

# SPACE SCIENCE FICTION

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ORSON



# MOON-BLIND

BY ERIK VAN LHIEN

Either Soames or all of Earth was crazy. He knew he'd landed on the Moon in 1948. They knew no ship had left Earth and that he had died in World War II. And all the proof was on their side.

Illustrated by ORRAN

After four years, the clouds looked good. From up there, they had been blurs on the white and green ball that hung in the sky to mock him. Now, as they seemed to rush up towards him they spelled home—or death. There were worse things than death.

For the moment, the sight of the Earth swelling below him brought a lump in Bill Soames' throat. He'd hated it, cursed it, and screamed at it during the long Lunar days. He'd loathed the amug fools on it who had deserted him after calling him a hero and had left him to die

or get back by himself. But now the call of his kind washed all that out. A thousand miles below were people, life, and home. It didn't matter what they'd done to him, or why they had done it; he'd lived through it somehow, and now he was almost there.

He shivered in the wash of emotions. His gaunt, almost skeletal body jerked under the flood of adrenalin, and his scarred, claw-like hands gripped the edge of the control board savagely. The starved hollows in his cheeks deepened, and the wisps of white hair on his head were beaded with drops of cold perspiration.

Behind him, the uneven roar of the rocket had been making the little ship quiver with subsonic vibrations. These halted suddenly, began again, and then were gone. The last of his bitterly acquired fuel was exhausted.

Weightlessness caught his tortured body, sending anguished cramps through him and threatening to end his hard-held hold on consciousness. He mastered himself after a moment of retching, and reached for the tiny crank that would spin the gyroscopes. He turned it madly, to the limit of his strength. Imperceptibly, the view of Earth in

the plate that showed the ship's rear began to twist.

It took time to turn the ship that way, and he had little time left. The atmosphere was rushing up. He'd been luckier than he had expected; the rocket had killed most of his speed. But now he had to strike that two-hundred mile layer of air head foremost. The crank seemed to fight against him, but the ship was swinging. Here in space, Newton's third law worked perfectly. For every action, an equal and opposite reaction. A few thousand turns of the little wheel geared to the crank would turn the ship half a revolution in the other direction.

Four years before, when he had turned over to brake down to the Moon, it had been easy. He'd been strong, then, full of energy. He'd been the conquering hero. Months of conditioning and training had gone by, and he had walked up the ramp to the ship entrance with perfect health and complete confidence. He'd grinned at the generals and the reporters gathered to see the first manned flight to the Moon, and he'd known he would come back.

Well, he was coming back—through no help from them. The ship had been a gem, and the landing on the Moon had been almost routine. He'd sent back

his radar message, located the single unmanned supply ship they'd sent ahead, and settled down to getting ready for the other ones still to arrive.

They never came, and there was no message back from Earth!

When he landed, July 5, 1948, he had had enough food to last him nearly four months, counting the supplies in the unmanned ship. He hadn't worried too much, at first. Air was renewed by the pumpkin vines and tomatoes that filled one chamber of the ship, and the water he used was recovered automatically. Something had held up his supply ships, but they'd be along shortly with the water that served as fuel for the big atomic-powered rocket; as for the message, probably something was wrong with his receiver.

In August, he began worrying, after he'd caught bits of some conversation on his microwave set and found it worked perfectly. There was still no message directed at him. He tried to reason it out, and decided that they must have somehow decided he was dead. He began cutting down on his eating, and planting more tomatoes and pumpkins frantically. There would be another ship up, to try it again, but it was going to take

longer, probably. He'd have to survive until it landed, and then prove he wasn't dead by reaching it. He couldn't understand why they didn't hear his calls, since the radar seemed to transmit okay. But he could find out all about it when the next ship landed.

By the beginning of 1949, he was sick of pumpkins and tomatoes, and beginning to wonder. That was when he started looking up at Earth and cursing it. It wasn't until almost 1950, though, that he gave up all hope, along with attempts to understand.

It nearly broke him. But Bill Soames had been picked carefully, and he wasn't the type to give up. It took him over two years to build a solar oven out of the supply ship parts and begin baking water out of the gypsum he finally located. Then only a trickle seemed to come from his crude pipes. He hoarded it painfully, beginning to fill his fuel tanks.

He had to stop to find minerals to enrich the hydroponic tanks. He wasted days and weeks lying sick and near death from exposure, exhaustion, and near-starvation. He developed deficiency troubles, and he refused to give in to them. He never thought of failure. They'd abandoned him, and he cursed Earth

with every weakened breath. But he was going back.

Finally, he stripped the ship of every drop of water he could spare, leaving himself almost none. He had already moved most of the plants into a crude hot-house outside. Now he drained their tanks, and decided that with that, added to what he had got from the gypsum, he had fuel enough.

In the spells of sickness, he had lost track of time. But he was fairly sure it was near the end of April, 1962, when he finally blasted off and headed back for Earth.

The ship was pointing ahead towards the cloud-filled atmosphere now. Soames dropped his hand from the crank, shaking with exhaustion, and waited for the first sign of air outside. He was falling fast, but that couldn't be helped.

He let the weakness grip him for a moment longer, while cold sweat stood out on his forehead, and time seemed to hang still in his frozen mind. Then he reached for the controls that would guide the ship down on its stubby wings.

The controls resisted faintly when he touched them. The refrigerator inside the ship was whining, and he knew the hull must be hot already. This was

familiar ground—he'd piloted experimental rocket planes enough to have the feel of supersonic flight. It was a matter of keeping the ship up in the superthin air until it began to lose speed, then letting it glide down to a landing.

He should hit somewhere inside the Atlantic Coast, from his rough calculations. He might do damage there—but the chances were against it. Anyhow, they hadn't thought of him for four long years—they'd have to take their chances now.

The ship was getting hot inside. He fought against the controls, trying to hold it just inside the atmosphere until its speed came down enough. The clouds below were lost from his sight. He stole a quick glance at the thin section of hull he could see. It wasn't glowing yet.

He fought mechanically, with his mind buried somewhere down in its deepest sections, trying not to think. The ship groaned, and the stubby wings seemed about to fall off. Somewhere to the rear, something gave with the sound of an express rifle. The ship grew hotter. The thin, worn coveralls were wet with his sweat, and the wristwatch seemed to burn his skin.

Then the speed was dropping, and he was going into his glide.

He came down through the clouds, finally, just as he left the darkness behind. His eyes darted to the little port that would show the surface below. He should be nearing the coast.

Soames' gasp was a hoarse choke. The line that separated sea and sky was directly below him! [The] overshoot. He drew back on the control, trying to steepen the glide, but it was already too late. The ship went plunging down through the air, heading out to sea. He cursed to himself, but there was nothing to be done, in the time left. He began a slow turn, but he knew it would fail.

He was miles from land when the first sound of the water slapping against the ship reached his ears. She was coming down smoothly enough. Spray leaped up, and the ship lurched as the braking force of the sea hit it while it still was making better than 200 miles per hour. But he managed to avoid being thrown forward. Then she was skipping a bit, with the sound of rifle-like popping coming from the rear again. A moment later, the ship was coasting smoothly over the fairly calm sea.

He was down—home—back to Earth—and alive!

And brother, would the brass hats have some explaining to do now!

Wetness touched his bare feet. He jerked his eyes down, to see an inch of water on the "floor" of the ship—and it was rising as he looked. The ship had sprung a leak during the battle through the air and the pounding of the landing. Now it would sink almost at once.

Bill threw the straps of the seat off and was on his feet, jumping for the airlock as he saw it. With a leak, this thing would sink like a piece of lead. He grabbed down his good-luck charm as he went. The sheaf of hundred dollar bills—eight in all—had been left from the going-away present his mother had sent him, and he'd forgotten them until half way out from Earth. Somehow, they had always been a symbol that he'd get back—but now, if he lived, they'd be of more immediate use. He reached for the packet of exposed film, but the water was coming up too fast; it touched the control-board and the films slid along the wet surface and vanished. There was no time to grope for them.

Soames struggled through the water as the little lock finally opened. He pulled himself out. The land was lost from view, and the sea was all around him.

But there was no time to wait. He jumped into the water and began paddling frantically. It

was icy cold, and it shocked his body, driving the breath from his lungs. In his emaciated condition, keeping afloat was going to be hard work. Eight miles . . .

It never really occurred to him that he couldn't make it. He was heading toward the land when the suction of the ship's sinking caught him, and he didn't look back. He settled down to the best compromise between endurance and speed he could make and drove on. He was back on Earth, and they couldn't defeat him now.

Fifteen minutes later, the boat appeared. It was a Coast Guard cutter, he saw. It circled, and a line was tossed to him. On the rail, he could see the figures of men. All the loneliness of the long years on the Moon hit at him, then. He pulled on the line, dragging forward; it wasn't the thought of rescue, but the sound of human voices that drove him now.

"I'm Bill Soames," he began shouting, over and over.

They pulled him up, crying something to him—something about luck that had let them see his plane going down on their radar screen. But he hardly heard the words.

"I'm Soames," he repeated. "Major William Soames. God-damn it, can't you understand? That was a rocket ship—the

*Lunatic*. I've come back from the Moon. Four years—four damned long years—but I've come back."

"Shock," one of the men said. "Okay, Bill, take it easy. You'll be all right."

He shrugged off their hands. "I am all right. Damn it, don't you even remember me? I took off for the Moon in 1948—July 1, 1948! Now I'm back!"

He saw consternation on their faces and pity mixed with it. He shook his head. After all the publicity there had been, it hardly seemed that a man on Earth could help knowing about the trip. Yet maybe these men hadn't heard. Maybe they didn't care about rockets and the Moon.

"Didn't get a rocket out of the atmosphere until February, 1949," the Coast Guardsman said slowly. "That was when they shot the Wac Corporal up, using the V-2 to carry her. Got up about 250 miles, as I remember it. Brother, this is 1952—not 1976. You've been seeing too much fantasy on the television. Come on, we'll fix up a bunk."

A fine welcome for a hero, Bill thought. He'd expected his name to be enough to stop them cold. Now something was stopping him . . . tired . . . everything getting black . . . so tired, so dead. . . He felt himself falling, but was too far gone into unconsciousness to care.



They held him two weeks in the hospital. The semi-starvation and the exhaustion had added to the shock of the cold swim. But he hadn't been delirious, as they claimed. He'd recovered the first night. Maybe he had raved a little—surely among all those doctors and nurses, one should have known about the take-off of the Moon ship, or should have known his name. They'd pretended to, after a while; but he knew they had been lying. They really believed all that guff about Man still being unready for Space!

He finished his lunch and reached for the dessert. Then he shuddered violently, and shoved it away. Pumpkin pie! His stomach seemed to turn over at the sight of it, and he pushed it as far from him as he could. Tomatoes and pumpkins were no longer fit to eat, as far as he was concerned.

He reached for the book on the table again. *Rockets, Missiles, and Space Travel*, by Willy Ley. He'd read the original version of it in 1947. This edition bore the date of 1951. It had a good deal of new material and all the charm and sound thinking he expected of Ley. But it didn't fit with his memory of a big, black-haired man who had boomed out farewells to him while he climbed the ramp for

the take-off. Ley wasn't just an expert—he was an enthusiast, and nobody wanted space-travel more than he did.

Yet the book contained no mention of Bill's flight. It didn't list the method of turning water to monatomic hydrogen and ozone for rocket fuel, discovered in 1946; there was nothing on the first compact atomic motor to provide power, built late in 1947. Both had been highly secret at the time, but they had been announced publicly before his flight.

He'd expected to find proof of his facts in the book. Instead, he found only confusion for his mind. They couldn't have covered up that thoroughly. Yet the date of February 24, 1949 was listed for man's first step beyond the atmosphere—the same 250 mile flight the Coast Guardsman had mentioned.

Soames sighed, and dropped the book as the nurse came for his tray, the eternal mechanical smile on her lips. "Dr. Willoughby will see you soon," she told him.

He'd tried to talk to her, but he knew it was useless. These people really didn't know about his trip. It should have been on the front pages of every newspaper in the world, and there shouldn't be a literate person alive who didn't know of it. In-

stead, they had treated his facts as the ravings of a man suffering from shock.

What could account for something big enough to suppress such news—not only to suppress it, but to kill what had already gone before?

Even his former commanders had failed him. He'd been refused the right to send a telegram, but the Coast Guardsman who had visited him had promised to mail his letters to the men of Operation Space. General Bartley should have come tearing in, threatening to rip the place apart unless he was released at once. But the letters had vanished, if they had ever been mailed, without an answer.

Dr. Willoughby came in quietly. "Well, young man, how do you feel today? Still think you're chasing girls on the moon, heh?"

Soames wanted to push the smiling face back into the man's adenoids, but he managed to grin. In hospitals, you had to grin. He'd learned already that patients had to humor doctors and nurses and agree to anything they suggested.

"No more of that," he answered. "I still can't remember, but I'm sane enough. When do I get out of here?"

The doctor seemed to consider it weightily. "Well, now, I guess

we can let you go. You did some fearful things to that body of yours—just what I can't tell; but you're well enough now. A little amnesia, of course, but that will wear off. Such cases happen from shock. You sure you want to leave?"

"I certainly am. I can get a job. . . ."

The doctor wasn't listening. He nodded without waiting to hear the answer. "The nurse will bring you clothes, and then lead you to my office. I'll have some papers there. And there's a Colonel Hadley to see you."

He was gone before Soames' shout could get from his throat. So the Army had his letters! The hospital must have been holding him until Hadley could get there. They'd been stalling, but not for the reason he had expected. Now his troubles would soon be over.

He signed for the clothes they had bought at his order and the property they held for him. The clothes were picked without taste, as if some store had packaged them at random. He looked more human when he finished shaving. His face was still gaunt and tense, and his hair was thin and white, as it had grown in after a long bout of illness. But he felt almost himself again as he followed the girl to the doctor's office.

Willoughby introduced him and withdrew discreetly. Colonel Hadley was a plump, youngish man, with the rocky face and false pleasantness that could carry a man to his position quickly, but would never let him advance much beyond it. He obviously had no imagination, and couldn't trust it in others.

He got down to business at once. "These your letters? Umm. Well, I've been talking to Dr. Willoughby. Understand you were pretty sick. So we won't discuss this nonsense about the moon. In fact, under the circumstances, perhaps we can forget. . ."

"Did you ever hear of Major William Soames?" Bill asked. "Before this, I mean?"

"Certainly. That's what made Bartley send me up here, instead of routine procedure. Naturally. Soames was on Bartley's flight over Berlin when the Nazis got him. Brave man. Saved Bartley's life. Got a posthumous Congressional Medal, you know. A hero."

"He—he died?"

"Right. May 23, 1943. Sad business. Had a brother—Lieutenant Roger Soames—on the same flight. Both got it."

Bill Soames let his legs lower him carefully into a chair, studying the Colonel's face. It wasn't the face of a man who could lie.

It was the face of a man reporting hard fact that he knew to be true. Yet it was the sheerest nonsense. Bill had started on that flight—but his plane had developed motor trouble half an hour out from England and he'd put back. He'd always felt he was somehow to blame for Roger's death. He tried to say something, but no words would come.

"Very sad," Hadley added. "Never knew Major Soames, but I got on well with his brother. Saw the whole business myself. Felt sick for a whole day afterwards—~~lost~~ Roger, then the Major." He cleared his throat. "You can guess what we thought when we heard you were impersonating him. Naturally, we had to investigate. Crank letters come often enough, but not like that. Deuce of it was that Bartley swore it was like the Major's handwriting. And you know, you do look a little like the pictures I saw. . . . Know what happens to anyone who impersonates an Army officer, young man? Bad. But—well, Dr. Willoughby tells me it was just shock. What about that?"

"I'm—I'm Bill Soames," Soames answered, while his head went around in crazy circles. He tried to pretend it was a gag to himself, but it wasn't. He fell back on the lying that had finally convinced the staff of his sanity.

"I—I guess I must have been kind of a hero worshipper; when I got the check, I thought I was the other William Soames—and went all the way on the hero stuff. If I caused you any trouble. . . ."

"You did. You certainly did. Two days up here, checking your fingerprints, doing everything. Prints don't match, of course. Took me a whole day in Washington just getting Soames' prints, too, you know. Funny, you'd think they'd be careful with the records of a hero; almost lost! Heh! Well, anyhow, I guess we can close the case. No sign of fraud. Hope you get your full memory back."

He stood up to go, and Bill got to his feet. He took the other's perfunctory handshake and watched him leave. He saw Willoughby come in, beaming. There must have been some exchange of words, though he couldn't remember them. Then the papers were signed, and he was going out of the hospital. The sun was shining brightly as he came down the steps, mechanically counting out the four hundred odd dollars he had left.

It had to be hypnotism. Hadley had thought he was telling the truth. But they had hypnotic drugs now. They might use them, if they wanted to pretend a man who'd flown to the Moon had

been dead years before. If General Bartley had meant to send Soames a warning that the subject was top secret, and to go slow . . . if he'd been unable to come himself. . . .

It still didn't make sense. It hadn't made sense when they had abandoned him on the Moon, and it made less now. What national danger could possibly be averted by lying about this—particularly when they were still talking about the fact that the first nation to get a base on the Moon would rule Earth?

There was only one answer. He had to see Bartley in person. He was due in Washington, it seemed—overdue by some four years.

Seeing Bartley proved to be more trouble than he'd thought. The Pentagon wasn't open to casual visitors—not the part he wanted. He couldn't use his own name, either. But even Generals are human beings. They eat, and they have to have places to sleep. Soames gave up direct efforts, and waited patiently.

He was lucky. He spotted Bartley getting into a car alone on the third day, just as he was driving up to park his own rented car. He could tell the way the gears ground that the man was bound for the old familiar place. Bartley was short and

plump, a little Santa Claus of a man with fierce black hair and a totally unconvincing bristle of a mustache. When he was angry, he looked more jovial than ever—which was probably why he had his favorite bar well out in Bethesda, away from the usual run of other officers.

Soames kept a casual eye on the car, but he was sure of himself when Bartley headed out Wisconsin Avenue. He drove into the little parking lot, just as Bartley disappeared into the pleasant bar across the way. Then he took his time. The General would need a beer by himself before he could be approached. When Bill finally went in, he found the place almost unchanged. He ordered his own beer and moved back to the juke-box. Bartley was sitting beside it. He set his beer on the table, and began feeding nickels into the machine. None of the new tunes meant anything to him, but luck was still with him. There was one of the old platters there—"A Long Long Trail." He let it start, and saw Bartley glance up.

Soames had worn a hat to cover his hair, but he had carefully turned his face to the light. Now he saw Bartley's eyes slip to his own, and hesitate. He smiled faintly, drew an answering doubtful smile, and slipped

into the booth. The other man offered no objections.

"Beer here is worth coming a long ways for," Bill said casually. "Worth a quarter million miles."

The General smiled doubtfully, then frowned as if the joke escaped him. It was a good act, Bill had to admit. "Good beer," he finally admitted. "Like the stuff the Germans had for their officers—almost."

"Honigsbrau," Bill agreed. "A couple cases of it. They'd just started to crack it and drink when we strafed 'em. It was warm by the time we reached the shack, but it was worth all the trouble we had."

The General nodded. "Good. Dark and heavy stuff. I can still taste it. Used to . . ."

His mouth fell open, making him look more than ever like a comic cherub. "Good God! Man, you couldn't be! You . . . Bill Soames!"

Bill nodded, and the fears washed away. "In the flesh, Tom. I had a helluva time getting back—I'm still mad about being left there. But I knew you'd be glad to see me!"

"Glad! You sunovagun! We knew you were dead. You couldn't have lived in that smash-up. Bill!" He was pumping Bill's hands, his own arm

jerking spasmodically. "Man, wait'll they hear about this!"

"They don't seem to want to hear about it," Bill told him.

"They will, boy, they will! We didn't go through the war together for nothing!"

"Or Operation Space? Remember how we used to dream about that, when I found you were human enough to read those stories. Rockets—space. . . . We didn't think then. . . ."

Bartley sighed. "Yeah. And when the V-2's fell into our hands, I did a lot more dreaming, Bill. It was tough, not getting assigned to White Sands. I really wanted to work on the rockets. But I guess they knew what they were doing when they turned me down."

"They turned you down?" Hell, Tom Bartley had been the one to get him in, after his first application was turned down. Bartley had been the first officer picked for the job.

"They did. I guess I forgot about your being somewhere in Germany— Say, when did you get back? And how? Come on, give."

Bill sat back, staring at him. It was his turn to sit with his mouth open. He glanced up to see if anyone else could have come near to cut off the honesty he'd found here before. They were alone. The bartender was

at the other end, and all the booths were deserted.

"Okay," he said. "I guess you had some reason for the game, but not between us, Tom. Leaving me up on the Moon without answering my signals was a dirty trick. It took me four years to get back, and then I cracked your precious ship into the ocean, where the salt water can eat its magnesium to bits. But it's time to stop the pussy-footing. You know damned well I never cracked up on the Moon. I've left my signature up there. Now I'm back. And I want some explanations."

Bartley's face had gone white, and now was turning sery red. His hand around the beer glass tightened until the glass snapped. Blood seeped out on his fingers, but he didn't look at it. Finally he took a deep breath.

"For a minute you fooled me," he began in a deadly quiet voice. "For a minute. I was fool enough to think Bill Soames had managed to live somehow, when I knew he'd burned up in the plane. But I should have remembered those damned letters. You fooled Hindley—he thought you were sick, not crazy. But you can't fool me. You damned rotten . . ."

The fist that landed in Bill's

face hardly traveled six inches, but it was backed by sheathes of muscles that only looked like fat. Bill's head snapped back against the rear of the booth, while hot pain lanced through him. He slid down, barely holding onto his aching consciousness. He heard Bartley get up and dash to the phone. He heard the crisp orders to come for him.

For a second, he wanted to lie there and let them get him. There was nothing left. The others could be fooled or try to fool him—but Tom Bartley wouldn't do that. That blow had been based on real feelings. Bartley had believed he'd never worked at White Sands. And generals weren't hypnotized, even for security.

Then the stubbornness that had carried him through four years of desertion on the Moon and brought him back alive came to the surface. He shook the blackness away from his head, sending up lancing pains, and got to his feet. The beer bottle was under his hand. He lifted it, and threw it, four feet behind Bartley. As the man turned toward it, his legs drove him forward. He was out of the bar, and across the street. He threw a bill at the parking attendant, and gunned his rented car to life. Then he began twisting crazily through side streets. Washington

wouldn't be healthy for him after this.

He had no time to think, but his mind had already been made up. There was one place and only one where he could go. And he'd better get started there fast.

The key that had been with his wallet—the stuff he'd forgotten to leave behind when he took off—still fitted the lock. He opened the door of the quiet apartment when no one answered his knock. The furniture was mostly the same, and there were pictures of himself and Roger on the piano. He called, but there was no answer. Then he moved back toward the windows that opened on Central Park South.

It was hard to believe, after the war, the tests, and the Moon, that he'd grown up here, in the quiet luxury of the money his father had left them. But he found his old room still as it had been the last day before he left. He closed the door on it quickly; it brought back too much that he'd forgotten.

He found a chair near the door and settled down to wait. The rest of the world might deceive him. Even Tom Bartley might lie—he'd left Bill on the Moon, and he probably had enough guilt feelings from that to account for anything. But Bill knew that his mother would-

n't lie to the craziest stranger. Surely he'd find the truth here. She had never understood his craving for adventure beyond Earth, and she wouldn't know too much about advances in the world. But she'd accept him. All their lies about his having died over Berlin wouldn't mean anything to her, after they'd spent so many week-ends here when the war was over. She'd remember the ring on his finger that had been her idea, to help him cut his way out of a Nazi prison if he were captured; she'd thought that diamonds were somehow safe and that they could cut steel bars as well as glass. She'd remember the thousand dollars that had been meant to give him a grand party with the men, since he insisted on being fool enough to try to reach the Moon. She'd been tearful then, but she'd seen something of his drive, and had seemed proud of him, at the end.

He sat there, soaking up peace and quiet from the room around him. The sunlight disappeared from the windows at the far end, and there was a bit of gloom that finally ended when the street-lights went on. They left the room thick with shadows, and rich with the fancies he'd woven around them when he was only a kid, playing with Roger.

He made no effort to turn on the light, but waited quietly.

Then he heard the elevator stop, and her feet on the floor of the hall. He was still sitting as the key turned in the lock, and a beam of light struck him. She closed the door quietly, looking older and frailer than he remembered, but still upright and carrying herself with the ordered pride of good breeding.

She snapped on the lights and turned to face him. For a moment, surprise struck her. Then she mastered herself. "Good evening, young man. How did you get in here?" Her voice was firm, but calm enough, as if this were a minor upset in some fond routine.

He stood up, moving toward the light. She watched him, then smiled doubtfully. "If you're a burglar, you're quite welcome to what money I have here. Only don't make any commotion, please. I can't stand vulgarity." She was trying to make a joke of it, he knew. Then her voice caught. "But you . . . you look like . . ."

"Hi, Mom," he said, nodding.

She stood there, suddenly old and shrunken, though her back was straighter than ever. Her perfectly applied make-up was ghastly on her white face. She backed against the door slowly.



while her hand went to her throat.

"You look like Bill—like Bill—like Bill. Just like Bill." It was a soft moan, unconscious. "Bill was a nice boy. He died in the war—the same time Roger died. It wasn't fair. He died—they told me he died horribly. And they sent me his papers, what was left—and half a letter he'd begun—and they gave him a medal. He was such a nice boy. I saved them all . . . I . . ."

She began to fall, still stiffly. Bill caught her in his arms, and eased her onto a couch. He'd never seen her faint before. He knew she hadn't fainted when she'd heard that Roger had been killed. He stood helpless. Finally he lowered her head and raised her feet, waiting for her to come to. His eyes moved to the drawer where she'd stared, the drawer under the two smaller pictures from their childhood.

He found them all there—the death notice, with its accusing date, half of a letter he actually had written—but completely—his papers, and some knick-knacks that seemed to have been in a fire!

He pawed through them quickly, and then went back to the couch. He knew what he had to do, and began rummaging into his few belongings. He was rub-

bing her forehead when she came to. She looked at him, but he was holding his face as taut as he could, to build up the lines that the hard years had put on it. She shook her head slowly.

"You're—not . . ."

"No, ma'am. I guess I forgot, calling you 'Mom' the way Bill always did. He was my buddy, you know. Used to laugh at how we looked alike. A great guy. We were in prison over there together. That's why I came back, to bring you this—all he had left when he died. But he didn't die in the plane, ma'am. They shot him trying to escape, and it was quick and painless. That's why I came here, why I had his key . . ."

He'd rehearsed it in his mind, but hadn't known whether it would work. Now he saw life come back into her. She drew herself up, and straightened her hair. Her voice was calm again. "Silly of me, of course. I—I'm glad you came. I never did believe Bill died in the plane. He was so much at home in any kind of machinery. Thank you for bringing my picture back to me. And now, can't I get you a drink, before I apologize for being so weak?"

He shook his head. "I'll have to rush, ma'am. I waited too long. Bill wanted you to have the picture—it was what he valued

most. But—well, I have got to rush."

She let him go. She was not the sort to hold any nervous man against his will. She saw him to the door, and her fingers rested briefly on his arm. The smile she gave him would have been reward enough, if his story had been true.

Then he went down the stairs and out into the night on this world which had erased him and which refused to admit he had ever left it.

There had been another picture in his wallet, but he'd been a fool to look at it. He'd looked at it often enough that first year up there, wondering whether she'd wait for him, but somehow the memory of Sherry had grown weak with time. He'd been a bigger fool to spend the night making phone calls to locate her.

He knew it now as he sat on the too-lavish couch. He'd heard a faint gasp when she first saw him, but she'd never thought he was Bill Soames, and he hadn't tried to tell her he was. He'd used the same line on her as he'd finally used on his mother, with a change in the picture. It sat on the table near her now, its water-stained younger image of her face staring up.

She slid a trifle sideways, ex-

posing one knee from under her negligee, and reached across him for her drink. She'd always had a nice bosom, and she'd always known it. She sipped the drink and put it back. "Poor Bill," she said throatily. "He was such a kid—but I guess I was too, then. I suppose he really expected me to wait for him?"

"I don't know—maybe not," Bill answered her. "Things were pretty tough in the prison."

"I meant to wait for him. But it was so long. I guess it wasn't very nice, marrying Bob Stanton just six months after Bill went overseas, but you know how it is. And then we heard Bill had died, but I was just having Junior . . ."

"Junior?" Bill jerked at that, his eyes flickering over the slightly too-decorated room. She couldn't have had a child in 1943—she had waited for him; she'd promised to wait again when he left for the rocket in 1947. And imagination wouldn't supply a child . . .

She laughed and pointed to a picture of a boy of about eight. "He's away at school now, of course. You know how important it is give them the best education." She sighed, and reached for the drink. "But it's terribly hard on a boy's mother, having him away. The place gets so lonely, now that Bob's away in

Washington so much of the time. Sometimes I think I'll go mad . . ."

She wasn't even subtle about it. For a moment, it worked. Bill had spent too long away from women. Then the ease of her passion was too much for him; it told him too strongly what a fool he'd been ever to believe her accounts of the missing dates that had always come between them. He pushed her away, pulled her negligee shut firmly, and added insult to the injury by making no attempt to turn his eyes away.

She was just switching from surprise to querulous hurt as his feet carried him across the living room to the foyer. Her voice was rising to a shriek of outraged anger as he closed the door behind him. This time the night air felt good. There were worse things than being marooned on the Moon. He might have come back and married her!

Then he frowned. It wasn't night, anymore, after all. The street-lights were still on, but day was breaking in the east.

He grimaced. Well, he'd gotten things out of the night. He'd found that his mother knew he was dead, and had been dead years before he took off for the Moon; he'd found the papers that had the authentic appear-

ance of age to prove it. He'd found that the girl who'd been single and willing to wait for him in 1947 had not only been married, but had had a child in 1943 or 1944. That would take some explaining! He couldn't swear to some things about her, but he knew damned well there had been no marriage or child in the past from which he came.

It hit him, then—the stories he'd read once had been filled with the idea that time is a matter of multiple choice, and that the future is a fan-shaped thing, with many branches. If he'd gone to the Moon from one such probability world and somehow gotten switched over to another on the return—a world where he had never left . . .

He shrugged. It was fine for speculation, but there was no way to account for such a switch. Anyhow, that stuff was based on the need for a good story-gimmick, and not on facts. There was a lot more sense in a universe where there was an absolute relation between cause and effect. This was the same world he'd left—however much deceit was involved, and whatever the tricks they used to deny him. It might be a crazy world, but not one of those improbable ones.

He considered that. A crazy world—or one person who was crazy. Then he grinned savagely.

He didn't feel crazy. It was no solution, anyhow. If he were crazy, he wouldn't know it. The same stubbornness that had let him survive for four years on the Moon made him reject the idea at once. There had been times when the whole world was wrong and only one man was right; as far as he was concerned, this was another such case.

He came up to a newsstand and stood staring at the magazines. There were more dealing in the fantastic than he remembered, but they looked familiar. Space-ships and weird landscapes vied with half-nude girls and bug-eyed monsters. He started to buy one, and then gave up the idea; after being up there, he didn't want someone else's guess. As for alien life-forms . . .

He thought about it for a second, but little more. Maybe some alien civilization that wanted to keep man Earthbound might suppress knowledge and even change memories; but it didn't fit the case. It would have been easier for such a race to eliminate him, or to prevent the ship ever having taken off. There was no answer there.

He bought a newspaper and went into a coffee shop for breakfast. He still enjoyed eating real food. The sight of two

eggs, over light, surrounded by crisp bacon, together with toast and coffee was better than any scene off Earth. He took his plate to a little table and began glancing through the paper as he ate. Most of the news meant nothing to him—the war beginning in Asia now so soon after the last war was something he preferred to ignore. Most of the rest of the paper was filled with things that he couldn't understand or didn't care to read. Even the comics were dull, without the continuity of regular reading.

Then he stopped, and looked back at a picture. Professor Arnold Rosenblum had delivered a lecture on the need for a space station outside Earth's atmosphere. When interviewed later at the Weldon Arms Hotel, he had stated . . .

Rosenblum had been the man who had invented the method of using water as the propellant! He'd been part of Operation Space from the beginning. If Bill could see him . . .

He knew the result. Rosenblum wouldn't remember. Yet the man was a scientist, and science isn't something that deals with belief. It sticks to facts. Bill turned it over, considering. The man might not believe a word he would have to say—yet he couldn't argue against provable facts. And to a real scientist,

there were facts that could be proved!

The phone booth was in the back, and there was no trouble in getting his message put through to the scientist. Apparently men of science still didn't have to be suspicious of callers, as did movie stars. The voice at the other end was sleepy, but not hostile. "Yes?"

"Dr. Rosenblum? I'm James Cross, a former student—class of '44. I was wondering whether I could see you—about the space stations? I—" He halted his story about being a reporter, considering what he knew of the man. Then he hesitated deliberately. "I—I don't have any reason to bother you, but I missed your lecture, and I couldn't get much out of the newspaper articles. For breakfast, perhaps?"

"Cross?" Rosenblum seemed to turn it over and decide names didn't matter. "Well, why not? I don't wonder you couldn't understand the newspaper account. Ten minutes—wait, where are you?"

"Ten minutes will be fine," Bill told him. "And thanks."

"Pleasure. Always glad to find someone still curious. Usually they forget after college." The phone clicked down, covering the last of a yawn. Bill went outside quickly to flag a cab.



It took fifteen minutes, but he managed to beat the professor to the lobby. Rosenblum was tall and thin, with a face like that of Lincoln, and eyes that managed to be both sharp and friendly, even with traces of sleep in them. He made no comment at not recognizing Bill.

Soames had given up expecting recognition. He ordered breakfast again, and grinned at Rosenblum's order—the scientist obviously believed in enjoying life. Then he plunged into it.

"I've been thinking that problem of fuels over, Dr. Rosenblum. You mentioned flourine and beryllium as a theoretical ideal. What about ozone and monatomic hydrogen? Wouldn't they have a higher exhaust velocity? Maybe enough to avoid the need for a step rocket?"

"Very fine," Rosenblum admitted with a grin, around a thick slice of ham. "Excellent—if you'll tell me how to get them and store them."

"Don't. Make them out of water. Like this." Bill pulled out a pad and began scribbling on it, mixing it with comments as he gave all that he could remember of what Rosenblum had originally discovered. He was watching for signs of suspicion, but there were none. The professor showed interest, but no indication that this was some

highly secret discovery of his own.

He studied it. "You'd need power for this, of course, Mr. Cross. But I suppose the work being done on submarine atomic motors might provide that, for a large ship. Still . . ."

Bill relaxed at the interest on the other's face. Facts—science had to deal with facts. And no casual interviewer could know enough about both fuels and atomics to reveal such information—Rosenblum would have to believe him. "I've been thinking about it. If we use a heavy-water moderated pile, but design it . . ."

He plunged into that. It was hard work, trying to remember it all, but he was sure he'd covered most of the points. Rosenblum sat back, his breakfast forgotten, nodding. Bill looked up with a final nod of his own at the scrawls on the paper. "Well?"

"Interesting. Unfortunately, it won't work. I tried to do exactly that with water for a fuel back in 1946—and it failed. The theory looks good—but it takes too much power. I had some students working on it, too, but we had to abandon the idea. As for your atomic motor . . ." He shook his head sadly. "Well, that's out of my field, but some of the

material they've just released covers such an idea. I understand it isn't controllable."

"But—"

Rosenblum shook his head and began attacking his breakfast again. "Oh, I think you've done a lot of clear thinking, and I'm not calling you a fool, young man. I only wish I had a few more students like you. But you have to remember that there are hundreds of men working on these things today, and they've had these ideas, too. It's a beautiful piece of logic—but unfortunately, logic isn't everything; it won't work."

"It did work!" Bill told him grimly. "It worked when you tried it in 1946! Security be damned! I know it. I was the guy who rode the rocket using it to the Moon and back! I tell you, I know!"

A change crept over Rosenblum's face. He studied Bill for a moment, then shook his head, making clucking sounds.

"Another one, eh? Last week it was my colleague, Dr. Dickson, who had invented a variation of this, late in 1949. Now I invented it in 1947. And of course, the man who told him about it had been to the Moon personally, too. You don't fit the description, or I might think you were the same man. Mr. Cross, in spite of what the papers say,

college professors are neither credulous idiots nor crazy."

He picked up his check, and put down change for the tip. "I have no intention of reporting you to the establishment. But I think you'd be wise to leave, at once! Good day."

Rosenblum walked toward the cashier, leaving Bill to stare down at the working diagrams that had taken him to the Moon, but had been proven not to work. Sure, science dealt in facts! It had been a beautiful theory.

The library had a complete file of the *New York Times* back through 1947. Bill had half expected to find missing issues, but they were all there. He rifled back to June, thumbing through. The advance feelers put out by the Army were there—meaningless by themselves, of course, but leading up to what was to come. He came to July, and tensed.

There were no missing headlines—but there was nothing on the flight of a rocket to the Moon. He combed July thoroughly. There was no mention of him. He went back to July 2nd, when the news should have been broken. On the front page, one of the men who had covered the take-off had a by-line story; it dealt with ordinary news, though, and would have required that the man be in New York the

day before. Bill turned to the science columns—and again, a name that had been among those covering the take-off hit his eye. But the story dealt with something totally unrelated to the flight, and again would have had to be written by a man nowhere near the take-off spot!

It took him four hours to complete his search, and netted him only one item. That stopped him when he came to it. It was in the same month; this time it was a more sensational paper, and the account was buried under a miscellaneous collection of scandals. *Ham Claims Contact With Man In Moon!* It seemed that a radio amateur had picked up a signal from someone who claimed to be marooned on the Moon, asking for supply ships. It must have been his signal!

He took it to be photostated, amazed at his violent reaction to even this bit of evidence. His hands were trembling as he held it up and pointed out the piece. But the man who came to help him only glanced at it with amusement.

"Fortean, eh? Well, I get a kick out of such things, too. But you'll find a lot of things like this printed in the summer. That's why reporters call it the silly season, I guess." He read through it, grinning again. "Mm-hm. They ran almost the

same story in 1950—I remember it, because my father was visiting us . . . You know, I had a man here a couple weeks ago who told me he sent the message. Never cracked a grin . . . Hey, mister, don't you want your stat?"

Bill went down the street slowly. He'd have to get a room, of course. And a job. His money wouldn't last forever—even if he hooked the diamond ring and his watch. Time for lunch. Hell, he wasn't hungry. He glanced at a television store; noticing that the screens looked immense, though the prices were lower than he'd thought they would ever be. But men could make progress in amusement, even if their leading scientists insisted they'd failed at work that might have sent man to the planets, given time.

He bought a paper and skimmed it. He found the first of the "silly season" accounts on Page 7, though it wasn't summer yet. It dealt with the flying saucers, of course, since they were still the current fad. He turned on. Maybe it was a lean day, and news was scarce. Three pages further he found a brief mention of a 97-year-old woman who could recite the Bible in Hebrew, though she'd never spoken a word of it in her life.



Telepathy, she claimed; thought communication with a scholar who had lived two thousand years before.

He threw the paper in the disposal can, and stared up at the sign moving across the Times Building.

They'd covered up perfectly. There wasn't any real evidence left. A ship had disappeared on the Moon, but nobody had missed it. A man who waited for help was tagged as dead years before, and even his own mother could remember how he had died. Science had proved that he couldn't make the trip with the equipment he had. The papers were complete—and spurious.

It was the stuff of madness. Yet he knew inside himself he wasn't mad. Somehow, reality had been altered for everyone here. A thousand men who had seen the ship take-off now probably all knew that they had been doing something else. Papers had been changed.

Men had invented the steam-boat long before Fulton. Their attempts had been buried, though some of them had worked. Leif Ericson had crossed the Atlantic and discovered America before Columbus—and the account had been lost, until the evidence was found. Had the facts been altered then? Had

Ericson come home to find that everyone knew he had been in Iceland all along? And then, when the evidence was finally found, centuries later after America had been discovered again, had things been doctored up the opposite way, so that people thought the evidence had been there all along?

What about the hot-air engine? It was known before the gasoline motor, and it had been just as good. Yet it had lain unused for decades, until after gasoline was powering every car on the road; then it had been re-discovered, and someone had scratched his head and wondered how it had been overlooked. Prontosil was developed during World War I, but the sulfa part wasn't used to kill germs until twenty years later. Penicillin had appeared and proved its germ killing power before 1930, but no one got around to using it until World War II.

Why was everything so significant overlooked? And would some man, a hundred years from now, stand on the Moon and stare down at his crude solar still, to recognize he'd been there first? Would they mysteriously find the accounts in old papers then, and wonder why they hadn't known about it before?

Or would this ultimate step of

mankind be buried for good, while the race went on warring its way to destruction? A base on the Moon could spell enforced peace, if they got it in time.

Bill walked on, without purpose. He was finished. There was no use fighting now. Maybe he really wasn't Bill Soames. Maybe he'd been James Cross all along—maybe a nephew of old Robert Cross, who'd inherited a small fortune when the old man died. Gone on a hunting trip by airplane, gotten lost, half starved before he could find the plane, then landed in the ocean. Three children, one a girl with amazing dark red hair and the deepest blue eyes that could smile at a man. A vision of a pleasant apartment swam into his mind. He'd better call home . . .

He cut it off savagely. He was Major William Soames, back to a crazy Earth after four years on the Moon. Neither his own mind nor any outside force was going to change his knowledge of that.

For a second, he was tempted to call the phone number that had been in his mind. Maybe there was such a number under the name of James Cross, and such a family. Maybe they had a convenient slot for him to fit into, just as they'd destroyed his own slot. But he couldn't fool

with it. Giving in might be just what they wanted—whoever or whatever they were.

He shook his head. It was too late to change his mind. The doubtful number had disappeared, along with the fantasies that went with it. He was no longer uncertain about himself, at least. Yet he knew that he had to find some kind of proof, if he didn't want the fantasy thoughts to come back.

Where could he go for specific information? How could he locate the news from all the papers, dealing with a specific subject, instead of having to plow through edition after edition, requiring a life-time of effort?

Then he had it. There were clipping bureaus that did that for one. They could cull out everything except articles dealing with rockets, space-flight, and so on. He had no idea of the cost, but he could find out. He studied the signs along the street, and began pulling off the ring. He'd never get what it was worth—but even at a discount, five carats should be worth a considerable sum. Then he could investigate the clipping bureaus.

Again, luck changed capriciously. The ring had brought more than he'd expected—at least half of what it was worth --and he found the bureaus list-

ed in the classified section of the phone book. Most of them obviously specialized in names, rather than subjects. Some agreed that they could get him such clippings. And one stated rather doubtfully that they had some. But the seventeenth one seemed pleasantly surprised when he broached the idea.

"How about photostats? They do you as well?"

Bill could see no reason to object to that. The voice at the end of the line became even more pleasant. "Fine. We've been making up a file on that subject. Another day, and you'd have been too late. But we can run off a copy for you tonight, and have it ready at nine tomorrow. It'll save you a lot of expense, too. We've had to get extra copies of some of the papers from back years, and that runs into money, not counting the overtime work. This way, that's all paid for, and we can be pretty reasonable."

"Nine o'clock tomorrow," Bill agreed. "I suppose you'll want some money in advance?"

The voice brightened again. They made arrangements for a messenger to pick up the money in the lobby of a near-by hotel. Bill registered at the desk while waiting, using the same fictitious name he had given the agency. He was tired in a way that he'd never been during all the gruel-

ing effort to get back to Earth. It would be easy to relax and pretend the world was right—it was hard to keep fighting it. But something in his head refused to surrender. Somehow, he was going to collect the recognition they owed him, if it took him his whole remaining life time to get it!

He should have felt better after a night's sleep, but bitterness was apparently getting to be a habit again. Nine o'clock found him outside the clipping bureau. He saw tired, lackluster women entering and punching their cards into the time clock; they began gathering up newspapers and fling towards desks, where the routine job of marking, cutting, and pasting the items began. They'd probably throw away a thousand hints of new ideas and inventions that would be buried for years or decades, and never know what they had missed—if the news was even there. They'd go on collecting the names of men who liked to see those names in print. And at night they'd go home too tired and dreary to look up at the sky. Would it really make any difference if they knew that somewhere up there parts of a supply rocket had been turned into a solar still, so that a starved, crazy fool could come

back here to bring them news nobody would believe?

"Mr. Foster?" a voice behind him said for the third time, and he suddenly remembered that he'd chosen that as his name the day before. "Ah, good morning. Everything's ready—and quite a file, too. I was looking it over last night. Strange material here—enough for a book, at least. People hear messages from the Moon, people see big ships land, people announce they've built a rocket to go to Mars. A Coast Guard yeoman even reported picking a man out of the sea who claimed he'd just come from the Moon. Something about living up there four years without air or water. People! Are you a writer?"

"Sort of." Bill evaded his question. He picked up the file with a shudder at realizing he had made the news, even if it hadn't been quite the way he'd intended.

The clerk was busy making a flourish of computing the sales tax, then counting the money. Bill picked up the bulky envelope and started to leave, just as a big, blond man entered. The clerk nodded toward him. "The man who ordered this originally," he started, as if to introduce them.

But Bill didn't wait. He'd seen a quiet little bar on the corner, and he headed for it. It was

nearly empty, and he found a booth off by himself, where he could go through the photostats.

Most of it was what he had expected, and it had been padded out with flying saucer stories, of course. He began weeding out the junk, keeping everything that seemed to have the faintest use. There was an account on July 1 of a kid who'd run away—it made no sense until a July 8 follow-up pasted to it showed that the kid had been found, safe enough, but swearing he'd gone to see the big rocket go up. Bill checked the date again. It was 1948, and the location had been about right. The kid could have run off to see him leave, if word had leaked. But it was no proof by itself.

"Hi," a soft voice said. The big blond man was sliding down across from him. "Hear you got a bargain. Not that I care—nothing exclusive. Interested in space flight?"

Bill frowned, and then decided he could use a little chance to talk socially. "You might say so," he admitted. "Mostly about the Moon. I got interested in Professor Rosenblum's lecture. It gets to be a bit expensive as a hobby, though."

"Pays off, if you know how. That's my angle. I make process shots for the movies, now that

they've gone in for this stuff. Do it cheaper and better than they can. I figured some of this might give me some ideas." The man's voice was friendly, but he seemed vaguely disappointed, as if he had expected something else from Bill.

For his own part, Bill was wondering about leaving. It had seemed to offer some possibility for interest when he'd realized that the other was sinking money into finding all he could about such things. But Bill wasn't interested in process shots. The films that had been lost on his ship were the real thing—and they showed it. No trick of photography could give the same effect.

He started to gather up the mess of photostats, but the other had signaled for more beer. "I'm Brad Wollen."

"Bill Soames," he answered automatically, and then cursed himself as the other's eyebrows lifted. "A cousin of the fellow who got the Medal of Honor, if that's what you were thinking."

Wollen nodded. "Funny. And I'm the cousin of the Army test pilot who cracked up in that new supersonic job back in '49. Quite a coincidence, isn't it? Hey, wait a minute . . . didn't I see something about a guy who claimed he was your cousin in one of these . . ."

He began searching through the clippings busily. Bill swore hotly to himself. He'd thought his name had escaped publication—they usually left out names, in such cases. He shoved back his beer, and began framing an excuse to leave.

Then he stopped. Lying on the table was an eight-by-ten glossy picture. And it was no process shot. The lighting couldn't be duplicated. That was a shot of the Moon—the real Moon!

His hands fumbled with it as he tried to pick it up. No tricks could do that! And the rocket ship in the background was too detailed for any of the stuff they were doing now. It was different from his—but it might have been another model of the same ship, just as this picture was like the crater he'd known, though not quite the same.

"It's real!" he said slowly. "The way the light bounces, the way those rocks look eroded, yet aren't rounded off! Damn it, you can't fake that."

He realized he was being a fool as he said it, but the words piled out before he could stop them. It wasn't the stupidity that brought him to a halt, though. It was the sudden blanched shock on the other man's face. Wollen had heaved himself half out of his seat and

was staring at him as if he'd just come out of hell, complete with brimstone.

"Mister, how do you know how those rocks look?" The man's voice was a hoarse whisper.

Bill sighed wearily. "Because I was the fool that took off in the first ship—in 1948, for the record. The blind fool who wouldn't die, but managed to live up there four years until I could come back here to be shown what a real fool is. Now go ahead and laugh. Tell me you never heard of a rocket then, and that Bill Soames died over Berlin. Tell me I'm a liar now!"

"I never heard of a '48 rocket, and I did hear you died." Wollen was sinking back slowly. "But it fits—Oh, God, how well it fits. Then—you did crash in the sea!"

He didn't wait for Bill's tensed, unbelieving nod. "I was luckier. I came down in a swamp, not sixty miles from here. Make way for the hero, home from the Moon! Did they abandon you without supplies, too? Yeah. It isn't fun, baking out water, if you did it the way I did. And it isn't fun when you find you're dead—were dead before you took off, and your wife swears your kids belong to the man she married the same day she married you, and . . . But I had the films.

When the guys I showed them to told me they were nice process work, I caught on fast. I came closer to starving here than up there, at first. Now—well, I'm doing all right, that way. They like my process work! Almost looks real, they tell me. The blind fools! They won't even look at the ship—they call it clever of me to make such a big mock-up for my shots!"

His voice quieted suddenly. "I've been back three months. Sometimes I begin to think I never took off from Earth at all. I get funny ideas. But all the same, I took off in 1950, and I was up there seventeen months, on food enough for less than six."

They sat staring at each other, while Bill cursed himself. It had been thrown at him—the man who had approached Rosenblum's colleague, Dr. Dickson, must have been Wollen. Rosenblum had discovered the fuel method in 1946; Dickson had found it in 1949 . . .

His eyes dropped to the clip-plings, but Wollen was gathering them up. "It's a nice ship, still," he said. "It needs raising upright, and a little work. But you'll like it."

It was a nice ship—a better model in some ways than Bill's had been. But they'd discussed