

# SPACE SCIENCE FICTION

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# HERO'S WAY

BY JUDITH MERRIL

ILLUSTRATED BY GARI

The graduates naturally wanted to go out fearlessly through the brave new worlds of space. They could imagine being heroes and coming back to the cheering of Earth and heroes' rewards. Yeah, heroes' rewards.



One hundred and forty-seven graduates this time. Seven score, and seven left over. Twelve dozen, and three more. Go on, find another way to count it. Count the hairs off your head this year, or the ones that turned gray. Count the cost of books and paper and lab equipment. Count their ages and their families and their average incomes, and all the other statistics the office of Space Information gathers up so neatly.

Count them any way you want, only don't count how many years they have to live, how long they'll be healthy, how many trips they'll make. Don't count the kids they may never have, or the families they'll leave behind. Don't even try to count the pretty picture hats out there in front, because you'll find yourself trying to count tears instead . . . the tears the girls sitting under the pretty hats haven't shed yet.

You can't count tomorrow's tears. No, but you can count those hundred and forty-seven men, one by one, slow as death and sad as sickness. You can count each one as he comes up looking awed and eager in his new fitted grays, with the stripes on the sleeve. You can hand him his diploma, and watch the pile on the table go down, slowly, slowly, much too slowly. And before the next set of grays comes

up, one inch shorter than the last and red-topped instead of black, you have too much time to remember that there's a man inside the uniform, a man you know, a man you've watched and taught and brooded over for five years in the Academy.

How can you count a human life? Do you give it a number, *one* or *one hundred and forty-seven*, according to grades and rank acquired in five years' time? All you can do is keep on handing out diplomas and doom until you reach the bottom of the pile and the table is empty, and the last gray uniform, blonde-topped, six-feet one-inch, age 23, has filed past.

The fourth Commencement was over at Spaceways, the official part at least. Even in four years, customs grow up though, and the teevee stayed with it for another hour while the boys kissed the girls and hugged their mothers and shook their fathers' hands, and while they all sang space songs around the rocket memorial.

Then the teevee cut off, and switched back to commercial shows. Technicians supervised the removal of the big scanners from the campus. Mothers and fathers went home to make preparations for the evening parties. Girl friends, one by one, reluc-

tantly, took leave to go back to their hotel rooms and dress for the evening. Then a hundred and forty-seven men in fitted new grays, with stripes on their sleeves and diplomas in their hands, filed into the Chapel for a final farewell from the chief.

Alex Halder stood behind the rostrum and waited, erect as befitting his Brigadier's rank, patient as was required by his headmastership. He watched them come in, and found it impossible to think of them any longer as a class, a group, a quantitative category. He knew them, each of them, almost too well. And this would be his last chance to speak to them before they made, each for himself, a final and terrible decision.

At last they were all there, standing stiffly at attention next to their chairs, the doors firmly closed to the outside world.

"All right, boys," Alex Halder said. "At ease."

There was a murmur from the group, of surprise, of curiosity, but they all still stood. Halder smiled. They'd been expecting something ceremonious, official, brisk.

"At ease," he repeated. "Sit down. You're going to be here for a while. Get yourselves comfortable. Take your jackets off, or light a cigarette, or anything you feel like. The shouting's all

over now. Nobody's watching you. Or me. And temporarily at least I don't even outrank you. You've got your diplomas. You're out of Academy. And you don't get to sign up for Service till Chapel is over."

They began to settle down. The room hummed and rustled with whispers and adjustments.

"You never even thought of that, did you? Well, think of it now. You're free, every one of you. You've got just about exactly twenty minutes before you walk out of here, and that's all the time you've got to decide what you want to do with the rest of your lives. I know, it probably never even occurred to you that you'd have twenty minutes. You figured it was all set up.

"It is, in a way. When you go out those doors, you're on the air again. You've all seen this from the other end. You watched it on teevee for three years. When you go out, the table will be set up and waiting, and the scanner'll be watching you, and the chances are no matter what you think you ought to do, you'll walk over to the table and sign up. But according to the law that set up at the Academy, all we can do here is give you an education. We can't force you to use it any special way. So you get to have a couple of hours be-

tween graduation and induction, to change your minds.

"You get more than that. You get this twenty minutes now, not because the law requires it, but because Alex Halder, whatever you may have thought for the last five years, is a human being as well as a Brigadier-General. You men are in the fourth graduating class of the Academy. I've made this speech, or one like it, to each of the three classes that went before you. I'll make one like it every year as long as I'm in command here.

"I want to tell you some of the facts of life they left out of the Academy curriculum. And remember, in back there, you're only going to hear this once, so you better listen while you can."

The murmuring in the back rows stopped.

Halder hesitated. "You know—I told you—this is the fourth time I've given this speech, and the toughest part of it is that I never got bored with it—because every year I've got a new story to tell.

"This year it's about a man you all know, or at least know of. His name is Willard Adamson, and in case you've forgotten—I see you haven't," he said brusquely. "All right, when you're ready, I'll go on."

Again, the noise subsided.

"Bill's served two months of his sentence so far—his jail sentence, I mean. He's got nine years and ten months of it left to go, and it's that short only because he's Bill Adamson, after all. But I don't think it matters much to Bill. He's served eleven years of a different kind of sentence already, and this one is a life term.

"You probably remember how high and righteous the teevee commentators got during the trial. They all thought it was shocking for a hero of the spaceways to fall so low. They said it was a bad example to all the kids who worshipped Bill Adamson.

"Well, it was. It was a bad example maybe some of you men can profit by. But it wasn't shocking, at least not to anybody who's been in the Service more than a couple of years. I don't mean to say, for a minute, that I'm condoning drug-peddling or even drug-taking. I'm not building up to a sentimental white-wash of good old Bill. But I wasn't shocked when it happened. I wasn't surprised and neither was any other senior Serviceman. Most of the others who went sour haven't been anywhere near as spectacular as Bill, but a lot of them have gone the same way before. It didn't have

to be dope. Liquor, women, the big rackets and the little ones . . .

"All right, that's enough build-up. I'm going to tell you some things about Bill that were never in the papers or on teevee either and probably won't be. Not for a long time to come anyhow. I can tell it now, because it was just this last year—a few weeks, that's all, before they raided Bill's place and caught him with the goods—that we licked the problem. If any of you here go out and shoot your mouths off, it won't matter to the Government any more. Only to Bill. As an old friend of his, I'm asking you now not to repeat what I tell you. But there's no law against it . . . now."

Again he hesitated. Where do you start with a story like that? He'd been stalling, and the men out there knew it as well as he did. All right, start at the beginning, stall a little more, but just tell it straight through.

"Bill Adamson," he said pedantically, as if he were delivering a classroom lecture of Service history, "was not really the first man to go to the moon. He was the first man to land a rocket on the moon and take off again. He was the first man to take a ship designed for X-12 fuel outside Earth's atmosphere.

"The funny thing is, Bill was no hero. He didn't even want to make that trip. He was a volunteer, sure. Everybody in the Service is a volunteer, and no Serviceman ever has to take on an assignment of special danger unless he volunteers. You'll find out all about it the day some bright-eyed Colonel full of bright ideas asks you coyly whether, in view of your exceptional qualifications for the job, you would like to volunteer for a given mission. I speak with authority, because I was the Colonel who put it up to Adamson."

They were silent in the back row now. The chief was really talking; whatever this was all about, it was coming out now.

"The thing for you men to remember, right now, and later on if you do sign up, is that any time at all you have a perfect right to say 'No, thanks,' and go on about your business. Believe me, nobody who's been in a while will think the less of you for it!

"As a matter of fact, that's what Bill did. He said no when I asked him, but I wouldn't listen then. We needed him. I put on all the pressure I thought I ought to, and I told him to take twenty-four hours and think it over.

"He said the answer was still no, and would be in twenty-four

hours. I told him to come back and say it again. I knew a little more about Bill just then than he did himself.

"He had a girl. I'd met her, and I knew the type. She was a bit-player on teevee at the time, smart, ambitious, loaded with looks, and enough talent to get along. Quite a dish, but not what you'd call the understanding type. She was *crazy* about space-men.

"Yeah, I know, you still get plenty of it. But think back eleven - twelve years. There weren't many of us who had licenses in those days. The Service was new; the Academy wasn't even opened yet. And here was Bill Adamson, just a kid—if you'll pardon my saying so—no older than any of you, and he'd been offered a chance to be the first man to land on the moon and have a look around.

"Naturally, he told his girl about it. Naturally, he figured she'd be glad he turned it down. She loved him, it says here, so she wouldn't want him to take a risk like that. New fuel, new ship, untried out of atmosphere. Hell, he didn't know if the setup would hold together half-way there.

"Like I said, I knew more about that girl than Bill did. First she thought he was kidding when he said he was going

to turn it down. Then she began to realize he meant it, and she argued with him. He just kept patiently explaining that he liked living, especially with her in his life. So she threatened him and bribed him. He owed it to his country, she said, and he owed it to mankind, to take the trip. If he was too much of a coward to do his duty, he wasn't the man for her; that was the threat.

"On the other hand, she pointed out, if he went, why they could get married right away. They'd have a few weeks together whatever happened.

"Up till then, you see, Bill had been begging her to get married, and she'd been holding off. She had her career to think about. She wanted to stay single till she established herself. Bill admitted to me later, when he told me about all this, that he had a sneaking notion that he had over-talked the dangers—that maybe she was so sure he wouldn't live through it, that she was willing to marry him just because it wouldn't last long.

"But of course he knew that was an unworthy thought. She had such high ideals of devotion to mankind, she was willing to sacrifice her own principles as well as Bill's life. Anyhow, he pushed all his unworthy suspi-



cions out of his mind and came back and told me the next day that he'd go. They got married on special license the same day.

"Bill got three weeks leave, and the time of his life. The two of them were together all the time, at one big blowout after another. The world couldn't do enough for Bill Adamson. Or for the girl who married him.

"All that time it never once occurred to him how much she was getting out of the deal, or what her high principles really added up to, in cash terms, for her. When she signed two big-money teevee contracts within the three weeks, he was bewilderedly grateful, because he didn't have to worry about her now, in case anything happened to him.

"The happy daze lasted right up to the takeoff. He blasted off in a blaze of glory, and he made it all right. He spent two days on the moon all by his lonesome, taking pictures and looking around, filling little jars and bottles with samples of this and that, and making all the tests the Science Service boys wanted. Then he took off again, with no trouble at all, and got back all in one piece, hungry, thirsty, a little cramped in the muscles, and otherwise feeling fine.

"Maybe some of you remember the big welcome home he got?

You're all old enough to remember . . ."

Halder looked around the big dim room, and found nods and smiles answering him. It had been one bang-up celebration, the kind of thing no kid with his heart set on the spaceways was likely to forget.

"You remember Bill went on a world tour, and he was on teevee half the time, one show or another? A lot of the time she was with him . . . his wife, I mean. You may not have noticed her at the time, but you would have if you were a few years older. I did.

"Anyhow, all that happened, or began to happen, about five days after he got back. Before they let loose for any kind of welcoming, the medics went over that boy with a fine-tooth comb. They weren't taking any chances on new bugs or, for Bill's sake, on new sensitivities either.

"They made all kinds of tests on him, took samples of everything he had, and even after they let him loose, they kept on running tests. It was almost as if they had their minds made up not to stop till they got some bad news.

"Well, they got it."

He paused, and the silence in the room was a waiting, breathing thing.

"After they got it," he said tiredly, "they checked and double-checked. They made absolutely sure before they told him anything at all. When they got around to telling him, there was no doubt whatsoever. He had to believe it.

"He had to believe it, and he had to go tell his girl—his wife—about it. That was when she made the first mistake she ever made with Bill, and the last one she ever had a chance to make. She said she didn't care. It was the truth, too. She was glad, really, because it meant she didn't have to worry about being pregnant. She could concentrate on her career.

"That was the joker. It took that one crack too many to make Bill see what a mutt he'd latched onto. That was when he began to put two and two together, and figured out why she wanted him to go in the first place.

"He walked out, but he never bothered about a divorce. Later on, when she wanted one, he was just mean enough to put a little trouble in her way. Bill was a pretty normal average kind of guy. He wanted a wife and kids and a home. He'd always figured on having that after he got out of Service. Now he was out, and a hero, and he had lots of dough—but he could never marry the kind of wife he wanted, because

he never could have any kids.

"Sure, I know—lots of people can't have kids. They get married anyhow, they adopt kids. They find some way around it. But Bill couldn't do that. He couldn't talk, you see.

"He might have found the right kind of girl. Only if he did he'd have to level with her before anything got serious—and he couldn't. He was a bloomin' hero, even if he hated it and never wanted to be one. And the Government wanted good publicity for the Service, not bad. They were just building it up; they were opening up the Academy. They made it pretty clear to him just how a little word-of-mouth gossip about a case like his could wreck the whole project. Things like that get around fast.

"He never did talk. And I guess he saw to it the girl kept quiet too, because she never peeped. It doesn't matter now; they finally licked it, just last year. Licked it for good, I mean. That's when they dropped the double-armor-and-dome protection at Moon Base. You can go out there now in standard space-gear and walk around just like Bill did. And still come home and have kids."

They were getting restless, and his time was almost up. He couldn't talk for more than

twenty minutes.

"All right," he said, quietly, "That's my story for this year. But you want to remember, it's just the one for *this* year. I have my pick of new ones every June.

"The Service is pretty damn good when you come right down to it. Thorough, efficient. It can keep a secret like Bill's for eleven years, and it can make sure everybody who comes after a guy like Bill is protected, like they did on the Moon. But the one thing they can't do is see what kind of trouble is coming up ahead.

"We've licked a lot of problems so far—but just a few compared to what's coming up. One of you men may be the first to set foot on Jupiter, and frankly—"

His voice was getting fainter. He paused and said as loudly as he could, "I don't wish it on any of you!"

They were fiddling with their jackets, straightening their ties. He had to wind up anyway.

"All right. That's about it. But when you go out that door to the big table, and to the teevee scanners that'll tell the whole world if you don't sign up, remember this:

"Whatever trouble you run into, you can get to be a hero like **Bill**—provided you look okay when you come home. But what-

ever trouble you come home with, you can't get any sympathy for it. And if you come back with your bones busted or a hole in your head, the chances are they'll just decide you're not fit for public display.

"The Service *has* to come first.

"All right, that's all," he said very faintly. But they heard him. They were pushing through the door already, one hundred and forty-seven of them in new fitted greys with stripes on their sleeves, every last one of them fighting to be first on line at the table.

"And I hope none of you turn out to be heroes," Alex Halder said sadly.

But none of them heard, not even the ones who were still in the room. He'd been carried away when he started to talk about Bill; he'd used up extra words and extra minutes. His voice wasn't working any more.

Alex Halder was one of the lucky ones. There were four of them on the Venus expedition, and all they lost was the use of their natural built-in talking equipment. But a problem like that was nothing to the Space Service medics. Brigadier-General Halder would manage all right; all he needed was a new charge for his batteries.