

# SPACE SCIENCE FICTION

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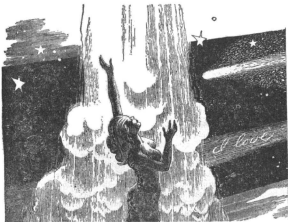
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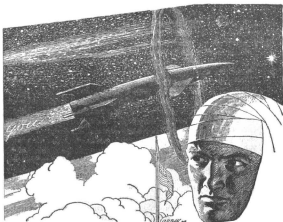


# THE BARRIER

BY MURRAY LEINSTER

Illustrated by ORBAN

Men proved once that the speed of sound was a barrier which no airplane could crack. It took new ideas, tough men, and a lot of time to beat it. Then men got out of the atmosphere where a worse barrier was waiting. They knew that ships had to go faster than light to reach the stars. It's a lot tougher to beat the speed of light than to crack the sonic barrier. It would take a hero to do that—or the world's number one prize fool!



I get a laugh out of the way they tell the story of how Joe Harper broke the Barrier. All the visicasts carry it on the anniversary of the *Star Pup's* return. There's a big, full-hour program about it, and school-kids have to watch it for school credit, and all that day the comedians make cracks about it, and they fly flags at half-mast and have ceremonies yapping about it. Joe Harper broke the Barrier, they say, and he's a planetary hero—the first one—and Bill Todd makes a speech and says what a good guy Joe

Harper was, and how everybody wishes he'd lived, and they hold Joe Harper up for all the kids to model themselves by. They say with proud and wistful grief that they can't build a memorial over his grave, but that every Earth-colony in the skies is his memorial. They say a lot of things like that.

I knew Joe Harper. I knew him when. I knew him better than anybody else who ever lived. I know more about him than anybody who makes speeches or writes the visicasts for the anniversary of the

Breaking of the Barrier. I know!

The Barrier was space, of course. It was the distance between Earth and the nearest star. It was the difference between the distance to the Moon—we could make that then—and Alpha Centaurus. It was less than two light-seconds to the Moon. It was four and a half light-years to Alpha Centaurus.

I'm not going to spoil the story. When I kick off, this goes to the Joseph Harper Memorial Fund—which educates boys who can't swing it themselves. They can use it or not, just as they please. If they give a damn about actual facts they'll publish it, though. This is the truth about this precious hero of theirs, Joe Harper.

It was the Bessenden Comet that started it. If you're more than a kid you'll remember. It was a comet that they picked up on the Moon Observatory telescopes first. They'd already spotted two planets of Alpha Centaurus, then. They picked up Bessenden's Comet a half-light year out. It took plenty long to arrive. By the time it was a naked-eye object they had its orbit figured, and they were shivering with joy. It came in and swung around the sun, and they checked some more, and

then they went crazy with excitement.

There were three good reasons. One was that Bessenden's Comet didn't visit our sun only. It had a closed orbit, of course, and our Sun was at one end of it, but Alpha Centauri was at the other. It made a round trip between them every twenty-three zillion zillion years.

That was one excuse for going nuts. Another was the spectrum of its tail. There was some stuff in it that didn't fit into the periodic table. It had atoms with double nuclei. Like double suns. Two nuclei spinning around each other, and the planetary electrons running around outside. The physicists went out of their minds, figuring out what it would mean. They called the stuff bessendium, after the guy who'd picked out the comet on a photographic plate in the first place. He never did anything else of any importance in all his life. The third reason for excitement was the news that Earth was due to pass through the comet's track in just three months.

That meant there might be meteoric falls of the same stuff the comet was made of. Meteors go barging around in the orbits of comets. The Leonids and the August meteors do, anyhow. Maybe some scrap from this comet would fall.

The physicists started showing their figures to the big-money boys. By the time we were ready to pass through the comet's trail there was an offer of a thousand dollars a gram for any meteoric material from the comet. And you could write a book about that night with everybody watching for millions to fall from the sky!

A half-ounce piece fell in the middle of Rio de Janeiro. A fireball exploded over Lake Erie, and three pieces fell on shore. There was a fall in Kamchatka—sixty pieces, total weight twenty-three pounds. Up near the Moon Observatory they got another piece. With all the earth watching here and on the moon besides, there were less than thirty pounds of meteoric material picked up—and there was less than an ounce and a half of pure besselium in it. That was where Joe Harper came in.

He'd been working on rockets. He was the one who worked out compound-explosion rocket-motors, and got forty thousand feet exhaust-velocity for the first time. The big-money boys were putting up for something big, and they wanted him to design the engines. They were going to build a space-ship with their ounce and a half of besselium. Because besselium turned out to be an atomic catalyst. You

could get controlled atomic energy out of anything from lead to mushroom soup if you had as much as an ounce and a quarter of besselium. You couldn't use less. There was a critical mass for catalysis, like there's a critical mass for a bomb. They could make one ship. Just one. They could never make another ship unless they got some more besselium. And they called in Joe to build the drive.

You've heard the stuff about him. Poor boy, self-educated, brilliant mind, genius for seeing into the heart of things, high ideals, chivalrous—everything a planetary hero ought to be. Sure! That's what the visicasts say. Let's skip that hogwash. The compound-explosion rocket-motor was only a twist on the principle of the long-barreled cannon. He got it from the Big Bertha that bombarded Paris from seventy miles, back in 1917-1918, fifty years before he was born. Of course he had to work out a tricky electronic-circuit cooling-system to keep his engine from melting. It turned waste heat to electricity, and they use that to generate current on Earth, right now.

They were going to use the *Star Pup* to go to Mars. A quick petrological exploration — for traces of besselium—and they would push off for Saturn's

rings. If that failed they'd start checking over the asteroids, one by one, for bessendum. Earth had the stuff to make one atomic-drive ship. Just one. No more. They had to use it to try to find more stuff for more ships. And Joe Harper designed the *Star Pup's* engines.

He did a good job on those engines. You can give him that. They were good engines. But he put something over on the rest of the designing crew. Those engines could have pulled the *Star Pup* straight out from the sun. They could accelerate the ship at forty-seven gravities. If you figure what forty-seven gravities would do to anybody inside the ship, you'll see how often it would be used!

The funny thing was that nobody realized it while the ship was building. Not even Bill Todd—but he was an astronomer. Nobody got it but Lila Hunt, who was the biological designer; she worked on the air-freshener and ozone apparatus and the interior environment to keep the crew from cracking up from space-nerves. A nice-looking girl, Lila. A little bit on the tall side, but she had good eyes and plenty of brain-cells working, and she was a human being besides. Even she didn't really tumble until they'd finished putting on the *Star Pup's* outer plating and

were working on the outer helix.

Joe Harper was puttering around on top of the hull, watching the workmen mold-welding the silver conductor-bars from the cooling circuit. The *Star Pup* was funny-looking. Her rockets were outside her skin. There was a helix of heavy silver bar around the whole hull. It was supposed to be communication-stuff. Lila watched Joe raising hell with workmen fixing up a weld. They had blueprints and a wiring-diagram, and they argued with him. He took the diagram and changed it and signed the change. He snapped.

"That puts you in the clear! Go ahead and fix it my way!"

Then Lila said:

"Joe."

He climbed down from the hull and went to her. He liked her a lot, Joe did. She was a couple of inches taller than he was, but he thought about her a lot when he should have been doing something more sensible. He never made any passes at her, though. He was conceited, but not that conceited! He knew she wouldn't look at him. So he acted curt and hard-boiled to her, but he always thought over everything she'd said, afterward, just liking to remember the way she looked and how her voice sounded.

This time, when he climbed down off the *Star Pup*, she smiled at him and said, "Joe, those engines are too big. I've been reading up. You had an article in the last *Electronics Engineering*. I studied it."

"Why?" asked Joe. Pretty stupid. A girl doesn't read a technical article outside her field unless it's by a man she wants to understand.

"Oh, I like to read what my friends publish," said Lila. "But those engines are big! You'd never dare turn them on full, according to the figures in your article. You're putting something over. Come have lunch with me and tell me about it, will you?"

He pretended to hesitate, but he went to the commissary of the moonship yard where all the rockets that had ever gone to the moon had been built—but the *Star Pup* was the first one ever built to go farther. A moon-rocket could get to Mars, but it would have to coast eight months, and carry eight months of food for the crew that went along—and then it couldn't get back. So nobody'd gone. No use in it. Joe and Lila found a table and sat down.

"So I'm putting something over!" said Joe. "What?"

"I wouldn't know," admitted Lila. She smiled at him very

nicely. "But if you turned on your engines full-power you'd kill everybody in the ship unless you turned on the coolers full power. Then you wouldn't get much drive, but you'd draw off a couple of hundred thousand kilowatts of power. Maybe more."

"So what?" said Joe, challenging.

"So what are you going to do with two hundred thousand kilowatts of power, out in space?" asked Lila.

"It's three hundred thousand," said Joe. He ordered a meal, for her and himself, and said, "I want to try something."

"To try melting the ship?" asked Lila. She said softly, "Tell me, Joe. The engines are in. It's too late to tear them out. I won't tell. What do you want to try?"

"You saw the helix outside the hull," said Joe. "It's half-inch silver bars, to send radio signals and pick them up, they say. Quite a loop. What'd happen if you sent three hundred thousand kilowatts through that helix—four hundred thousand horsepower?"

"Wouldn't they blow?" asked Lila. She watched his face.

"Not if they were cold enough," Joe told her. "Not at four degrees Kelvin. That's the temperature out there. Silver's a superconductor there—zero re-

sistance. They wouldn't blow. They'd carry the current. What would happen?"

Lila thought it over. She shook her head. It was queer, this stuff. He talked technicalities and noticed the way she smiled and thought about that. She talked technicalities and smiled at him in a strictly untechnical way.

"All I can see is that there'd be the strongest magnetic field anybody even thought about," she said. "What good would that be to a space-ship enclosed in it?"

"Take a thing that makes heat," said Joe, noticing that her hair had funny little golden lights in it. "A resistance-wire, say. Put in enough power and it stops making heat. It gives light. Put in more power and if it didn't blow it'd stop making light. It'd give off ultra-violet and X-rays. Put in still more, and if anything could take it, it'd give cosmetics. Right?"

She nodded.

"Take a coil that'll make a magnetic field," said Joe. "Put in enough power, so it's not magnetism any more. What'll it be?"

"What would it be?" she asked, surprised into paying attention to what he was saying, instead of just to him.

"I want to find out," he told her, grinning. Then he said:

"You're a good-looking girl, Lila."

"Ah!" she said, making it sound like half a joke. "Come up to my house tonight and tell me that again!"

"You'd pump me," he said wisely. "About what I think that field would be. I don't fall for that."

"I might want you to tell me I'm good-looking," she protested.

"Not with Bill Todd hanging around."

She said very firmly indeed, her eyes anxious. "He hasn't any mortgage on me! I'd like you to come, Joe. I—you never have talked to me about anything but work."

"And I won't," said Joe. "Not until I get rich. Remember my cooling-circuit for my rockets?"

She nodded. That was a bad deal that Joe Harper got. It made him the fool he turned out to be. But of course, if he hadn't been something of a half-wit to start with, it wouldn't.

"I never did appeal to girls," said Joe deliberately. "I was pretty well resigned to it. Then I met a girl who seemed to fall for me, hard. She liked to talk about my work, even. I was figuring out that cooling-circuit, then, and I bragged about it to her. I drew the circuit for her to admire. She admired it a lot.



She admired it so much that she carefully took my sketches and a tape-recording of what I'd said about it to the corporation that patented it and is making very nice dividends from it. They're building all the new power-plants on earth with my circuit. But I didn't get anything out of it. I guess the girl did, though."

Lila knew it had been taken from him, of course. She'd never known how. It was one of those things that couldn't be proved.

"Do you think I'd do that?" she asked, hurt.

"I wouldn't take the chance," he told her. "That's all."

"That's hardly a nice thing to say to me," she protested.

"I know," he agreed. "It isn't nice. But I said it."

She bit her lips.

"If that's why you act as you do, Joe," said Lila quietly, "—because some girl did you a dirty trick—I'll promise not to say one word about work or the *Star Pup*. I would like you to like me, Joe. I've tried to make you."

She looked like she meant it, and he was tempted. This was in the commissary restaurant. She was the prettiest girl in the room. He liked her better than he'd ever liked anybody else. But he'd been hit hard. He'd

made a bitter resolve never to be fooled again by a girl. He would have given Lila his left arm and leg, if it would have done her any good. But he couldn't trust anybody. He couldn't tell the difference between Lila and the kind of girl who could be hired to make a fool of him.

"I'll tell you," he said. He grinned, but he meant it. "If my trick is what I think it is, I'll get a lot richer than that cooling-circuit ever would have made me. I've got you in my mind. When I'm rich, I'll come and ask you to marry me. I mean it," he added. "That's what I want."

Then Lila went pale. She said very quietly, "I think you mean that, Joe. You're just crazy enough to mean it. But I'm crazy too, in my own way. I've been telling myself I was in love with you. I've been making passes at you in a ladylike way. Now that you've said this—I'd marry you tomorrow if you asked me. Right now. But if you dodged me until you got rich—not trusting me—and then came . . . I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in the world!"

Then she got up and went out of the commissary, fast. Joe looked after her. He felt rotten. He had an idea that she hoped he'd come over to her house that night. But he was not the bril-

liant, impulsive, splendidly normal character the visicasts say he was. He didn't go. Next day he saw her at the moonship yard. He nodded how-do. She turned away. He was sorry, but he was that kind of a fool. He didn't know what to do.

Then he had that run-in with Bill Todd. The *Star Pup* was pretty nearly finished, and Bill was feeling good. He was the official head of the organization that had bought up all the bessendium from the meteoric falls, he was in over-all charge of designing and building the *Star Pup*, and he'd be her skipper. An astronomer, Bill Todd. Big and handsome, and he could turn on the charm and make a swell speech before a woman's club or a banker's luncheon. He liked Lila.

All of a sudden he came to Joe Harper and said angrily, "Look here, Joe! What's this about Lila?"

Joe was working, then. He was making an instrument to go on the *Star Pup*, and it was tricky adjusting it, because all he had to go on was theory. He was irritable because he couldn't have any of the stuff it was supposed to measure to calibrate it by.

"What about Lila?" he asked.

"She told me she's not sure she'll sign on the *Star Pup* for

the cruise. Even the try-out cruise! I asked her what was the matter and she said you wouldn't want her along. If you think you can decide who makes up the crew of the *Star Pup* . . . I raised the money for that ship! I'm to be her skipper! If I want Lila in the crew, she's in the crew!"

"All right," said Joe. "She's in the crew, then."

He was having trouble with his work. He was fretting. And Bill Todd was a nuisance.

Bill said more angrily still, "You're a good engine man, Joe, but don't get any ideas! You're not the boss of this business! If you've got something on your mind, you can say it right now!"

Joe turned from his workbench and snapped, "The scheme is crazy! It's crazy to hunt for bessendium on Mars. Erosion has pulled it down flat and covered over all its rocks anyhow. It's crazy to hunt for bessendium in Saturn's rings. It makes a nice dramatic picture, but the specific gravity's low. There won't be any heavy elements like bessendium. If there's any in this solar system it'll be on Mercury, but I don't think there is. The comet came from Centaurus. I don't believe there's an atom of bessendium closer than that! It would take some freak conditions to make a double-nucleus atom! We'd have found it on

Earth if there were any around. Earth's got the best assortment of elements any planet has. It could be on Mercury—but not anywhere else. I think it'll have to be found in the Centaurus system."

Bill Todd said, "Ambitious, you are! It'd take six years, counting acceleration and deceleration, to get to Centaurus at point eight light-speed. That's the best the *Star Pup* could do with all the time it needed for acceleration. And the crew would starve on the way. Six years each way? You're the one who's crazy!"

"Want to bet?" asked Joe.

"I do not want to bet," said Bill Todd with dignity. "I want you to attend to your part of this business and leave the rest—including the selection of the crew—to me!"

"Else I'm likely to be left out, eh?" asked Joe.

"Figure it yourself!" said Bill.

Joe went back to his instrument. Bill Todd was a pretty good astronomer. He could raise money and give a charming lecture, and he was good at changing the photographic plates in a telescope. He stood there, watching Joe belligerently.

"And I want Lila on the *Star Pup*!" he said firmly. "That's settled!"

He stalked away, leaving Joe to figure it out. And Joe figured. He could see through Bill Todd easily enough. Bill was the sort to gloat over being skipper of the first ship to land on Mars, and the first to touch the rings of Saturn—nobody'd want to land on Saturn—and he was the fair-haired boy who would revel in being the hero of the first romance out in space. He'd love the visiscreen appearances he'd be asked to make as a great scientist and a great lover, holding the hand of the girl he'd won with Saturn filling half the universe as he told her of his love . . . Sure! Even Joe could figure that one out.

He saw Lila next day. He went up to her and said, "You told Bill you want me left behind? Why?"

"I didn't say that," said Lila quietly. "I said I might not go along myself. I don't think it's a good idea to have a crew of a ship not able to trust each other."

Joe said coldly, "All right. Suppose I put three hundred thousand kilowatts through that helix. It'll be as much more than magnetism as light or X-rays is more than heat. It'll be a stress in space, of course. It'll be a new kind of stress in space. I think it'll make a field in which the speed of light will go up out of

sight, and a field that can travel at that speed. I think it'll give the *Star Pup* a faster than-light drive. Is that what you want to know? You wanted me to trust you. I've told you. Satisfied?"

She shook her head.

"That's not what I want you to say," she said in a low tone.

"I've got to be part of the crew," said Joe practically, "to find out if that works. I might be wrong. It might blow us to hell and gone. I'd rather you stayed behind."

"Why?" asked Lila bitterly. "Nobody cares if I go on a dangerous expedition!"

"I do," said Joe. He meant it.

"If you'll ask me," said Lila, "I'll go with you and be with you when you try it. I'll even help you do it without the others knowing—because they wouldn't let you. That's not right, but I'll do it. You haven't the right to risk their lives without their consent, but I'll help you do that—if you say what I want you to say."

Joe shrugged.

"They'd never agree," he told her. "Besides, there's the bessendium. It's all there is. Bill wouldn't risk either his neck or the bessendium except for glory. He'd never risk both."

"I will," said Lila. "But you've got to ask me to. Joe, haven't you ever wanted anybody

to be part of you? To share everything with you? Even danger?"

"No," said Joe. "Not danger. If I get a lot of money I'll want to share that with you."

"You're crazy!" cried Lila fiercely. "I won't let you do it! I'll tell Bill Todd what you intend! I'll stop you!"

She ran away. He didn't run after her. He just stared where she'd vanished. Plain stupid.

He took off in the *Star Pup*, alone, two days before the ship was officially finished. It was practically done, of course. The air-plant was in, and the heaters, and the fuel was loaded—but anything would do for fuel. The bessendium was in its place, built in. Joe Harper went to the ship and got a workman to help him get a couple of heavy cases inside. Said it was instruments for testing the rockets. Then he got all the workmen away. He was going to test the rockets.

He tried them. One by one, at minimum power, he set every one at work. But even so, they made a noise that was something to crack a man's ear-drums. The noise was terrific. It went beyond the moonship yard. It filled the offices. It was a growling, snarling thunder. Lila heard it. She turned her head, going white. Bill Todd was talking to her at the time.

"Who's turned on the rockets?" she demanded, white as chalk.

"Joe," said Bill, easily. "He told me he was going to make a check. Just routine. You didn't tell him he'd have to stay behind, did you?"

Lila didn't answer. She was out the door. She ran. She ran down the steps and into the yard, and she ran crazily toward the *Star Pup*, sobbing as she ran and blubbering. "Joe! Joe! Wait for me!"

Somebody tried to stop her when she was a couple of hundred yards of the ship. She dodged them, and ran down a lane of unscorched ground where the rocket-flames didn't touch. She saw the ports were closed. The entrance-port closed as she got to the ship's side. It seemed like Joe had closed it in her face, but actually he'd done it from the control-room. She pounded on it with her fists, crying, "Joe! Joe! Let me in!" The booming of ten thousand thunders was in her ears.

Then the ship up-ended and went away from there with as many of the forty-seven gravities that its engines could give as Joe dared put into them. There was a flash, and it was darting up. It went up into the sky. It was out of sight in seconds. And there wasn't anything

where it had been. Not anything.

So Joe went to Centaurus. They got word to the Moon Observatory, and they got a telescope trained on the *Star Pup* and saw it head out. Joe put it through all its paces on atomic-rocket drive. Very conscientious, he was. Then he lined up for Alpha Centaurus—and suddenly the ship wasn't there. He'd waited, watching the outside temperature, until the silver helix was down to four degrees Kelvin and it didn't have any resistance at all. Then he turned on the engines and the cooler full power. Three hundred thousand kilowatts went into the helix. There was hardly any power left as rocket-thrust, but there was enough. The magnetic field became something else. It became an area of stress in which the speed of light went away up—and therefore an area in which the *Star Pup* could travel hundreds of times faster than in normal space. The stress went ahead of the *Star Pup*. She went out of sight. There wasn't even a streak of ions left behind that anybody could see. There was a streak, but the ions were too far apart. Miles and miles apart.

The *Star Pup* had cracked the Barrier.

He was gone something over three weeks, living on the food he'd gotten into the ship in those

two cases he'd said were instruments. Then, one day, the *Star Pup* winked into being again. She came on toward Earth. The radio receivers at the Moon Observatory picked up this message.

"Star Pup reporting back from Alpha Centaurus planet two," was the message. "Have nearly ton deasendium ore for cargo. Contact Lila Hunt care of moonship yard Star Pup project. Message for her: quote, I know what I should have said. I say it. I love you. We'll get married please. Unquote."

The Moon Observatory relayed the message to Earth, while the *Star Pup* came on. They went crazy down there, of course. But Bill Todd phrased the message back to Joe. He did a beautiful job of it.

It told Joe that Lila had been in the blast-area when he took off. It had been quick. That was the blessed part of it. It didn't last the thousandth of a second.

Joe went out of his mind, out there in the *Star Pup*, heading for Earth. There was a time when he started to head for the Sun and dive in it. But that wasn't fair. So he landed on Earth.

But Joe got one break. The only break he ever got out of the whole business. He set the *Star Pup* down. The minute she

was on the ground the planes hovering around broke all barriers and came swooping over to see the *Star Pup* close. Joe got out of the ship and began to run. He wanted to hide. He didn't want to be a hero. And he got his break.

A four-passenger job collided with a light plane and they started to fall: they gathered up two other planes on the way down. They landed at the very edge of the crowd that was rushing out on the field to mob Joe for being a hero. They blew up when they hit. There were eighty-some people killed, right away, and some hundreds burnt or injured in the crush. They never found Joe's body. They never found Joe.

When they picked me out of the mess and hauled me to the hospital with all the other injured, I was burnt pretty badly. The first thing they asked me was, "What's your name?"

I told them, "John Smith." I didn't want to be a hero. I wanted to hide. I wanted not to remember anything. I was pretty bitter because I didn't die. It was three months before they turned me out of the hospital, and then nobody would have recognized me anyhow. So that's that.

Joe Harper wasn't any hero. He was a damn fool. I should know. I used to be him.