

STARTLING STORIES

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A Complete Novel

THE SHADOW MEN

By A. E. VAN VOGT

When he allowed Marie Chanette to die, Lieutenant Cargill tore open the fabric of time to come and found himself haunted by an inescapable destiny! 11

Two Complete Novelets

ROMAN HOLIDAY.....Kelvin Kent 80

When time-trotter Pete Manx goes to Rome, he makes the Romans do as he does in this Hall of Fame Classic reprinted by popular demand

THE RETURN OF CAPTAIN FUTURE.....Edmond Hamilton 94

Curtis Newton, the Man of Tomorrow, and his inseparable comrades clash in fierce combat against Mankind's deadliest enemy—the Linid!

Short Stories

STARS OVER SANTA CLAUS.....William Morrison 71

It's more blessed to give than receive, even when you use a materializer

THE LAST ADMIRAL.....Rene LaFayette 112

Politicians of the future learn you can't teach an old space dog new tricks

HATHOR'S PETS.....Margaret St. Clair 126

She had unanswerable weapons to use when they began acting like people!

REGROWTH.....J. W. Groves 133

Doctor Sutgen performs a weird experiment in cellular development

THE FIRST ONE.....John D. MacDonald 139

It was up to Bus Bannister to climb into the rocket ship, or else!

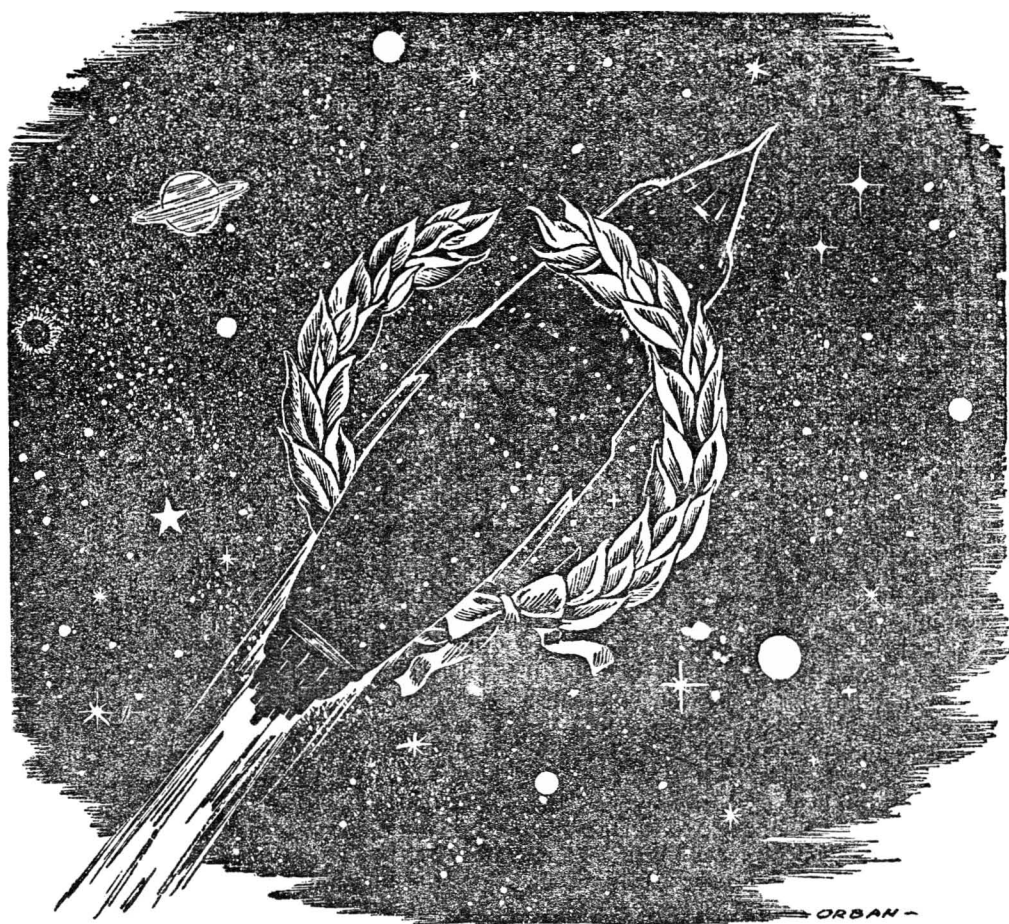
Features

THE ETHER VIBRATES (Announcements and Letters) The Editor 6

CURRENT FAN PUBLICATIONS.....A Review 155

SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF.....A Department 160

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The First One

It was up to Bus Bannister to climb into a rocket ship presumably headed for the Moon, or else. . . .

JAXON BRADLAW leaned forward, his belly against the edge of his walnut desk, leveled a fat finger at the lean young man who sat across from him and said, "Remember Lindbergh, Bannister! Remember Lindbergh!"

He sighed and leaned back, as though the argument was settled.

"Bus" Bannister, recently liberated via

the discharge route, from the discipline of Army Test Rocket Center Three, smiled gently.

"You remember him, Bradlaw. I can't. He flew the ocean three years before I was born."

Bradlaw sighed again. "I'll go over it once more, Bannister. No more. And this time I want a straight answer."

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

"I've been giving you a straight answer, mister. No."

"We don't like that answer, Bannister. Now listen. You know the legislation. It says, in effect, that the proceeds of the Miller Fund will be turned over to the first commercial outfit that can successfully demonstrate a practical method of space travel. A circling of the moon and safe return to earth will be considered as a successful demonstration. My boy, that fund is seventeen million dollars and we mean to have it."

Bannister forced a yawn. "You've said that before." He lifted a languid hand and tapped off the fingers: "Archbold, Hunter, Magerelli, Kolzak. Four good guys you shot into space—*whoom!* No answer. Nothing. Okay, so you looked me up just because I happen to be the only guy who has gotten a thousand miles off the surface and got down again. Your man Harder talked me into applying for a discharge. You socked ten thousand into my account as a guarantee of good faith. You implied that you had something hot—something new. Yep, I'd like to be the first guy to do it—you know that. But why should I take a chance on the same blasted equipment you killed four good guys with?"

Bradlaw said in an exasperated tone, "But, my boy, we're not asking you to take that chance. You don't take any chances at all. Our public relations people set it all up. Crowds come to see the take-off. You get into the ship. We have a special panel built. You get out through that and shut yourself into a recess in one of the lead shields. Twenty-five good inches of lead to protect you from any part of the flareback as the ship takes off. Everybody goes home. That night we get you out of the shield, put you under wraps and fly you down to Mr. Bessor's rancho in Mexico where we've got the duplicate ship ready. When the time comes, you take off in it and make your landing back here. We coach you in what to say. You'll be a hero, my boy, and with the seventeen million. I know we can develop the equipment so that in a short time the trip can be made—without any faking."

"I don't like it," Bus Bannister said, and yawned again.

HARDER, a grim man in his forties, with a face like a protruding shelf of slate rock, pointed a thumb at Bannister and said, "He says he doesn't like it."

"Hop off that Hemingway routine, Harder," Bradlaw said. He looked at Bannister again, and said gently, "Tell me just why

you don't like it, my boy."

"In the first place, it's a seventeen-million-dollar fraud. In the second place, I won't be able to explain the lack of close-up pictures of the moon's surface."

"We've got faked ones ready, made from the best photographs available."

"Okay. So you have. In the third place, I've been looking over the equipment that you think is so hot, and you haven't even caught up to the army and I doggone well know that General Rockets is way ahead of the army. You're fiddling around with a space drive that we discarded four months ago. You've still got manual controls on your counteracting jets for the landing."

"The army and General are using automatic controls that compute weight, height, speed and brake it just enough. Also, your fuel adjustment means that you hit top velocity too soon. I think that you killed four guys that way. They couldn't take the Gs involved. Even your compartment is crummy. You got an eight-foot recoil on your pilot seat, but only in one direction. What the devil does the guy do when he lands? Scrape himself off the port with a putty knife? With the stuff you're using, people will know it's been fak'd. I would, and I just fly the things—I don't build them."

Jaxon Bradlaw snapped at his front tooth with a yellow thumbnail, making a small pocking noise in the quiet office. Bannister glanced idly toward the door, reading in reverse the name, JAXON BRADLAW—PRESIDENT written on the outside of the opaque glass. President of Spaceways, Inc. Bus sneered gently at himself for being suckered into his present unhappy position. True, there was the ten thousand dollars in the bank, but the army had been paying him that in one year when you figured in the space bonus. And no income tax to pay. Well, maybe they'd take him back.

But even as he thought it, he knew that he was dreaming. Spaceways had gone too far in telling their plans to Bus Bannister. It was a game they were playing now. He knew that with seventeen million at stake, he'd never be permitted to walk out knowing what he did about their plans.

He had to admit that the plan was clever. It might work. Thousands would see the ship make that slow, initial, six-foot climb while inertia was overcome and then scream up into the blue, appearing to angle off toward the east due to rotational effect. The government would be checking the entire surface of the earth with radar to guard against any sly returning. Their vigilance

would be relaxed by the time he took off from Mexico. Yes, it might work.

Bradlaw said, slowly, "You know, Bannister, you might have something there."

"Where?"

What you said about the methods. We have made some advances, but—well, considering what we plan to do, it wasn't thought worth the expense to make the alterations. But, suppose we go along with you. Suppose you work with our people on as many changes as you want, and we incorporate them in both ships. It will delay the starting time, but—"

"I still don't like it."

"He still doesn't like it, boss."

"Shut up, Harder. My boy, I hate to do this. But you force me, my boy. You force me!" Here it comes, Bus thought. "You have a choice. You can help us fake the flight, get your hundred thousand when we get the seventeen million. Or, you can go along with Mr. Harder. He makes a specialty of accidents. He has one that can happen to you. A nice clean accident, but permanent, I'm afraid."

Bus Bannister tried to yawn again, but his jaw felt stiff, his mouth dry. He straightened up in the chair and glanced over at Harder. Harder was inspecting his fingernails. Mr. Bradlaw hummed softly and tapped on the plate glass desk top with a yellow pencil.

"You're pretty convincing," Bus said.

"My boy," we have to be. There's a great deal at stake. You see, we know that you often take a bit too much to drink. You might say too much. Our way is safer."

"And what happens if, after the fake, I ask for some more money to keep my mouth shut?"

"I'm afraid that you'd be lynched if you told that it all had been a fake. Men who are to go down in history can't afford to wave clay feet at the citizens. We'll trust you to be smart enough to realize that."

"And you'll make all the changes we'd ought to have?"

"You heard my promise."

Bus managed a grin, even though his heart felt heavy inside him. He knew that he had been often wild, often reckless, but never dishonest—and this would be fraud on an international scale. He would be hailed by all races, all men. First man to the moon. Cheers! Slap that boy on the back, hey?

"Guess I better go along with you."

"Or go no place at all," Harder said.

"Shut up, Harder. Bannister, you'll never regret this."

BRADLAW was as good as his word. For the next seven weeks, Bus Bannister worked at the Las Cruces Launching Area of Spaceways, Inc. The sleek ship, one hundred and twenty-one feet long, twenty feet thick at the widest point, was stripped down to the bare hull and the jets changed to allow for a more gradual pickup of speed. The recoil arrangements on the pilot seat were changed to Bus's specifications, the front jets changed to automatic control. He knew that, as the changes were made to the master ship, identical changes were being made in the duplicate south of the border.

Always, Harder was with him. Every minute of the day and night. There was no avoiding his quiet, cynical alertness.

The special escape-hatch was made at night, the edges grooved so that the joining was invisible. The recess was made in the lead shields. Bus spent over an hour one night practising the escape, sliding down into the deep cavity in the lead which had been prepared for him. He did it over and over until each move was automatic.

On the night before the launching, he put on the protective suit and watched the installation of the master capsules for the atomic drive. Three workmen died in the shops that night. Bus realized that they were the three who had done work on the escape hatch, on the recess in the lead shield. He told himself that it was best that way—the fewer people who knew, the better. A world hero couldn't walk around chewing his fingers and taking quick looks over his shoulder—he had to be sure of his prestige.

* * *

Weather was right. The yellow sun flared down out of the blue sky and the multitudes sat in their cars and aircraft, listening to the speeches over the P.A. system. The Vice President was the guest of honor. He spoke at length.

Bus heard parts of it:

"—intrepid young man . . . vision of the future . . . conquest of space . . . new worlds . . . the stars come home . . . where others have failed . . . we honor the dead and pledge ourselves, nay, re-dedicate ourselves—"

He was grabbed and hauled blushing and confused onto the platform, the silver face of the mike in front of him, the television cameras staring at him with inquisitive eyes.

He said, "All this is fine, but—well, I'm just another guy who tries to drive these things. If I do it, it will be because a lot of other guys sweated out the details in the lab. The astrogation is mechanical, almost. I'll

(Concluded on page 162)

THE FIRST ONE

(Concluded from page 141)

just sit there—and I guess I'll do some praying. Thanks for coming to watch it!"

They yelled and they blew the horns of the cars. The sound roared in Bus Bannister's ears as he climbed the ladder to the scaffold, slid into the open port and screwed it shut. The sound ceased abruptly. It was very quiet inside the ship.

The suit was there—and the time to climb into it. He looked around and relocated the escape hatch. He slid into the G suit and zipped it up the middle. He clamped the wring flap shut around the base of the helmet and appeared for a moment at the port as he had been instructed.

He could see the thousands of cars down there, see the faces closer by, see the tears that surprisingly gleamed in the sun on the gray withered cheeks of the Vice President. They turned and started to hurry back away from the ship, away from the white fury of the expected blast.

He moved quickly to the escape hatch, put his hand on the concealed handle. He glanced at the automatic timer. Ten seconds to zero. Just barely time to make it. He paused for another second. His hand dropped away from the handle. With frantic haste he climbed into the pilot seat, snapped the heavy plastic webbing across his thighs, around his middle. His eyes were on the clock as he fastened the intake vent to his G suit to the compressed air nozzle. He pushed the cock and the air hissed into the suit. Two seconds to zero. He checked the recoil, unlatched the seat, forced his head back against the deep cushioned rest.

A gigantic hand clamped tightly around his middle and he screamed with all the power of his lungs. Through misted, slitted eyes, he looked up through the quartz port and saw the sky dropping toward him.