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REVIEWS

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TOP PICKS

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COVER

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The First Man on the Moon

By ALFRED COPPEL

John Thomson swore he'd be the first man on the moon.
But he wasn't. He was only the first murderer.

Thick sleep lay at a steep angle on the stark whiteness of the lunar plain. The rocket nozzles were a fused lump of slag; the frayed-and-burnt hull crumpled and warped by the impact of landing. And there was silence . . . complete and utter

silence. There could be none. Thomson realized this. At first the thought had brought panic, but, as the scope of his achievement dawned on him, the fear retreated.

Drained, giddy, half-crazed . . . the

realities of death held no terrors. Not yet. And it was worth it! Fame . . . immortality!

Across the abyss, the whole world waited for word. The transmitter in the rocket had received the crash. The word would come, brought Thurston . . . when he was ready to send it. And sending it, he would place his official seal of immortality on his brow. The truth would close, but wonderfully, astrophysically. There would be no other to dull his rightful glory. Only Wayne could save them that . . . and Wayne was dead. He laughed wildly within his helmet. So deeply dead!

With an effort he dragged his eyes from the sky. Slowly, his reason was returning. There was work to do. Wayne must be hidden. The secret to fame must never leak. And it should be done quickly. Time would fly and in the last hours the fear would cease. He knew that. Right now his thoughts sustained him.

There was the broadcast to look forward to. A billion people waited for his words.

The plan was working . . . almost of its own inertia. He was alone. He was on the Moon, where no man had ever been before him. Not even Wayne. Wayne, who helped the rocket and guided it. Wayne, who had stolen every chance Thurston had ever had for recognition! Well, Wayne was dead now. He had never put a living foot on the soil of the Moon. Only Thurston had done that. And it was his prospect to eternal glory! No one, no one could take that away from him! Weighed in the loaded balance of his mind, it more than compensated for dying alone and on an alien world. In fact, even the dying would add to the legend, and Thurston would live forever.

He ran his tongue over dry lips and managed to pick up the thing at his feet. Wayne's corpse was still slumped from external pressure, and the naked flesh was drying fast in a parchment-like consistency. Moisture was still seeping in useful little dribbles from the charred shell where Thurston's reason now had landed.

Thurston found himself shuddering. The matter had been the hardest part . . . but now it was done . . . and all that remained was to give his dead companion a secret cryptographic message in the vast expanse of pines that lay out there under the

blistering sun.

Thurston's unsteady mind swerved from high elation to sadness. Poor Wayne! He felt he could afford to be generous now. So many years of work so soon to be forgotten. Just one quick blow, and gone, gone Wayne slipped into the limbo of the Earth's forgotten . . .

Under the light gravity, he carried the naked, grubby bundle over. And, as he walked out into the Mare Transquillitatis, his spirits rose again. How wonderful it was to be certain that no one could steal his triumph! Not even Wayne. Particularly not Wayne. He looked down at the thing in his arms and chuckled. The sound was muffled within the pyrexia bubble of his helmet.

After what seemed a long time, Thurston stopped and set down his burden. With his pick-spade he set to work digging a trench in the pumice. As he dug, he found himself crooning happily to the corpse. His voice was high-pitched and hysterical, but of course he did not notice it.

"There, there . . . Wayne, old friend . . . see! I am making a grave for you. The very first grave, Wayne . . . and you shall have it, old friend! Yours the grave and mine the glory!" He laughed hysterically at the thought. "I'll see you didn't make it alive. You didn't, did you? But I made it. Wayne. Mr. Alone . . . all alone! With no help from you, do you hear?"

Thurston clattered on, the sound of his crazed voice dying within the confines of his helmet, while all around him the eternal silence of the Sea of Serenity continued unbroken. The stars above steadily lit the silver sky, and the sun flamed in impotent splendor, furiously silent.

At last the job was done, and Thurston lowered the naked corpse into the shadows. "Goodbye, Wayne. You see, you shouldn't have come here with me. You shouldn't have tried to steal my success. That was a wrong thing. But you're sorry now, aren't you, old friend! Don't fool me badly, Wayne. I'll join you soon. Goodbye, Wayne. Goodbye . . ." Laboriously, he shoveled pumice into the pit and tamped it down with his braded boots. Then he smoothed the surface of the dig until it was as smooth

in the rest of the surrounding plain, satisfied, he turned his back on the grave and started for the cabin.

He sang on the way back, so happy was he to have done with his ghastly companion. Backlessly prodigal of his oxygen supply, he ran toward the open valve of the ship. Breath coming hard, he stumbled into the socket and across the hatched deck-plates to the radiophone. The tiny atomic batteries lowered as he removed the rubidium dampers. Flares flickered the needles of the main set. Thurston adjusted the selector to "relay" and tuned in his suit radio. Then he resumed to sit in the open valve and call the monitoring station.

He smiled with satisfaction as the response cut through the blanket of hissing solar static.

"Hello! Hello, Earth! This is White Knut! My Lord, we'd given you up for lost! Where are you?"

Thurston took a steadier grip on his dazing mind and replied:

"Listen carefully, Earth. You understand? This is John Thurston. I am on the westernmost edge of the Sea of Serenity on the Moon. Where is dead . . . he didn't make it. Died during asphyxiation and I had to drop it of his body in space. Did you get that? I am alone here. The ship crashed on landing. I can't get back . . . but it's worth it! I haven't much time left . . . but I want everyone to know that I made it. It will be quiet now for others . . . after I've pointed the way. I'm the first and it's worth it! Did you get that?"

There was a long silence. Finally, the stationer spoke respectfully. "Yes, Thurston, we got that. Your transmission is being dialed onto the commercial bands. Can you tell us what you are up there? And . . . and Thurston, we all want you to know that our prayers are with you." Team wags flowing on Earth now, Thurston knew. Time for a master to science destined to drift alone on an alien world. He smiled faintly. Even this tiny taste of defiance and respect was hardly wise to his frustrated pride.

Thurston stepped through the valve and lowered himself to the plain. His heart was pounding triumphantly. Carefully,

pointedly, he began to describe his surroundings, interspersing his words with scientific data. He played the lava well. There was no hysteria recognizable in his voice . . . and, if it trembled slightly, there was reason enough for that.

He rounded the bulge of the rocket's nose and looked for the first time at the western edge of the Mare. In the near distance an irregularly-shaped outcropping of rock caught his eye. Transmuting as he went, he made his way toward it . . . He drew nearer. And as he did, first began to stir within him. His steps faltered, but some awful power drove him on. His voice became a shrill rasp in his ears, and so Earth a billion people gaped with horror . . .

"Faye!"

Thurston shouted the name in fear and drove his arm over his face. But the thing remained. It was real!

"Faye . . . or IT CAN'T BE! NO!"

But the figure did not move. The vast, featureless, loomed stark white and naked in the brilliant sunlight. Legs apart, arms folded on its breast, it stared with haunting eyes at the vast emptiness of the lunar plain.

Thurston howled with terror and fury.

"Damn you! Damn you! Why don't you answer me! I killed you once . . . I'll kill you again! I'm the first man here! Do you hear me? I'll kill you again!"

He lowered his head and charged. The last thing he remembered was the soundless battle of his shattering helmet, and the terrible pain as his skull cracked under the suddenly shifting pressures . . .

" . . . And strangely enough, the story of the man's first conquest of space is the story of one man, Sargus, the Egyptian Immortal, who led his people to the Moon in the misty past of Earth's youth. The Lemnians are gone now, but on the westernmost edge of the Sea of Serenity alone stands a statue of Sargus. It stands as magnificent testimony, a monument to the first man on the Moon."

Excerpt from *Tellurian History*,
Quintus Mundus, Geneva Story
Press, 1249 C.E.