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THE FEELING

If this story holds true in real practice, it may reveal something about us that we've never known.

By **ROGER DEE**

Illustrated by **GAUGHAN**

“WE’RE just starting on the first one — Walraven, ship’s communications man,” Costain said, low-voiced. “Captain Maxon and Vaughn have called in. There’s been no word from Ragan.”

Coordinator Erwin took his

seat beside the psychologist, his bearing as militarily authoritative in spite of civilian clothing as the room’s air was medical.

“Maybe Ragan won’t turn up,” Erwin said. “Maybe we’ve still got a man out there to bring the ship back.”

Costain made a quieting ges-

ture, his eyes on the three-man psych team grouped about Walraven's wheeled reclining chair. "They've given Walraven a light somnolent. Not enough to put him out, just enough to make him relive the flight in detail. Accurately."

The lead psych man killed the room's lighting to a glow. "Lieutenant Walraven, the ship is ready. You are at your post, with Captain Maxon and Lieutenants Vaughn and Ragan. The first Mars flight is about to blast off. How do you feel?"

Walraven lay utterly relaxed, his face dreaming. His voice had the waning sound of a tape running down for lack of power.

"Jumpy," he said. "But not really afraid. We're too well conditioned for that, I guess. This is a big thing, an important thing. Exciting."

IT HAD been exciting at first. The long preparation over, training and study and news interviews and final parties all dreamlike and part of the past. Outside now, invisible but heart-eningly present beyond the ship's impermeable hull, the essential and privileged people waiting to see them off. The ship's power plant was humming gently like a giant, patient cat.

Captain Maxon passed out muscle-relaxant capsules. The

total boneless relaxation that was their defense against acceleration came quickly.

The ship was two hours out, beyond lunar orbit and still accelerating, when, trained for months against the moment, set each about his task. Readings occupied Maxon and Vaughn and Ragan while Walraven checked his communications and telemetering gear.

It was not until the transmitter slot had licked up its first coded tape — no plain text here, security before even safety — and reported all well, the predicted borne out, that they became aware of the Feeling.

The four of them sat in their unsqueaking gimbaled seats and looked at each other, sharing the Feeling and knowing that they shared it, but not why. Vaughn, who was given to poetry and some degree of soul-searching, made the first open recognition.

"There's something wrong," he said.

The others agreed and, agreeing, could add nothing of explanation to the wrongness. Time passed while they sat, seeing within themselves for the answer — and if not for answer, at least for identification — but nothing came and nothing changed except that with time the steady pressure of the Feeling grew stronger.

Vaughn, again, was first to react to the pressure. "We've got to do something." He twisted out of his seat and wavered in the small pseudogravity of the ship's continuing acceleration. "I've never in my life felt so desolate, so—"

He stopped. "There aren't any words," he said helplessly.

Less articulate than Vaughn and knowing it, the others did not try to help find the words. Only Ragan, professional soldier without family or close tie anywhere in the world, had a suggestion.

"The ship's power plant is partly psionic," Ragan said. "I don't understand the principle, but it's been drilled into us that no other system can give a one-directional thrust without reaction. The psi-drive is tied into our minds in the same way it's tied into the atomic and electronic components. It's part of us and we're part of it."

Even Maxon, crew authority on the combination drive, missed his meaning at first.

"If our atomic shielding fails," Ragan explained, "we're irradiated. If our psionics bank fails, we may feel anything. Maybe the trouble is there."

Privately they disagreed, certain that nothing so disquieting as the Feeling that weighted them down could be induced even

by so cryptic a marriage of dissimilar principles as made up the ship's power plant. Still it was a possible avenue of relief.

"It's worth trying," Maxon said, and they checked.

And checked, and checked.

"**WE** WORKED for hours," Walraven said, "but nothing came of it. None of us, even Maxon, knew enough about the psi-drive to be sure, but we ended up certain that the trouble wasn't there. It was in us."

The drug was wearing thin, leaving him pale and shaken. His face had a glisten of sweat under the lowered lights.

The lead psych man chose a hypodermic needle, looked to Erwin and Costain for authority, and administered a second injection.

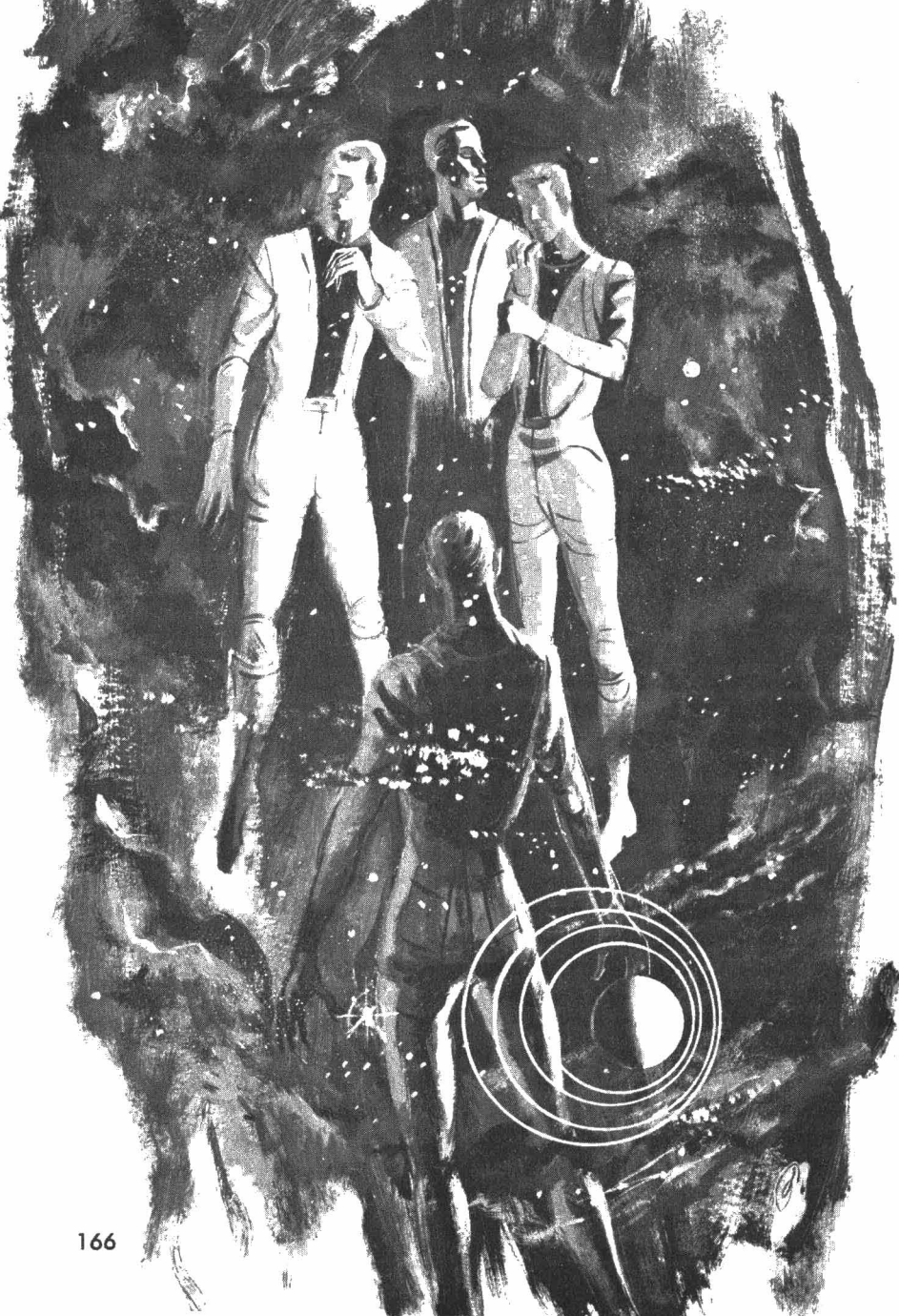
"You gave up searching," he said. "What then, Lieutenant?"

"We waited," Walraven said.

He relaxed, his face smoothing to impersonal detachment as his mind slipped back to the ship and its crew. Watching, Costain felt a sudden deep unease as if the man's mind had really winged back through time and space and carried a part of his own with it.

"There was only one more possible check," Walraven said. "We had to wait two days for that."

The check was Maxon's idea,



simple of execution and unarguable of result. At halfway point acceleration must cease, the ship rotate on its gyros and deceleration set in. There would be a period of waiting when the power plant must be shut off completely.

If the Feeling stemmed from the psi-drive, it would lift then.

It did not lift. They sat weightless and disoriented while the gyros precessed and the ship swung end by end and the steady pressure of the Feeling mounted up and up without relief.

"It gets worse every hour," Vaughn said raggedly.

"It's not a matter of time," Maxon said. "It's the distance. The Feeling grows stronger as we get farther from home."

They sat for another time without talk, feeling the distance build up behind them and sensing through the unwindowed hull of the ship what the emptiness outside must be like. The ship was no longer an armored projectile bearing them snugly and swiftly to a first planetfall. It was a walnut shell without strength or direction.

In the end they talked out their problem because there was nothing else they could do.

"We're men," Maxon said, not as if he must convince himself but as if it were a premise that had to be made, a starting point

for all logic. "We're reasoning creatures. If the trouble lies in ourselves we can find its source and its reason for being."

He picked Vaughn first because Vaughn had been first to sense the wrongness and because the most sensitive link in a chain is also predictably its weakest.

"Try," Maxon said. "I know there are no words to describe this thing, but get as close as you can."

VAUGHN tried. "It isn't homesickness. It's a different thing altogether from nostalgia. It's not just fear. I'm afraid — not of any *thing*, just afraid in the way a child is afraid of falling in his dreams, when he's really had no experience with falling because he's never fallen more than a few inches in his life . . . When I think of my wife, it's not the same at all as if I were just in some far corner of the Earth with only land and water between us. Even if I were marooned on an uncharted island somewhere with no hope of seeing home again, I wouldn't feel this way. There wouldn't be this awful *pulling*."

Ragan agreed with Vaughn that the Feeling was essentially a *pull*, but beyond agreement could add nothing. Ragan had covered the world without forming a tie to hold him; one place

was as good as another and he felt no loss for any particular spot on Earth.

"I only want to be back there," he said simply. "Anywhere but here."

"I was born on a farm in New England," Walraven said. "Out of the land, like my father and his people before him. I'm part of that land, no matter how far from it I go, because everything I am came from it. I feel uprooted. I don't belong here."

Uprooted was the key for which they had hunted.

Maxon said slowly, "There are wild animals on Earth that can't live away from their natural homes. Insects — how does a termite feel, cut off from its hive? Maybe that's our trouble. Something bigger than individual men made the human race what it is. Maybe we've been a sort of composite being all along, without knowing it, tied together by the need of each other and not able to exist apart. Maybe no one knew it before because no one was ever isolated in the way we are."

Walraven had more to say, almost defiant in his earnestness. "This is going to sound wild, but I've been fighting inside myself ever since Vaughn mentioned being pulled toward home. I have the feeling that if I'd only let go, I'd be back where I belong." He

snapped his fingers, the sound loud in the room. "Like that."

No one laughed because each found in himself the same conviction waiting to be recognized. Ragan said, "Walraven's right. There's no place on Earth I care for more than another, but I feel I could be back there in any one of them" — he snapped his fingers, as Walraven had done — "as quickly as that."

"I know," Maxon said. "But we can't let go. We were sent out to put this ship into orbit around Mars. We've got to take her there."

WALRAVEN said, "It wasn't easy. The Feeling got worse as we went out and out. Knowing what it was helped a little, but not enough. We held onto each other, the four of us, to keep the group together. We *knew* what would happen if we let go."

The head psych man looked to Costain and put his needle away when Costain shook his head.

"The ship," Coordinator Erwin said sharply. "Walraven, you did put her into orbit?"

"Yes," Walraven said. "We put her into orbit and turned on the telemetering equipment—they'll be picking up her signals by now — and then we turned our backs on each other and we let go. There wasn't any feeling of motion or speed, but I felt a

fresh breeze on my face and when I opened my eyes I was standing beside a familiar stone fence on a hill above the house where I was born. You haven't told me, but the others came back, too, didn't they?"

"All but Ragan," Erwin said. His tone made Costain think wryly, *Even the military can snatch at straws.* "Maxon and Vaughn called in. But we haven't heard from Ragan."

"He wasn't left behind," Walraven said with certainty. "Ragan has no family, but he has a home. We're standing on it."

An orderly came in with an envelope for Costain, who opened it and handed the paper to Erwin. To Walraven, Costain said, "It's a cablegram from North Ireland. Ragan is back."

Erwin was still gripping the paper in his hand when he walked with Costain out of the hospital into the bright airiness of a spring day. He glared at the warm, blue sky.

"We'll find a way," Erwin said. "We've proved that we can put men on Mars. With the right conditioning, we can keep them there."

"You're a dedicated and resolute man, Coordinator," Costain said. "Do you really suppose that any amount of conditioning could fit you to do what those boys failed at?"

The long moment of considering that passed before Erwin answered left a fine sheen of sweat on his face.

"No," Erwin said.

— ROGER DEE

