so dumb, Bart. She's play-

ing for keeps, and she isn't even subtle about it."

"But what am I going to do? I'm in love with her, Ben."

"Do you think she loves you?"

"I — I'm sure of it."

"But she won't even try to understand your side! My god, Bart, can't you see what's happening? She's selfish, Bart. Just plain selfish. She wants you, and she wants you on her own terms. There won't be any compromise. Turn in that resignation, and you're sunk —"

Anger lit in his eyes then. "It's not selfishness," he said doggedly.

"Then what do you call it? Has she even listened to you? Has she even given one little minute's consideration to how you feel?" I set down my coffee cup in disgust. "Marny is a woman," I said slowly. "To women, a husband and a home are the end of existence. Oh, there are other things, sure, but basically, a woman wants a husband, and somewhere, deep in her mind she has a picture of the vine-covered cottage in the country and all the rest of the bilge that goes with it. Where does a space-man fit into that picture? He doesn't. So there won't be any space-man. Do you think she really loves you, Bart? If she did, would she try to keep you here?"

"But I love her, Ben —"

"And she'll tear your heart out

for it! You don't belong down here, Bart. You belong with Dillon. You have the mind, the build, the potential that Dillon needs. Think of it! Out of all the thousands who want to go to space, you have the chance. You'll get to Mars, you'll work to open the frontier, on Mars, on Venus — we're on the edge of the greatest era of exploration and discovery the earth has ever known, Bart. We have the ships to take us to our own planets now, we need only the men with courage and strength enough to leave their homes and go. And with the new work on induced warp that Dillon's laboratories have been doing, it may not be long before we can go farther than our system — on to the stars. You belong out there, Bart — you don't belong anywhere else. And against a challenge like that, *no woman is worth it. Men like you can't stay, Bart.*"

And then I saw the old light coming back into his eyes, the light I knew I would see, the light that always appeared in his eyes when he talked about the stars. I knew the key was turned now, that he could never change, that he knew he had to go. "There's no end to the possibilities," he said softly. "There's simply no end."

He set down his coffee cup, and the light was still in his eyes. But there was something else in his eyes,

too, that hadn't been there before. Call it pain, if you want, or disappointment. "I'll have to think, Ben. I'll just have to think. But thanks for making me think."

I drained my cup, and sat back with a sigh, and felt the music sing through me. I knew the answer, now. "You won't be sorry," I said.

THE rest of the story is history, of course. Probably he never fully realized the part I had played in his decision. Possibly he wouldn't have cared. He went through Dillon's screening at the top of the list, and shipped on the little exploratory ship *Dillon's Dream*, and headed out for Mars, with a little crew around him, driving into the blackness of space as though he couldn't leave too soon. The landing was good, and the work began. What he did there everybody knows, the gruelling, dangerous work of opening the frontier, of exploring and mapping. Every child today has seen the pictures he made, and sent back, working on Mars until the first wave of colonists came, and then he was on his way again, to Venus, working in the dust and horrible wind to open it up for observation and study, working with a frenzied vitality, a fierce urgent unity of purpose that turned into legend around him as his crews came back. The staggering

courage of the man, the fearlessness, the eagerness to be first, to push farther and farther into the limitless challenge of interplanetary exploration. Pictures came back, messages came back, and later the colonists came back, telling tales of the man that grew and expanded month after month. And then, amazingly, the Dillon Warp was perfected in the laboratory, and Bart Witton was the first to petition for a ship, waiting eagerly for word from the home offices that he could command the first ship to make a star-jump. The world listened, and cheered, never quite understanding why, with all the fame, he never returned to the planet from which he came, but at every chance turned his back on quiet Earth, and his face toward the stormy stars —

So the Star-jump Station went up under his direction, the most colossal task ever undertaken in space, prelude to another infinitely more colossal task, the establishment of a Warp receiver big enough to handle a ship. Bart was the man the eyes of the world were watching when he closed the last port on the new little ship, waved a rakish farewell to the engineers and friends crowded near the ship, and then, with a burst of brilliant purple, threw in the Warp, and flashed into the hyperspace men

had dreamed of but never before seen, jumping for the stars—

He didn't make it, of course. The ship was an impossible, audacious experiment, he didn't really have a chance. They brought him back, his body wrenched and broken from the shock, the little ship torn almost into ribbons. And from the wreckage they found the flaw, the vital information to make safe Warp passage possible. They brought his body back to Star-jump Station, and placed it with reverence in the pitted little ship with which he had started his fabulous career. They knew that the brilliant life was gone, like the last ashes of a dying nova. And they knew that he had lead the way to the greatest era in the history of Man —

I knew the whole story, of course. I knew the force that drove him, I knew why he never came home. I knew the truth of the last night he had seen Marny, the bitterness in his eyes and voice as he left. I knew the depth of the love he had carried with him to the stars, and the horrible dread he held in his heart of ever again coming back to the earth he left, the dread of ever again seeing the girl he had loved. I knew the depth of that personal battle that drove him closer to the stars that were his, and ever away from the Earth which

dealt him his greatest bitterness—

And the girl? Marny should be home very soon now. It's getting late, past 10:30, and the bridge-club never lasts later than 10:00. It's been a quiet, comfortable evening, without a call, but a storm is blowing up from the West, and the kids are getting restless. But, she'll be home very soon, and go upstairs to kiss the kids goodnight, and it'll be nice to lie in bed and listen to the thunder crack. Matter of fact, I think I heard the garage doors slamming just a minute or two ago. She still prefers the three-wheeler to the 'copter, particularly

with the parking problems we're having with 'copters these days. She should be in any minute.

But then, it may be a while before she comes. Sometimes she stops on the porch, and just stands there, staring up at the stars, if the night is clear. I've seen her, standing there for almost an hour, sometimes, just staring up at the blackness with tears in her eyes. But she always comes in, and I never ask her what she's been thinking. I don't think I'd want to know.

And me? I never look at the stars.