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publicity stunt

by JAN MELTON

By the end of the second week he'd spent or agreed to spend a cool one billion dollars—and he'd just started!

MR. THEODORE PENNINGTON was a large man, to say the least, with a set of chins which would have been the envy of any circus fat lady. At the moment, the chins were quivering frantically, turning bright pink one after another to match the rest of his florid face.

"It's preposterous," Mr. Pennington stormed. "Completely, thoroughly, utterly, fantastically,..." he paused for breath.

Gerald H. Lawton, Attorney at Law, reached for one of Mr. Pennington's imported cigars. "Ridiculously," he suggested.

"...Ridiculously preposterous!" Mr. Pennington finished. "And stay out of my cigars!"

The attorney struck a match. "The fact remains, T. J., that your advertisement was a bona-fide offer, it left no doubt as to the means of securing the proffered trip, and it contains no loopholes. Therefore, Abigail Winthrop, having presented you with one thousand empty tubes of Cleenall Toothpaste, is entitled to one trip to Mars cour-

Pennington never anticipated that anyone would have the patience to get together one thousand empty tubes of Cleenall Toothpaste (ugh!) but someone did. Jan Melton, an investigator who holds a bachelor's degree in criminology from Fresno State College, tells what happened.

tesy of Cleenall Toothpaste, Incorporated. For Free."

Mr. Pennington started all over again. "This is the 20th century, not Buck Rogers' 25th. The nearest thing to space flight in this country is a little basketball floating around 1700 miles up taking pictures. How in the devil am I supposed to furnish a trip to Mars?"

Lawton blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling. "That's your problem. You ran the ad."

Mr. Pennington snorted, "That ad was a gag! How was I supposed to know some little old lady would have nothing better to do than sit around and collect toothpaste tubes!" He slammed a ham-like fist on the desk. "You go talk to this Mrs. Winthrop and get her to forget this whole deal."

"It's Miss Winthrop, and she is a very stubborn woman. She had already told me that if she doesn't get the trip, she'll sue for false advertising."

"She'll never make it stick!"

"Yes, she will. Your ad was very specific. I can see it now..."

"Never mind! I'm sick enough of that thing without listening to you quote it from memory." He placed a pudgy finger on the intercom and pushed. "Miss Norwood. Call a meeting of the Board. Immediately." He glowered

at the lawyer. "You'd better find us a way out of this thing, and fast!"

Lawton unwound from his chair and stood up. "Okay, I'll try, but I'd bet my last dime you'll have to furnish the trip to Mars or its cash equivalent."

Mr. Pennington brightened like a three hundred watt bulb. "That's it! Cash equivalent."

Lawton stopped at the door. "It would be cheaper to build a space ship."

"Huh?"

"Sure. If a person wanted to go to Europe, it would cost two or three thousand dollars to book passage, eat, and so forth. So that's your cash equivalent. But if he wanted to go to Mars, he'd have to build a ship, test it, and everything. That would cost three or four billion dollars, and that's your cash equivalent. Whatever it costs to get there."

Mr. Pennington's chins began to quiver again. Lawton opened the door but was stopped by the industrialist's voice. "Just a minute. I changed my mind. I want you to sit in on this meeting."

The lawyer shrugged and went back to his chair.

The Board of Directors arrived in 45 minutes. In 55 minutes they were all talking at once, until Mr. Pennington banged the gavel. "That's the situation, gentlemen," he

concluded. "And according to Mr. Lawton, we're legally bound to furnish this Miss Winthrop with a trip to Mars."

The executive vice-president rose to his feet. "Assuming we are stuck for the trip, and I'm willing to take Mr. Lawton's word for that, what's to prevent us from persuading her to take a substitute trip? Around the world, or something."

Lawton answered the question. "She's been around the world a couple times already. The problem is simple. Miss Winthrop is a lonely old maid who had outlived all her friends and hates all her relatives. She's been bored to tears for the last twenty years, so now she's jumping at the chance to do something different. Like going to Mars."

"So she picks on us," Mr. Pennington grumbled.

A junior executive had no idea. "Wouldn't it be cheaper to go ahead and let her sue? And then appeal the decision if we lost? She would have to spend a lot of money to keep the suit alive."

"Miss Winthrop is worth a couple hundred thousand," Lawton replied, "and she has a nephew who is a very able attorney and who would be just as happy to get rid of her as we would."

The meeting dragged on. Question after question, idea after idea, came up, to be dis-

pelled either by Lawton and the law or by Mr. Pennington and impracticality. Finally the third vice-president in charge of marketing stood up.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I think it is fairly clear that Miss Abigail Winthrop is entitled to a trip to Mars. I have, therefore, a proposition, and I hereby move its adoption. I move we build a spaceship and take her to Mars. Give her the trip."

The uproar was tremendous, but Mr. Pennington rose above it.

"Mister Colstead!" the industrialist fumed. "Just how do you propose to finance this project or are you secretly the Count of Monte Cristo or someone that money means nothing to you?"

Mr. Colstead waited until the noise had subsided somewhat, then explained. "There are three possible courses of action in this matter, as I see it. One, let Miss Winthrop sue. For reasons already explained, that is out of the question. Two, give her the cash equivalent of the trip. That is also out of the question since it involves at least two billion dollars in cash, which we don't have."

"Which is precisely why we can't build a spaceship," Mr. Pennington interrupted. "We don't have the money!"

"I was coming to that," Mr. Colstead explained patiently. "True, we don't have the

money to build a ship. But to build it will take time, and with time there is a way to get the money." He paused for dramatic effect. "Sales. And you get sales by advertising. And the fact that you are giving a little old lady her heart's desire is human interest, therefore news, therefore good, and especially free, advertising. We merely have to take it from there." Mr. Colstead smiled benignly around the table and sat down.

"Maybe that's it," somebody else put in. "We could come out with all kinds of gimmicks to boost sales, like space-ship-shaped toothpaste tubes for the kiddies."

"Right," another voice chimed. "And think of the saving in income tax with the profit and loss statement."

Nonetheless, the idea caught, and suggestions flew for twenty minutes before Mr. Pennington banged down the gavel. "All right," he decided, "we'll do it. We'll give Miss Abigail Winthrop her free trip to Mars. And by heaven we'll make it the biggest publicity stunt in the history of the toothpaste industry!"

When Mr. Pennington made up his mind to do something, he did things in a big way. First he called in the representatives of the wire services and broke the story.

When the trade and women's magazines contacted him, he gave them fill ins on the story and at the same time purchased two and three page ads in the next issues extolling the virtues of that greatest of all toothpastes, Cleen-all. Then he contacted experts in every conceivable field connected with space flight, signed them to two year contracts, and put them to work. He purchased a huge expanse of Nevada desert and set up all the myriad details needed by a space ship testing and launching center.

By the end of the second week, Mr. Pennington had spent or committed himself to spend a cool one billion dollars. And, he complained to Lawton, he had just barely started.

Lawton nodded and filched an imported cigar, to Mr. Pennington's vociferous annoyance. "How long will it take to get this thing rolling," the lawyer asked.

"About three months, why?"

"Well," Lawton blew out the match and sat down, "Miss Winthrop is somewhat peeved about the delay. She seems to feel that you should have been ready to ship her off."

Mr. Pennington grew a shade darker. "My aching back!" he exploded. "It'll take a good two years to build this ship!"

Lawton shrugged. "She's talking suit again."

Mr. Pennington's chins began to quiver. "Stall her off. I can't afford to sink money into a lawsuit now. Stall her."

"Well, there's one answer. I've heard the Peoria Science Fiction Society would like to have her give a talk. Something about her reactions on being the first woman to go into space. Now if you were to start her off on a speaking tour of the country, footing the bills, of course, then..."

"And why the devil should I foot the bills?"

"To show your good faith, mainly. Besides, maybe she'll throw in a plug for Cleenall once in a while."

Mr. Pennington turned red, but he finally agreed, and Miss Winthrop was off for Peoria. The project, and the money, rolled on, and out.

At first there was some objection from the government, but since the project wasn't a government undertaking, and there were no government funds involved, and Cleenall, Inc. was not a company with government contracts, it was decided that there were no legal grounds for stepping in with security regulations and the usual red tape.

The project chief, a nuclear physicist late of the University of California, decided the best procedure would be to build a ship which was capable of traveling to the moon on her maiden voyage, as a

test flight, then being refitted and adapted for the Mars run. At first he had wanted to build a full-sized space station on the grounds that it would be easier to construct the ship itself in space, but after several discussions with Mr. Pennington he was convinced that it would be cheaper to go ahead and build the ship on Earth.

The sales force, spurred partly by the promise of higher commissions but more so by the threat of lost jobs, began opening territories hitherto untouched, branching out into Canada and South America and touching on the overseas market. In the first four months, sales rose 183% and net profits rose 57%, thanks to salary cuts imposed on the corporation officers and the abolition of stock dividends scheduled to be paid to the Board of Directors. And in that four months, the corporation sustained a net loss of seventeen million dollars cash outlay.

"Do you realize," Mr. Pennington informed the Board at the next meeting, "that this means a net loss of fifty-one million dollars over a twelve month period? And the corporation is already committed to pay out almost eight hundred fifty million dollars by the end of this fiscal year. That means a total net loss of nine hundred million dollars in eight months. Needless to say, gentlemen, we don't have

that much money. And we need twice as much." He glanced around the table. "Any suggestion?"

Mr. Colstead stood up. "Why not cash in on some of this free newspaper publicity a little more directly," he began. "How about selling guided tours of the project. So much a ticket?"

A junior executive interrupted. "I've got a better idea. How about giving the tours away for, say, fifteen empty Cleenall tubes. He did some scribbling on his note pad. "Fifteen tubes at 59c retail, means a net profit of two dollars and nine cents per person. That's more than you could sell tours for outright."

"That's right," someone else agreed. "The old idea of something for nothing."

Mr. Colstead nodded "Let's see, at a return of one percent, that's a hundred..." his voice trailed off as he stared at the ceiling. "Should increase our net profit by a million dollars in two months, not counting the tourist trade and the overseas market."

Mr. Pennington thought it over. "Okay, set it up. And Colstead, think up some more cheap giveaway gimmicks. Make empty Cleenall tubes worth their weight in Uranium."

Back in the office, Mr. Pennington sat down with a grunt. "How is dear Miss Abi-

gail these days?" he wanted to know.

"Let's see..." Lawton consulted a calendar. "She's in Atlantic City a honorary judge of the Miss America contest."

"Huh! I can imagine who she'd pick as a winner."

"And Thursday she's due in Pasadena to give a talk on the conveniences of knitting in free flight."

"What does she know about free flight?"

"Oh, she's had several scintillating talks with the staff about the trip, and she has a very vivid imagination."

"Plus a gift for gab." Mr. Pennington leaned forward and planted his elbows on the desk. "On your way downtown," he said pointedly, "check with my broker and see how he's doing on the stock market. And stay out of my cigars!"

Lawton obligingly returned the cigar to the humidior, artfully palming another, and left.

Time and money marched on together. Working twenty-four hours a day, the *Cleenall I* was made ready for the moon run in seven more months. According to the project chief, the trip, being a final test, would save half a billion dollars *if* nothing serious went wrong. This being an event of historical importance, the press was naturally invited, and two thousand grandstand seats were sold

for twenty dollars or twenty-five toothpaste tubes. The tubes were cheaper.

Miss Winthrop was on hand, too. Originally she had wanted to go along, but Mr. Pennington finally convinced her that it would be too dangerous, being a test flight, and besides, she was only entitled to the Mars trip. So she was more or less content to sit in the box of honor and watch the ship take off to the cheers of the spectators. The next day she left for San Francisco to speak to the Bay Counties Culinary Society on the problems of baking upsidedown cake in space; the problem being, according to Lawton, how do you tell, in weightless, directionless space, which side is up and which is down.

The trip around the moon was uneventful, and therefore highly successful. Data was gathered by the crew and radioed back to Earth, where it was disseminated "in the public interest" to boost sales. Photographs of the other side of the moon were published, to the disappointment of a great many romanticists, who found that the other side looked very much like the side everyone was used to.

Meanwhile the sales division made marketing history by opening up Darkest Africa as a selling area, receiving instead of cash goods worth five times as much as the present retail value of the toothpaste. The fact that the

people were more interested in Cleenal as a tasty delicacy than as a tooth cleaning agent was carefully not publicized.

Still, at the end of eighteen months, Cleenall, Inc., showed a net loss of one billion dollars, and Mr. Pennington himself was down to his last half million. And there was still, according to the project chief, a hundred million dollars worth of work to be done in refitting the *Cleenall I* for her trip to Mars.

"Where," Mr. Pennington complained, "am I supposed to get that kind of money? My credit's strained to the limit, I've pushed Cleenall prices as high as I can, and I'm broke myself."

Lawton filched a cigar. "Sell your stock in the corporation."

"What?"

"Sure. It ought to be worth something."

Mr. Pennington snorted.

"Besides, you've already picked up fifteen million in mineral rights for the Uganda territory, and sales are up forty-seven percent. That's another ten million. There's a fourth of your cost there."

"Sure, but sales are already at the saturation point." He snorted. "Where's Miss Winthrop?"

"Seattle, raising funds for a home for orphaned cats."

"What!"

"She would appreciate it if

you would make a contribution."

Mr. Pennington rose slowly to his feet, but before he could voice his opinion, Lawton had taken warning from his barometric chins and left.

"Stay out of my cigars!" Mr. Pennington shouted helplessly at the closed door.

Finally the great day arrived. Mr. Pennington had raised the necessary finances without resorting to sale of the corporation stock and the *Cleenall I* stood proud and sleek outside his Nevada field office, ready for the first trip in history to the mystery planet Mars. Inside the field office flashbulbs popped continuously in the direction of Mr. Pennington's smiling chins. Reporters milled about taking statements from everyone; Mr Pennington, the project chief, assorted technicians and executives, and the janitor who had absent-mindedly wandered in to empty the waste basket.

The governor of Nevada was there along with several state legislators. The Senator from Wyoming was there as personal representative of the President. Various military officials had arrived, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, outwardly congratulatory but inwardly fuming because the Army hadn't been the first.

"Yes, sir," Mr. Pennington was saying. "I've spent every dime I had or could borrow

on this project, but it will be worth it when I can see the happiness on Miss Winthrop's face. She has been extremely patient in the face of this unavoidable delay. Where is she? Mr. Lawton, my attorney, has gone to Reno to pick her up. They should be back shortly. You know, she..."

At this point attention shifted to the office door. Flashbulbs began popping all over again as Lawton opened the door, walked in, smiled, ...and closed the door behind him. Mr. Pennington's rosy mood began to fade.

"Where's Miss Winthrop?" he demanded.

Lawton ambled over to the window and gazed out at the great silvery shape in the desert.

"Lawton!" Mr. Pennington growled.

"Well," the attorney turned around smiling for a photographer, "I went to her hotel room and knocked on the door. When she saw who it was, she invited me in for a cup of tea, which I couldn't very well refuse since she offered to lace it with a little peach brandy, and a chat."

"So?" By this time Mr. Pennington's chins were most agitated.

"So, she told me about all the wonderful people she's met on her tours around the country and all. In fact, it seems she's even received a few proposals of marriage."

"You're stalling, Lawton!"

The lawyer held up a restraining hand. "Now, now. She told me to be sure and thank you for all the trouble you've gone to, but she's decided Mars is a pretty long way off, after all."

"What?"

Lawton shrugged. "She doesn't want to go." He glanced at the crowd of people, then turned back, concerned. "Are you ill?"

Mr. Pennington didn't say a word. He just kept looking

from Lawton to the window and back, over and over, the chins quivering like the proverbial bowls full of jelly. When it became obvious the big man had nothing to say, Lawton laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Cheer up. It's not that bad. Why, in fifty years or so you can go into the space transport business, and maybe find a whole new market for Cleen-all. Here," he fumbled in his coat pocket, "have a cigar."