

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL is the author of the story your editor chose to illustrate quality of style and characterization in the symposium on science fiction that appeared in the 1957 *Writers Yearbook*. One of Russell's many virtues is his ability to give a fresh slant on a theme that has been handled frequently by other authors, and I think he's done it again.



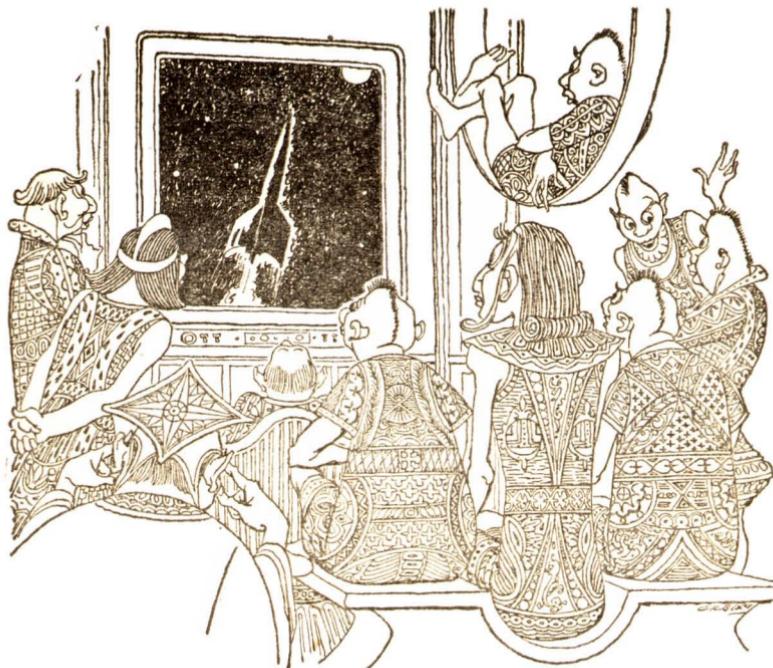


THE CASE FOR EARTH

by
Eric
Frank
Russell

illustrated by ORBAN

No one could have put the case better, and in
less biased a manner...but no Earthman could
deny the argument of the opposition!



HE'D GONE two-thirds of the way when it happened. There was no reason to expect it. The Moon had been won and Venus conquered; ships lost and martyrs made; experience gained and lessons learned. Now Carlow was bulleting to Mars in a vessel vastly superior to the first Moon-boats. Everything that could be anticipated had been taken into account and guarded against; in theory the odds

were proportionately greater in his favor.

But there are, and always will be, things that no man can foresee. Confiscation of the Moon, and mastery of Venus, represented humanity's expansion inward, toward the Sun. This, the first Mars-flight, was the initial thrust outward—away from the Sun, and more or less heading for the great concourse of stars. That made all the difference, an immensely significant dif-

ference that no expert had taken into account, and no ingenuity could overcome.

So, at the two-thirds point he hit the blanking area and dived into it unaware. The engines continued to roar without falter or cease. Nothing was visible save the hazy mist of stars and the pink target slowly swelling ahead. No strange body made a blip upon his fluorescent screens; no other flame-trail was detected by his thermo-couples.

TWO MOONS had become visible to the naked eye before it dawned upon him that all was not well. First, Carlow noticed that the output meter of his pulse transmitter was registering zero, despite the fact that the apparatus seemed to be functioning. Back on Earth, they were depending on that constant emission to keep radio-track of a body far too small to be followed with telescopes. Without it, they lost him—unless he resorted to the vocal beam and used it long enough to enable them to take new bearings.

Hurriedly, he switched on the main transceiver, spoke through his larynx microphone. "Do you still get my beacon, Earth? Do you still get my beacon?"

He repeated it at least twenty times. In all probability, the answer would be unintelligible—a distorted mutter-

ing amid a mess of static. But any response at all would serve to show that he had been heard. He strained at his ear-plugs and picked up nothing, not a sound, a voice, a murmur. Not even band-noise, backwash or the faint hiss of solar energy.

"Carlow calling! Carlow calling! Do you hear me, Earth? How is my beacon? Come in, Earth, and say whether you are getting my beacon!"

No reply.

On this transmitter, too, the output needle should have waggled in sympathy with the varying amplitude of his voice. It did not stir by a hairbreadth. He checked feed-cables and found nothing wrong. Power was pouring in, none squirting out. There was a transistor-tester among his numerous servicing instruments but how could he use that? One cannot control a racing vessel while partially dismantling and repairing a jigsaw puzzle of radio components. The tester was strictly for use when landed, and not before.

BY THE LOOKS of it, he was going to skid through the red dirt of Mars while those who had sent him were mourning his end. To their minds, sudden silence could mean only one thing: disaster, born of causes unknown.

Soon he was going to experience a major triumph that

they could not share, because the means of sharing had been denied them. The onus lay upon Carlow to restore communication immediately after landing. He would do his best, but he wasn't sanguine about it; he was a space-pilot rather than a radio expert. No man can be master of every conceivable skill.

Two more times he called, without slightest response; definitely the link to Earth was broken and had been broken for quite a while. He had no way of telling how long.

Further efforts were futile, because the landing now was too close at hand. He thundered across the orbits of Phobos and Deimos, with the vast face of Mars extending far beyond the capacity of the observation-port. No time to study the face; not a moment to spare for curious examination. It took all his strength, ability and single-minded concentration to bring the ship down without damage.

THE MARTIAN horizon swayed across the port as he swung the ship into a shrinking orbit around the planet. He took her round three times before velocity, angle of declination and nature of terrain were all just right. The vessel belly-skidded along a flatland that was not red but gray-green, with a thick carpet of lichens. The tail-end roar ceased for the

first time in many, many days. This was it, the hour of victory—the long step toward the Asteroid Belt, the Outer Planets, another solar system, an endless, uncountable multitude of worlds.

Yet, Carlow did not howl with the glory of it, jump around, wave flags, sing songs; he lounged in his seat, sweating and exhausted. Now was the moment that would inscribe his name in history books in letters of gold; but, like all such moments, it proved strangely matter-of-fact, humdrum, lacking in great thrill. The reaction, of course, following a long period of intense nervous strain. The aftermath.

A few minutes crawled by before he recovered and stood up for a better look through the port. With sleepy-eyed lack of comprehension, he gazed at a dark circle across the lichens, the shadow of something huge and round standing alongside his ship.

His ears were equally reluctant to register when they heard an authoritative hammering upon the airlock door.

THE CONTROL-CABIN'S ports permitted a field of view covering a fraction less than one-eighty degrees. There were no other vantage points from which to look around, no side-ports, no vision possible from the tail.

He could stand by the instrument-board and survey a

great sweep of alien territory that included nothing alongside or behind the ship. To see the rest, Carlow must blow the steering-jets lengthily and with enough power to edge the vessel around, wasting precious fuel and risking serious damage to the armor-plate shell. Seven-hundred tons grinding through an arc of ninety degrees would be more than enough to tear the belly-skids from the body.

Alternatively, he could go out through the airlock and take a look in person. He'd intended to do that very soon. If all had gone as planned he'd have donned a closed-circuit oxygen mask, taken a color-plate camera with him, set the instrument on its tripod and made a record of himself posing by the ship. The picture of the year, if not of the century.

But all had not gone as planned; the veteran advisers of Lunar and Venusian expeditions had no cause to expect what was taking place right now. They had provided instructions and advice, food, water, drugs, oxygen, signalling apparatus, instruments, weapons—every possible scientific contribution toward survival and success.

The one thing not provided was a safe way of answering the door when somebody—or some thing—knocks.

WHAT'S the answer to that? There are two, and

only two. Open the door, and take a chance; or stay in and sit tight, perhaps forever.

Knock, knock!

Could it be a wind-stirred branch belonging to an adjacent tree? Not likely; he had seen no tree when skidding across the lichens. There wasn't a tree in sight from here to the horizon. Nothing but the gray-green sward and, far away on the skyline, a huge, ragged outcrop of red rock.

What else? Metallic pebbles leaping into the ship's magnetic field? No, the rapping was too deliberate and methodical for that. It sounded exactly like the summons of an imperative hand—in a vast desert where there was no hand.

Knock, knock!

The round shadow remained upon the lichens without moving or changing form. No other shadows extruded from its rim; nothing stirred on the landscape, nothing winged through thin air, no bizarre figure advanced over the skyline. Mars was a dead world exactly as astronomers had declared.

Knock, knock!

Carlow could not stand it any longer. The risks involved in getting here were more numerous and deadly than the danger of opening the door to an unknown caller. He had survived the former; surely he could meet and beat the latter. Nothing ven-

tured, nothing gained. He who hesitates is lost. And so on.

ANALYTICAL instruments told Carlow that he'd need a mask, at least temporarily. Sometime he could do without it. One can become accustomed to rarified atmosphere, endure it without artificial aid, providing activity is not too strenuous. Men had discovered that fact atop Everest, many centuries ago. But for the time being he must use a mask.

Fastening one over his face, he checked its tank and supply hose. The feed-valve went *click-click* as he breathed. He took a pair of snouty, blued-steel guns from a drawer, shoved one into a side holster, and gripped the other in his right hand. Then he got down on all fours and crawled through the short tunnel leading into the airlock.

The inner door closed with a sigh. He broke the seal of the outer door, and heard Earth-air hiss as it joined that of Mars. It sounded like an angry serpent; whoever had been knocking should take that as a warning and stand clear.

He stationed himself strategically behind the door, gun held ready, as the door swung inward on heavy hinges. It opened full width, letting sunlight pour into the chamber. Nothing entered with it.

Bending, he took a swift

look at the airlock rim. All that he could see was the top of a metal ladder propped against it. A ladder? Who the deuce could produce a ladder at a moment's notice and position it in readiness? There was something dreamlike about this, in fact nightmarish.

Stepping boldly into the rim he stared out, saw the man waiting at the bottom of the ladder.

IT WAS anti-climax with a vengeance. A mere man—a plain, ordinary man who looked as if he might be the corner grocer in his Sunday best. The man gazed up a slightly officious air, while the Earthling looked down in open stupefaction.

There was compensatory startlement in what stood behind the man, the thing that had cast its shadow like a menacing promise of coming events. A great silvery globe of diameter twice the length of the Earth-ship—a monster metal ball, with copper-colored rings protruding from its surface in symmetrical array.

The first thought that whirled through Carlow's mind was a natural product of the environment in which he had developed. "Some other nation had beaten us to it. We've made it too late."

Further speculation was halted when the man down below said pointedly and in per-

fect English, "Why the gun?" Carlow eyed the weapon as it sat in his hand and answered confusedly, "Why not?"

"Guns create guns," said the other. "And shooters get shot." He made a gesture. "Well you've come all the way here. Are you satisfied merely to stare at it from up there? Don't you want to stand on a new world?"

"Obviously I won't be the first. I am disappointed."

"So are we," said the man. "And likely to remain so for some centuries to come."

"What d'you mean? Having got here ahead of me you should be overjoyed."

"That is one viewpoint. There are others."

FIRMING his lips, and absorbing oxygen through his nostrils, Carlow mulled that remark over, then said, "I can think up a reason why you knocked for a neighborly chitchat."

"What is that?"

"Your ship is out of action and unable to return; the arrival of mine is a gift from the gods."

"Yours won't get back," said the man. "Never."

"It will."

"Sorry," the man persisted with strange self-confidence. "But you are mistaken."

"I don't think so. Stick around and watch me take off."

With that he pointed his gun at the other and started

backing into the lock, his left hand stretching to close the door.

The man on the ground made a brief signal to the great metal globe. Carlow shot out of the lock, drawn by a dozen irresistible pulls. The gun was torn from his hand as he dived, his second weapon was ripped from its holster. His arm was lugged forward as his wristwatch tore itself loose; all the buttons leaped from his uniform jacket.

HE LANDED flat on a thick cushion of lichens, gasped for breath, and picked himself up. A ragged hole showed in the left of his pants where a small bunch of keys had taken the shortest route out of his pocket. It wasn't until he came erect that he realized that his mask had vanished along with the rest.

Carlow's opponent was facing him, tendering the mask with one hand while holding a purloined gun in the other. He took the mask, fitted it on. Its tank was dented, one of the straps broken, but it was wearable and still functioning. He drew oxygen thankfully.

"You won't need that thing in due time," assured the other, watching him.

Carlow glowered and said nothing.

"Unfortunately, though, I need this." He gestured with the gun. "I have to deal with

you in the only manner your kind understands, namely, with a weapon. Get walking."

"Where?"

"Round to the other side of our ship. You'll find a gangway. March up it."

"You can go to hell," said Carlow.

"Courage and stubbornness are not the same things" remarked the man, speaking as one would to a small child. "Neither is abuse an effective argument."

"Soul of wisdom, aren't you?"

"I pretend to nothing." The other smiled as if at a secret thought, added, "You may call me Harry; one name is as good as another on any world." He waved the gun again. "You can proceed on your own feet or be carried. Suit yourself."

THREE WASN'T much choice about it. The momentary magnetic field that had robbed Carlow of all susceptible metal, in response to a signal, proved that there were others in the metal sphere—perhaps a dozen, perhaps twenty or more. At any rate, enough of them to cope with a solitary mule.

With bad grace Carlow walked as told; the man named Harry—if that was his true name—followed with weapon in hand. Carlow kept his thoughts to himself, and they were plenty. What damage had been done inside his own vessel by sudden imme-

sion in so powerful a field? What critical instruments had been put out of action for keeps?

"Yours won't get back," the other had said. "Never."

Supposing it didn't, what then? Was all hope lost? Carlow did not think so. Despite intense nationalistic rivalries, Earth was a world considerably shrunken by ultrafast transport systems and vast communications networks. It was well-nigh impossible for any nation-sized group to retain a major secret longer than twelve months.

Over there, across the void, three thousand millions were living cheek by jowl, with rumors spreading fast among them, information circulating openly or surreptitiously at top speed. And there was no place to hide—for any lengthy period—anything so large and highly technical as a space-vessel far ahead of its time.

MERE POSSESSION of only one such ship implied the existence of an advanced technology, backed by formidable industrial resources. Once upon a time, in the long, long ago, a huge complex of factories and laboratories had been needed to produce the first supersonic rocket. Today, with a thing like this globe in plain view, the facilities behind it could be no smaller. It wouldn't take Earth long to learn the

source of this space-conquering tool.

Right now, Carlow couldn't hazard a simple guess at who had reached Mars first and was acting tough about the holding of it. He probed at the puzzle by trying to determine the nationality or racial characteristics of this fellow Harry. It defeated him. Harry was of no readily identifiable type; his speech was devoid of accent, and noteworthy only for being stiltedly correct.

"Up there," ordered Harry as they reached the gangway.

Obediently walking up, Carlow entered a large airlock, stood side-by-side with his captor while the outer door closed, the inner one opened. He removed his mask, let it dangle in one hand. A nudge with the gun sent him into a long metal passage.

It was here that he halted, involuntarily paralysed by sight of one of the crew.

THE THING strolled casually from a door on the right, crossed the passage, entered a door on the left. It did not so much as glance at Carlow. It couldn't, because it had no eyes.

It was four feet high, broad, with flexible legs, and thin, rubbery arms terminating in digits that had the sinuosity of snakes. There were two breathing holes and a wide mouth in its green and

scaly face; a feathery antenna protruded from its hairless head. It wore clothes of outlandish cut and sported some kind of insignia on the shoulders of its jacket.

Gazing through the door at this departing vision, Carlow ejaculated, "What's that?"

"A Hythian," said Harry. He prodded with the gun. "Keep going; you'll see more types before you're through. And in due time, you'll get used to them."

Harry was right. Around the corner, another and completely different creature side-stepped into a doorway to let them pass. This one was tall, gray, and skeletal. Its brilliant yellow eyes surveyed the prisoner with no surprise, no especial interest.

Farther along, they encountered two more as different again. One was a quadruped, with tiny hoofs like a gazelle's; it clattered past with open unconcern, followed by a crawling thing that seemed all eyes and tail.

"In here," Harry ordered, pushing a door open.

ENTERING, Carlow stared around the tiny cabin; he hardly heard the door close and lock as Harry departed. There was no port through which to examine surroundings. A folding seat lay against one wall; pulling it out, Carlow rested on it as he strove to halt the mad whirlings of his mind.

His guess at a disabled first-comer obviously had been a stupid one, made in the confusion of the moment. The great globe had not been there when he'd landed; otherwise he could not have failed to see it. Therefore it must have arrived after him, within a few seconds. Such promptness suggested that it had followed him down from some point of ambush within the star-spangled darkness.

Equally as mistaken was his theory of Earth-origin. Conceivably, some nation could produce a vessel like this one; but from nowhere in the wide, wide world could it dig up such a crew. So whence had the big sphere come? What was its origin? The question baffled Carlow.

He was still battling this problem when an upward surge told him that the vessel was lifting; then it shifted to a sidewise motion. Acceleration was wonderfully smooth, with no thunder of rockets; no vibration through the shell; nothing but a low, almost-unhearable hum. It did not last long. After forty minutes he felt the sensation of descent, the slight bump of ground-contact.

Gravitational pull remained the same as before. That told him the ship had not soared to the nearer moon. They were still on Mars.

NOTHING happened for another hour, during

which he mooched idly around the cabin, took an emergency ration from his pocket, and ate it without tasting it. He tried concocting futile plans for escape, most of them violent and bloody. But deep inside himself he knew there was no escape.

Eventually the door opened and Harry entered. "No gun this time," he said. "The need for one no longer exists. We have thrown your weapons away." He measured Carlow with sharp gray eyes. "Don't let that fact tempt you to try anything rash; it will serve only to annoy us."

"Aren't I entitled to be annoyed?" demanded Carlow.

"No."

"Why not?"

"The question of your rights has yet to be settled. That will be done with the minimum of delay." His expression softened as he went on, "I regret that you have not been given a meal but you may have one now, if you wish."

"I'm not hungry. I could do with a drink, though."

"A stimulant?"

"Preferably."

Harry brought one. It looked like ginger pop, tasted like a mixture of pear-juice and old brandy. Carlow drank it, said, "Hah!" and felt a bit better.

"This way," ordered Harry.

He led the other along the corridor to the gangway. No-

body passed them on the way. The huge vessel seemed empty, devoid of any other living soul.

Carlow toyed with the notion of jumping his guard while the going was good. It was a strong temptation, but he resisted it, deciding to bide his time. A better opportunity might arise later; and he wasn't dead, yet.

Outside, the gangway pointed toward a heavy metal door set in the face of a red rock wall. Together they marched through the doorway, along a wide, smoothly cut passage penetrating deep into the cliff. They reached a large, oval-shaped room with semi-circular tiers of seats rising at one end.

That was where Carlow got the willies again. The seats held an audience the like of which no Earth-born eyes had seen before.

PERMITTING himself to be led to a cushioned bench placed in the middle of the room, Carlow sat and stared dazedly at the assembly. His concentration was such that he was only dimly aware of Harry taking a seat beside him.

There were thirty-eight of them over there. He counted to make sure: Yes, thirty-eight; and no two of them alike. Most had eyes, but a few had not. Most had arms and legs, but some had other things. Only a couple of them

verged on the humanlike. One of these had a neckless head fixed rigidly to his shoulders; the other was the size of a marmoset.

They ran the gamut of size, shape and color; they surpassed anything in his wildest dreams. And they sat there silently, surveying him with judicial calmness.

Harry leaned across and whispered, "Take it easy. I'm official interpreter. I'll tell you what is going on. Don't interrupt—it will do you no good whatever."

THE CENTER figure in the front row stood up, pressed a stud; a gonglike note sounded from a metal hemisphere set in the wall. Opening a thin, purple-lipped mouth, he spoke in sibilants resembling a wavering hiss. Harry translated in low tones.

"Friends, again we have to determine right of entry with formality according to law. An example of the lifeform concerned sits before you now. Being of the same shape and form, and familiar with the subject's language, our brother of the Syrian group will interpret these proceedings for the subject's benefit."

"What the hell is all this?" growled Carlow, fidgeting.

"Hush!" warned Harry. "You'll find out. Be patient."

"Damn it, do I have to squat here like a felon, while..."

"Shut up! Curses and emotion are regarded as symptoms of irresponsible childishness; the least you can do is behave like an adult."

Carlow subsided, scowling.

The speaker continued, "I call upon our brother of the Rigellian group to state the case in favor."

He—or it—sat down. Another stood up, a somewhat reptilian creature holding a wad of papers in a very humanlike hand. The way he cleared his throat before beginning was also human.

THIS ONE launched forth with into a eulogy on the men of Earth. He did not color it, distort it, or lard it with mere opinions; he confined himself solely to facts, all of them flattering. He said that during the last two hundred Earth-orbits, Earthlings had climbed from progress stage eleven to progress stage seven. He spoke warmly of their many virtues—such as care for the aged and the sick; love of lesser animals; pity; self-sacrifice, and so forth. It took him a full hour to get through his speech which, in its purely factual way, was an able performance.

Finally he resumed his seat and the first speaker arose. "I call upon our brother of the Centaurian twin worlds to state the case in disfavor."

Another creature stood up, tall, chameleon-eyed. For some reason best known to

himself, he was wearing plastic filters in his nostrils. He had no papers, no hands with which to hold any. In a voice near the top of the audio-band he uttered a few words with an air of finality, resumed his seat. Harry did not bother to translate what had been said.

AGAIN THE first speaker came up. "Friends, you have heard summaries of the cases for and against. Is entry permitted?"

A unanimous, "No!"

"That is the decision of the associated species," he said. "Let the records be shipped to the central co-ordinating board as evidence that the law has been observed." His attention shifted to Harry. "Inform the subject that this verdict may be reversed when justification is found in the future."

Harry repeated it to Carlow, added philosophically, "That's that!" then conducted him back to the globe-ship and the cabin.

"What does all that business mean?" demanded Carlow.

"It means the time isn't yet; Earthmen are banned from free space."

"How are you going to stop them, eh? It won't be easy, I can tell you that!"

Smiling, Harry said, "We'll process your ship and let it crash upon Earth. The time,

place, and direction of fall will show that it met disaster, drifted sunward, and was pulled into Earth's gravitational field. What we have done to the ship will baffle and alarm your scientists. They'll require many years to evolve a theory to account for it, more years in which to devise a hoped-for cure. They won't send another vessel until they have solved the problem—or think they've solved it."

"What about me?"

"**I**FF WE were of your own kind," Harry told him, "We would deal with you swiftly and effectively. We'd take you out upon the sands, give you a minute for prayer, and put a bullet through your brain."

"Why should you? I've done you no harm."

"Very true," Harry agreed. "That's how we see it, too. Therefore you will be transferred to a nice, lush world which we have reserved for those who know too much—those whom we would not kill, but who must be kept out of harm's way. Your life will be idyllic—but to Earth you will be dead."

Sitting on the edge of the bunk, Carlow thought it over. He cared little for his own predicament. All space-pilots are men ready and willing to face the worst, come what may; they are callous with regard to themselves. But this

arbitrary condemnation of Earth's three thousand millions was something else. The more he thought of it the more it riled him.

"That lanky nightmare said something about us," he reminded. "What was it?"

"I'd rather not tell you."

"Come on, out with it. Surely I have a right to know. If it's undeserved criticism, why can't I answer it? They didn't give me that chance, did they? Do you call that a fair trial?"

"He made a statement that we can confirm and you cannot deny."

"Well, what was it?" Carlow insisted.

Looking uncomfortable, Harry said, "He stated that yours is the only known life-form that systematically slaughters its own young."

Registering bitterness, Carlow snapped, "That doesn't make dogs of us. Even if we haven't learned to keep the peace, we are smart and tough and we keep going. Man's a rover, see?"

"Down, rover, down!" said Harry.

He went out, closed the door. The click of its lock sounded like the crack of doom.

Within an hour the ship lifted, taking yet another undesirable specimen to a planetary heaven that was also a penal colony.

