

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

Vol. XXXIII, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

October, 1948

Featured Complete Novelet



THE MOON THAT VANISHED

By LEIGH BRACKETT

A fallen satellite of the Planet Venus is the lure which leads three hunted beings to the mysterious island of smiling death! 13

Two Other Complete Novelets

- YESTERDAY'S DOORS..... Arthur J. Burks 65
Back through the ages travels amnesiac Dean Hale!
- MIRACLE TOWN..... William F. Temple 86
When a stranger visits Peterville, molecules go haywire!

Ten Short Stories

- THAT MESS LAST YEAR..... John D. MacDonald 38
- GALACTIC HERITAGE..... Frank Belknap Long 43
- "I LIKE YOU, TOO—"..... Joe Gibson 52
- THE SQUARE PEGS..... Ray Bradbury 101
- THE COSMIC JACKPOT..... George O. Smith 109
- DATE LINE..... Benj. Miller 117
- REVERSE ENGLISH..... John S. Carroll 125
- SOFTIE..... Noel Loomis 133
- NO WINTER, NO SUMMER..... Donald Laverty 140
- REFERENT..... Brett Sterling 148

Features

- THE READER SPEAKS..... The Editor 6
- THE FRYING PAN..... A New Fanzine Review 171
- SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW..... A Department 174

Also See Features on Pages 85, 108, 124, 132, and 147

Cover Painting by Earle Bergey—Illustrating "The Moon that Vanished"

Published every other month by STANDARD MAGAZINES, INC., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Copyright, 1948, by Standard Magazines, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), \$3.00, single copies, 25c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter October 8, 1946, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of March 3, 1879. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

SOFTIE by Noel Loomis



Before Lt. Braniff loomed a gigantic robot, ten feet high and as wide as a barrel

THE galactic patrol cruiser *Parsec* was coasting—as she had been for eight months. At a speed of roughly twelve to fifteen light-minutes an hour, she had been patrolling the Pass—that vast cosmic void between the II Milky Way Supergalaxy and the I Supergalaxy of Andromeda.

The *Parsec* was so immense that a man could die in one end and be buried in space, and those on the other end wouldn't know

it until they read it in their daily *Space Traveler*. She was a 41,261 A.D. model, only four years old, and aside from fuel she was theoretically capable of sustaining herself in space for a thousand years—which is just what young Lt. Jim Braniff was afraid she was going to do.

Lt. Stevens, his roommate, came stamping in from the sixth watch slapping his hands. "Cold outside!" He wiped the fog from

Homesick and in need of a promotion, Lieutenant Jim Braniff concludes that a space officer's lot is not a happy one!

his glasses. "Must be nearly freezing. Hear they had a strike in the Heating Corps. The Old Man better step in and settle that before it gets serious."

Lt. Braniff sighed wearily. "Oh, he'll step in and tell them to go back to work or go without food. Sometimes I think the Old Man hasn't any feelings at all."

Stevens stared at him. Stevens was a handsome, darkhaired, glossy-eyebrowed young man who always seemed to be imbued with the recklessness of space.

"Homesickness eating on you again?" He snorted. "Why don't you go take a walk? There are some very nice girls over in the Kitchens."

"It's too far," Braniff said listlessly.

"You can catch a ride on the truck—if you want to." Stevens tossed his trim space jacket on the bed. "You might as well quit mooning over that wife and kid of yours. It'll be ten years yet before we get back to Earth."

"Do you really think it will be that long?" Lt. Braniff, to tell the truth, was horribly homesick. He was almost so homesick that he didn't care if Stevens knew it.

He got up and paced the floor while Stevens washed his face. Four years from home, and six years to go! They had spent three years and four months getting to the Pass, and they were to patrol it for three years. Suddenly he felt he couldn't stand it.

"I've got to get promoted," he said aloud. "That's the only answer. If I could get to the rank of captain by the time we get back, I could rate a job at home—back on Earth."

STEVENS looked up, his black eyebrows dripping water. "Don't expect me to sit back and wait for you to be made a captain. After all, I can use the money—and the rank."

Braniff knew it. He also knew that Stevens was two years older and three years more experienced—and, if he wanted to face the truth, a lot tougher. Stevens would inevitably get the first chance, unless the admiral should unaccountably soften, and Braniff saw no hope of that.

That very day Admiral Gorthy had given him a dressing-down for failing to report a tube burned out in the detector. It was a spare tube in the alternate circuit of the tenth stage of amplification, but the grizzled old admiral had threatened to keep him a lieutenant the rest of his life.

Why couldn't the admiral be human? Just because *he* didn't have any family back home, he didn't have to be so tough.

"I gave orders for you to inspect those tubes every day. That means every twenty-four hours. And quit mooning. If everybody were to be like you, we'd never get home."

But everybody wasn't as lonesome as Lt. Braniff. His only daughter was now three years old and he hadn't even seen her. His wife—since they'd left the constellation of Laerta, he hadn't even heard from her. It took too much power to send personal messages so far.

"You've got to learn to follow orders and do as you're told."

That was the Old Man, unfeeling, uncaring. The only thing he was interested in was discipline. Lt. Braniff could have been very fond of the Old Man if the Old Man had been human. All the staff officers felt that way. The Old Man was always alone, distant, unmoved by anybody else's troubles.

Yes, Admiral Gorthy undoubtedly would give the first promotion to Lt. Stevens, and there were not many promotions on a single cruise. Spacemen were physically perfect, and they didn't often die. They couldn't resign, they couldn't be transferred. Somehow, the life of a space officer was not as glamorous as Lt. Braniff had thought it would be. It would be financially good, for the pay was double what one could get on Earth, and Lt. Braniff was economical with his money.

The only thing was, the *Parsec* and its hundred thousand passengers was like a detached world, coasting through space without orbit, without sun, without a galaxy, even, without anything but those great beryllium plates that cut everybody inside from the rest of the IV Universe.

Lt. Braniff caught himself in mid-stride. He'd better take a turn in the crisp air. He was getting moody. No, he was already moody. He put on his jacket and stepped outside. His breath made funnels of steam under the lights.

He walked the quarter-mile to the bridge. He turned into the big room that housed all the great complexity of instruments that had to do with the navigation and maneuvering of a great cruiser. This was not the administrative headquarters. That was at the opposite end of the vessel in an alternate control room. This room was only for the im-

mediate problems of moving the ship.

He wandered over to the plate that showed space around the ship. In spite of the fact the plate was positioned on the wall, those black depths were not actually the depths of the Pass. Few men on the *Parsec* had ever seen the Pass itself, and no man there had seen space outside of the *Parsec* since the day they had left Earth four years before.

Lt. Braniff became aware that the junior lieutenant on duty had spoken to him. "I beg your pardon. What did you say?"

"I said we picked up something on the detector band a little while back."

Lt. Braniff opened his eyes. "What?"

"The officer of the day thinks it was a ship."

"Did they ask for clearance?"

"No."

THE control-room was buzzing with talk now. A junior admiral and two captains were watching the detector plate. "It's within a couple of a. u.'s," the admiral said, watching intently the faint yellow spot on the screen.

The young officer with the earphones on his head turned a switch. The sound of a sharp, broken whistle came from somewhere. "It's metal, sir," said the young officer.

"Can you estimate the dimensions?" They all waited breathlessly for the answer. No ship except the *Parsec* was supposed to be in this part of the Pass, and certainly no ship on legal business between the galaxies would fail to identify herself, for the entire IV Universe knew that the *Parsec* was the fastest and most heavily armed space-ship in that part of the Cosmos. Would this be a smuggler, an unannounced battleship, or even a wanderer from some other universe?

The young officer looked up. "Mass around two million tons, sir."

Eyebrows raised. "Sounds like Zhute," said the admiral. "That's what we're looking for. Give a reading to the Pilot Room every ten seconds. I'll have the controls set to follow him. Orderly!" A sergeant hurried up. "Awaken Admiral Gorthy. Request his presence on the bridge."

"Yes, sir."

Braniff hurried back to tell Stevens. He caught him just as Stevens was crawling into bed. The man bounced out of his bunk and started putting on clothes.

"First contact we've made in eight months," he said. "Thanks for telling me,

Mister—but don't think I'll give up my promotion."

Braniff swallowed and tried for a moment to forget about going home. "Who is Zhute?" he asked.

"Zhute's a renegade robot from somewhere. Nobody even knows what galaxy produced him. Nobody knows what he looks like. All we know is that he's done some of the neatest wholesale smuggling that's ever been done in this section. They know he's the one who runs those multiple-armed Stenorians through the Pass from the I Supergalaxy to the Fox-men of Fomelhaut in our galaxy."

"Who are the Fox-men of Fomelhaut?"

Lt. Stevens considered. "Well, I suppose out of some forty billion constellations in the galaxy, you couldn't learn all about all the worlds. These Fox-men are on Fomelhaut Twenty-One, a world about the size of Jupiter. That is, that's their original world. Since then, they've taken over all the worlds in their system, and as that was before the galactic federation, nobody can squawk. But there are trillions of them; they're highly developed mentally, but they're carnivorous and they're deadly and practically devoid of sentiment. If they could ever get enough weapons they could raise the devil with the whole galaxy. Luckily, they haven't developed an opposed thumb."

"How do they make trouble, then?"

Stevens pulled on his boots. "They never got very far until they enslaved the reptilian citizens on Fomelhaut Eleven. Now of course the reptiles are freed, and the foxes are on their own, but we do know that from somewhere they get periodic shipments of these ten-armed fellows from Stenor, over in the I Supergalaxy, in spite of intergalactic regulations and in spite of the fact that by smuggling alone they could start a war between the galaxies."

"Is that why we're out here—to find out how they're getting their slaves?"

"That's our Number One secret order of business, so they say." Stevens stood up and slipped into his jacket, took a last look at himself in the mirror. "Come on, let's move. This may be the only action of ten years in space."

ADMIRAL Gorthy was on deck when they got back, with his grizzled face watching the ship on the plate. It was now fairly plain as a space-ship, but it was shaped

more like a sphere than the *Parsec*.

"The idiot!" growled Admiral Gorthy. "Why doesn't he stop? Doesn't he know we can catch him?"

"He acts," said the junior admiral, "like some sort of alien intelligence. He may not figure as we do. He might think that if you could destroy him, you would have done so as soon as you sighted him."

"Maybe so, but he ought to stop now. He should at least answer. Have you sent out a challenge on the all-wave length, Mr. Hale?"

"Aye, sir," said the radio officer. "I've broadcast on everything we have."

"And no answer?"

"No acknowledgement, sir."

The grizzled old admiral considered. Braniff knew that none of the *Parsec's* many formidable weapons had ever been fired in action.

Gorthy said, "Captain, are we within range for your heat-projectors?"

"Aye, sir," said the ordnance officer.

Gorthy hesitated. "I don't like to blast a strange ship when I have no idea what in the galaxy she's carrying. Wait until you're close enough to fuse a couple of her port jets. Then throw a pressor beam and spin her around. Let's show them we mean business." He frowned. "I don't like it. There's more going on here than you can see."

Five minutes later the captain of ordnance announced, "The ship is revolving, sir. She's in an erratic course about half a million miles off our starboard bow."

Gorthy grunted. "Watch her."

They saw her name then, printed in strange characters that no one could read. "I'd say she's from the Third Universe," said the junior admiral. "But what's she doing away over here?"

"She could be off course," said the captain of ordnance.

"Not a hundred thousand light-years off course," growled Gorthy. "You're the semantics expert, Lt. Braniff. What do you make of her name?"

"I don't know, sir," said Braniff. "The only guess I can make is that those symbols have a mathematical origin, but they're definitely not the symbols of the Triangle-men of Theta Cygni."

Gorthy grunted.

"I think she's getting ready to make for land, sir," said the junior admiral.

"Where—oh, Inscription Rock. Sure. Where is it now?"

"Half an a. u. to the left, sir, minus twenty degrees."

"Okay. Follow him in."

The *Parsec* was passing the strange ship now. The *Parsec's* eighty million tons of mass couldn't be stopped very easily. So Gorthy had the big ship orbited, while he and a staff of some hundred officers and men detached themselves in the *Parsec Junior*, one of the *Parsec's* two contact boats. Lt. Braniff and Lt. Stevens, being officers of the line, were included.

The *Junior* was expelled by a powder charge at the rear, and immediately began blasting to cut down her own velocity. The strange ship seemed badly crippled; it was floundering in an apparently aimless spiral toward the planet called Inscription Rock. They followed it.

"What is Inscription Rock?" asked the junior officer of ordnance.

"Inscription Rock is the graveyard of military ambitions," Gorthy said gruffly. "It's an orphaned planet from some solar system that nobody can remember. It has wandered around in the Pass for a million years, and nobody has ever claimed it because it has nothing on it of value, and it's too vulnerable to be worth defending as a base. As long as it has been in the Pass it has been used by conquering admirals and defeated admirals to stop and repair their ships and gather their fleets. That planet has seen more intergalactic warfare than any other piece of solid matter in the Fourth Universe."

"They're going to land, sir," said the captain of the *Junior*.

GORTHY did not take his eyes from the plate. "Lieutenant Braniff!"

"Yes, sir." Braniff drew up, with his heart pounding.

"Take the Number Four fighter with a crew of four. Arrest the captain and crew of that ship and confiscate ship and cargo in the name of the Galactic Federation."

"Yes, sir."

"You will be backed by Lt. Stevens in Number Two. If there is any resistance whatever, use the omega-ray."

"Yes, sir." Lt. Braniff was thrilled. That was a drastic order; the omega-ray was a disintegrator at short range. It meant that Gorthy was alarmed. Lt. Braniff exulted momentarily. Perhaps if he turned in a good job on this, he would rate a promotion.

"If you can identify the captain as Zhute,

the renegade robot, kill him without mercy. We can't stand on ceremony, when a wrong move might plunge a hundred billion solar systems into conflict. We'll stand by up here—but be careful!"

"Yes, sir."

Five minutes later Braniff and his crew cast off in No. 4 fighter. The lieutenant was taut, alert. This was his chance. The strange ship landed rather heavily. Braniff circled her at ten miles, with his searchlight on her. Presently there was movement. A port opened. A white flag signaled. Lt. Braniff landed his fighter. There wasn't any sun for this world. It was dead black. He got out in his bubble and flexible suit and went toward the ship warily, careful to stay in the light.

He was remembering what Gorthy had said about starting an intergalactic war. That meant the first thing to do was establish the identity of the ship and find out its cargo. He signaled his three men to follow him. They stalked up to the strange ship. A door opened and a ladder rolled down. Lt. Braniff went up.

When he got through the strange round airlock he found himself confronted by a round-bodied, three-legged creature like an octopus with ten arms. He waited for his companions, then he signaled to the creature. It moved off. They followed.

In an odd-shaped room fitted with instruments and control levers that all ended in slender tips to suit the tentacles of the creature that led them, Lt. Braniff found half a dozen more of them, and finally in the light that was almost blackness, he saw a different form—a bigger form.

"Steady!" he said to his men, and turned on his infra-light. Through his filter-lenses he saw a gigantic robot, ten feet high, as wide as a barrel. Its steel plates were dull from long lack of polishing, but its hands swung like steel pistons at the end of its long arms.

"You can turn it off," the robot said abruptly. "You've had a good look at me."

Lt. Braniff felt queer, but he remembered his job. "Are you Zhute?"

"Yes, I'm Zhute. You forced me down against intergalactic law. I was minding my own business." The robot's metallic voice sounded bitter.

"You didn't identify yourself."

The robot's head lifted as if in surprise. "You did not signal."

"We did," said Lt. Braniff. "What ship is this?"

"The *Adraftsha*, from Phad Fourteen."

"That's not in the Two Supergalaxy," Lt. Braniff observed. "Are these members of your crew from that planet?"

"They are."

"Where are you from?"

"From the Deeps." The robot laughed.

Lt. Braniff understood that. The Deeps were at minus ninety degrees ascension, a void something like the Pass where the IV Universe thinned out. Braniff overlooked it.

"What's your cargo?"

"See for yourself."

AT THAT moment Braniff heard in his intership phone: "I have orders to follow you inside in fifteen minutes. This is Lt. Stevens."

"We are okay," said Braniff, "but stay close."

To tell the truth, Lt. Braniff was living ten lives at once. He was in an alien ship, surrounded by alien entities, talking to a giant robot. And besides that, they were practically in the dark. These creatures did not need much light. Lt. Braniff was scared to death.

"Lead the way," he said.

He took one man with him and left two to watch the robot. They followed a three-legged octopus down a low-ceilinged tunnel. It came to a door, worked a combination, apparently, and threw the door open. It was lined with a foot's thickness of lead, and Lt. Braniff shuddered at the strength in those heavy tentacles. He motioned the creature to go inside.

The Phaddian waddled in. A moment later it backed out, bearing a heavy lead box. Lt. Braniff observed the Geiger reading and straightened up. Hard radiation—plenty hard. If they hadn't been wearing shielded suits they couldn't have lived through that. He made some quick tests, then he went back to the robot.

"You will go with us," he said, and held his breath.

The robot shrugged. He turned and led the way out. Lt. Braniff exhaled and breathed deeply.

He felt still better when they were outside under the searchlights. Lt. Stevens was there in his bubble. The great robot stood at its full height. It looked around at the men, at the ships, at the contact boat floating

overhead, with light pouring from its port-holes.

Lt. Braniff knew that this might mean a promotion and it might mean that he would get a chance to stay home after this trip. He was happy and elated, but as he looked at Zhute, he felt sorry for the big robot. It looked a little bewildered. Lt. Braniff thought its shoulders slumped a trifle.

Then suddenly Zhute turned and ran, its great steel legs taking immense strides over the granite rock.

Braniff remembered what Gorthy had said about using the omega-ray, but he couldn't quite bring himself to do that. The robot had looked so forlorn and friendless, and besides, he wasn't offering resistance—though Braniff understood that the admiral would be pleased at any reasonable excuse for the destruction of the robot. But Zhute couldn't get away. They'd track him down in minutes by his metal body. So Braniff stood for instant, watching.

Then Lt. Stevens raised his omega-gun. Braniff saw that, and his temper flared. Why was Stevens so ready to blast a man—or a robot, either—just to grab off a promotion? And why must he shoot a helpless robot in the back?

Braniff wheeled. His right fist, encased in flexible beryllium, came up hard against Lt. Stevens' bubble. He saw Stevens' head snap back, then Stevens turned, with a look of amazement on his face. He stared an instant at Braniff and then he changed hands on the gun and hit back.

The blow jarred Braniff to the bottom of his spine. The bubble seemed to try to lift his head off. They closed. Stevens tried to bring the gun to bear on Braniff's head. Braniff kned him. Stevens backed away, gasping. Braniff followed. He kicked the gun out of Stevens' hand. Then a paralysis ray stunned them both. . . .

The next thing Braniff knew, he was being helped up. The grizzled old admiral stood there with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Lieutenant, will you explain your conduct?"

Braniff swallowed. He realized now with a sinking feeling, that he had forfeited all his right to promotion.

"I don't know, sir, but Zhute was my prisoner."

Gorthy studied him, apparently in some disgust. Finally he looked down to where they were bringing Zhute up the rocky slope.

He looked back at Braniff.

"Come with me."

They got into the No. 1 fighter. Gorthy directed the pilot. "There's a mountain here somewhere with a square face about three miles high—a black granite mountain," he said.

THE PILOT used his radar. A moment later he had it.

"Take us there," said Gorthy.

Braniff was puzzled, and a little apprehensive. Was the admiral getting ready to execute him?

The admiral had the ship landed on a point of rock a mile away. They got out. The lights were on the cliff, and then Braniff saw that the cliff was covered with inscriptions in many strange and alien characters.

"All the great military commanders for a million years have left their marks on that rock," said Gorthy. "This planet has been a place for fleets to rest and be repaired, for rendezvous between forces, and also for defeated admirals to stop and lick their wounds. And every one has left his mark.

"Look up there, clear up on top, at the left. I can't read that, but I've had it explained to me. Those machine-like marks were made by Nudghjz, the great Rigellian semi-mineral general who whipped the Milky Way in the first of the Intergalactic Wars. It says: 'I conquered all.' And he did. He conquered forty billion suns.

"Over on the left is the vine-like inscription of the famous Capellan admiral, Llalabella, who with his half-plant people and a billion space-ships from the galaxy swept to a glorious victory over the First Galaxy itself.

"And on down, one after another. Sardox, the evil cat from Merope; Vomel from Sirius itself; Fimit from Vega—names that have gone into the galactic history-books for all time.

"Look up there at the carved boasting of Nudghjz. It's in the granite, on a planet where there is no atmosphere and therefore no wind, no storms, no changes of temperature. His name has been there for a million years. Llalabella's was put there fifty thousand years later."

"Yes, sir," said Braniff. "I see, but—"

Gorthy faced him. "Lieutenant, you're a nice young man. You are not afraid to be sentimental. That's why you hit Lieutenant Stevens for aiming at Zhute—not because Zhute was your prisoner, but because he was

alone and discouraged. No matter how horrible a criminal he is, you felt sorry for him then."

Lt. Braniff licked his lips.

The grizzled old admiral was talking straight. "Lieutenant, you've got a family back home. That's where you belong. You came into the service because it looked glamorous and because you would make a lot of money, didn't you?"

Jim Braniff swallowed. "Yes, sir."

"A lot of us come in that way, Lieutenant. That's the way I came in, sixty years ago. I had a young wife then, but I thought I would look pretty glamorous to her when I got back. But actually it wasn't glamorous. It was just the way you see it now. When I finally got back, she was dead. There was nothing for me to do but stay in the service. I'll go the same way those admirals and generals went and, when I go, the only difference between us will be that I haven't cut my name on a rock. Do you see what I'm driving at, Lieutenant?"

BRANIFF faced him. "No, sir, I'm afraid I don't."

"Some men are fitted for space duty. Some aren't. You're not. Resign when you get back! Don't be afraid of criticism. The galaxy needs sentiment—not in the Space Service; we don't dare show it here. But your memory in the hearts of one generation of your family is worth more than a million years in rock. Remember that! When you get back to Earth, get out of it. You're too soft!" he said harshly. "You don't belong in the Space Service! I'd send you home now if there were enough fuel!"

He stalked back to the boat. Lt. Braniff watched him a moment with a softness in his chest, then he followed.

They got in and took off. They reached the *Junior*. Admiral Gorthy took his place at the screen. "Train your disintegrator on that tub down there," he ordered the junior officer of ordnance.

"But, sir," cried Braniff, "there are living beings down there—Phaddians."

"Never heard of them," the admiral said bluntly. "Captain, are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Prepare to fire. By the way, Lieutenant, what is the cargo?"

"Americium, sir."

"Americium!" The admiral stared at Braniff. "Holy jumping comets! That much americium would blow us into the Third Universe. But you thought first of the Phaddians, Lieutenant." The admiral nodded. "That's why we couldn't get a message through. That stuff's half-life is only five hundred years. Its radiation has a high speed. Americium is contraband. I confiscate it. Lieutenant, do you think you could repair that ship and take it home?"

"I think so, sir."

"Then do it. That load of americium is worth a dozen plutonium mines. I'll clear you with customs on Agena Centauri."

Suddenly Lt. Braniff realized what the admiral had told him to do.

"Did you say—take it home, sir?" He nearly choked as he tried to control his emotions.

The admiral glared at him. "Yes, I said take it home!" he snapped. "What did you think I said?"

All the homesickness and all the loneliness and all the longing that had been in Lt. Braniff's heart for four years welled up into his mind and almost overwhelmed him. He lifted his head high, trying to speak, and when the words finally came out, he said:

"That's what I thought you said, sir."

"Pick a crew and get started." The admiral was studying a sky map. "I think, Captain, we'll set a new course when we get back on board the *Parsec*. I'd like to take a run over toward the One Supergalaxy and see if I can pick up a clue as to where Zhute got all this americium. There must be a new galaxy opening up somewhere." He wheeled on Braniff. "What the devil are you waiting on, Lieutenant? Get going!"

Lt. Braniff smiled. "Yes, sir," he said, and added under his breath as he saluted, "You old softie."