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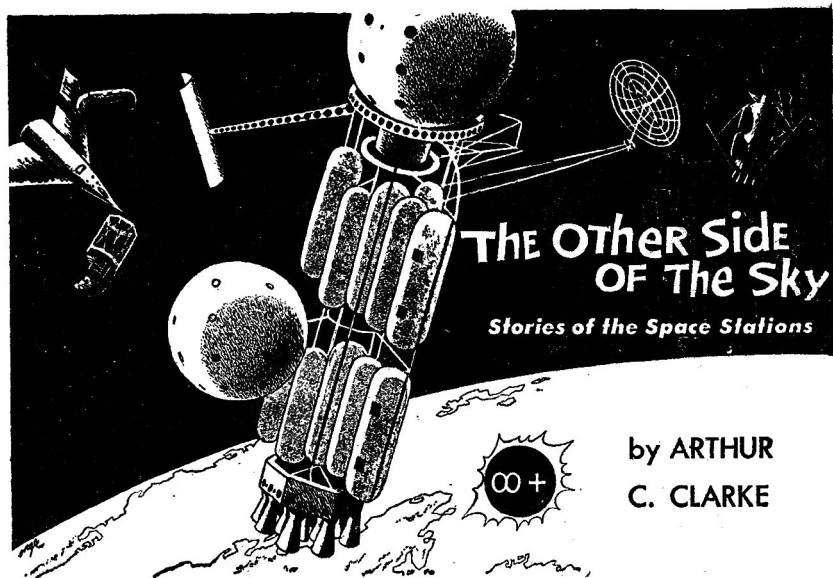
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an Infinity-plus feature

The space stations will, we have often heard, serve as stepping stones on our journey into space. But it takes a writer of the caliber of Arthur C. Clarke to show exactly how it will happen. In the last three stories of a complete set of six, presented on the following pages, he shows us both the human and the scientific aspects of this great adventure.





The Other Side Of The Sky: 5



PASSER BY

Love will find a way,

even if it must cross

900 miles of space

IT'S ONLY FAIR to warn you, right at the start, that this is a story with no ending. But it has a definite beginning, for it

was while we were both students at Astrotech that I met Julie. She was in her final year of Solar Physics while I was graduating,

and during our last year at college we saw a good deal of each other. I've still got the woolen tam-o'shanter she knitted so that I wouldn't bump my head against my space-helmet. (No, I never had the nerve to wear it.)

Unfortunately, when I was assigned to Satellite Two, Julie went to the Solar Observatory—at the same distance from Earth, but a couple of degrees eastwards along the orbit. So there we were, sitting twenty-two thousand miles above the middle of Africa—but with nine hundred miles of empty, hostile space between us.

At first we were both so busy that the pang of separation was somewhat lessened. But when the novelty of life in space had worn off, our thoughts began to bridge the gulf that divided us. And not only our thoughts, for I'd made friends with the communications people, and we used to have little chats over the interstation TV circuit. In some ways it made matters worse seeing each other face to face, and never knowing just how many other people were looking in at the same time. There's not much privacy in a space station. . . .

Sometimes I'd focus one of our telescopes on the distant, brilliant star of the Observatory. In the crystal clarity of space, I could use enormous magnifica-

tions, and could see every detail of our neighbors' equipment—the solar telescopes, the pressurized spheres of the living quarters that housed the staff, the slim pencils of visiting ferry rockets that had climbed up from Earth. Very often there would be spacesuited figures moving among the maze of apparatus, and I would strain my eyes in a hopeless attempt at identification. It's hard enough to recognize anyone in a spacesuit when you're only a few feet apart—but that didn't stop me from trying.

We'd resigned ourselves to waiting, with what patience we could muster, until our Earth leave was due in six months' time, when we had an unexpected stroke of luck. Less than half our tour of duty had passed when the head of the Transport Section suddenly announced that he was going outside with a butterfly net to catch meteors. He didn't become violent, but had to be shipped hastily back to Earth. I took over his job on a temporary basis and now had—in theory at least—the freedom of space.

THERE WERE TEN of the little low-powered rocket scooters under my proud command, as well as four of the larger inter-station shuttles used to ferry stores and personnel from orbit to orbit.

I couldn't hope to borrow one of *those*, but after several weeks of careful organizing I was able to carry out the plan I'd conceived some two micro-seconds after being told I was now head of Transport.

There's no need to tell how I juggled duty lists, cooked logs and fuel registers, and persuaded my colleagues to cover up for me. All that matters is that, about once a week, I would climb into my personal space-suit, strap myself to the spidery framework of a Mark III scooter, and drift away from the station at minimum power. When I was well clear, I'd go over to full throttle and the tiny rocket motor would hustle me across the nine-hundred-mile gap to the Observatory.

The trip took about thirty minutes, and the navigational requirements were elementary. I could see where I was going and where I'd come from, yet I don't mind admitting that I often felt—well, a trifle lonely—around the mid-point of the journey. There was no other solid matter within almost five hundred miles—and it looked an awfully long way down to Earth. It was a great help, at such moments, to turn the suit radio to the general service band, and to listen to all the back-chat between ships and stations.

At mid-flight I'd have to spin

the scooter around and start braking, and ten minutes later the Observatory would be close enough for its details to be visible to the unaided eye. Very shortly after that I'd drift up to a small, plastic pressure bubble that was in the process of being fitted out as a spectroscopic laboratory—and there would be Julie, waiting on the other side of the airlock. . . .

I won't pretend that we confined our discussions to the latest results in astrophysics, or the progress of the satellite construction schedule. Few things, indeed, were further from our thoughts; and the journey home always seemed to flash by at a quite astonishing speed.

IT WAS around mid-orbit on one of those homeward trips that the radar started to flash on my little control panel. There was something large at extreme range, and it was coming in fast. A meteor, I told myself—maybe even a small asteroid. Anything giving such a signal should be visible to the eye: I read off the bearings, and searched the star fields in the indicated direction. The thought of a collision never even crossed my mind; space is so inconceivably vast that I was thousands of times safer than a man crossing a busy street on Earth.

There it was—a bright and

steadily-growing star near the foot of Orion. It already outshone Rigel, and seconds later it was not merely a star, but had begun to show a visible disc. Now it was moving as fast as I could turn my head; it grew to a tiny, misshaped moon, then dwindled and shrank with that same silent, inexorable speed.

I suppose I had a clear view of it for perhaps half a second, and that half second has haunted me all my life. The—object—had already vanished by the time I thought of checking the radar again, so I had no way of gauging how close it came, and hence how large it really was. It could have been a small object a hundred feet away—or a very large one, ten miles off. There is no sense of perspective in space, and unless you know what you are looking at, you cannot judge its distance.

Of course, it *could* have been a very large and oddly-shaped meteor; I can never be sure that my eyes, straining to grasp the details of so swiftly-moving an object, were not hopelessly deceived. I may have imagined that I saw that broken, crumpled prow, and the cluster of dark ports like the sightless sockets of a skull. Of one thing only I was certain, even in that brief and fragmentary vision. If it *was* a ship, it was none of ours. Its shape was utterly

alien, and it was very, very old.

It may be that the greatest discovery of all time slipped from my grasp, as I struggled with my thoughts midway between the two space stations. But I had no measurements of speed or direction; whatever it was that I had glimpsed was now lost beyond recapture in the wastes of the Solar System.

What should I have done? No one would ever have believed me, for I would have had no proof. Had I made a report, there would have been endless trouble. I should have become the laughing stock of the Space Service, would have been reprimanded for misuse of equipment—and would certainly not have been able to see Julie again. And to me, at that age, nothing else was as important. If you've been in love yourself, you'll understand; if not, then no explanation is any use.

So I said nothing. To some other man (how many centuries hence?) will go the fame for proving that we were not the first-born of the children of the sun. Whatever it may be that is circling out there on its eternal orbit can wait, as it has waited ages already.

Yet I sometimes wonder. Would I have made a report, after all—had I known that Julie was going to marry someone else?

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