

**SUPER
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He was the last of the race that had hurled him into the cosmic dark, a lamp of knowledge for tomorrow's Earth. Surely the inheritors, whatever they might be, would grasp in friendship—

The Hand From the Stars

SOMEWHERE in the past there was a large chunk of forgetfulness. At first he thought he was awakening into a hangover, and he lay pleasantly warm and motionless, afraid that movement would bring morning-after nausea. Then, in fragmentary flashbacks, memory began to unreel; events came bubbling to the surface of his consciousness.

He thought first of Marena, and it was very pleasant. He thought of her scented hair and her full lips. . . . Then the lips tasted of salt, and an overpowering emptiness gaped up at him.

She was gone, and he was alone.

When last he had kissed her, he had felt a revolt growing. But he had quenched it. A lifelong philosophy cannot be overthrown that easily. And, lying there, remembering, he knew that he had acted wisely. Men, he thought and believed, are born into the world with duties. The most important is service to humanity, and that had been his duty. No, he had not revolted.

Marena was dead; he was alone.

He tried to shut out the thought and, for a moment, succeeded.

Other thoughts and memories replaced it.

The banquet room had been large; it was the main auditorium made over for this one night. It was cool and pleasant there, almost like outdoors.

Overhead the high ceiling was spangled with artificial stars. The room echoed and re-echoed warmly with the low buzz of dinner conversation.

The buzz died when Commander Haden stood up. Haden's voice was warm and moving. At one point he said: "I know that each of you before me is possessed with a deep sense of reverence because of the force we are about to set in motion. I know, too, that all but one of you cannot help but feel a touch of envy for that one man who will be alive to witness the fruition of our labors. And to that one man I want to say: The responsibilities and the dangers are great; but they are scarcely equal to their ultimate reward."

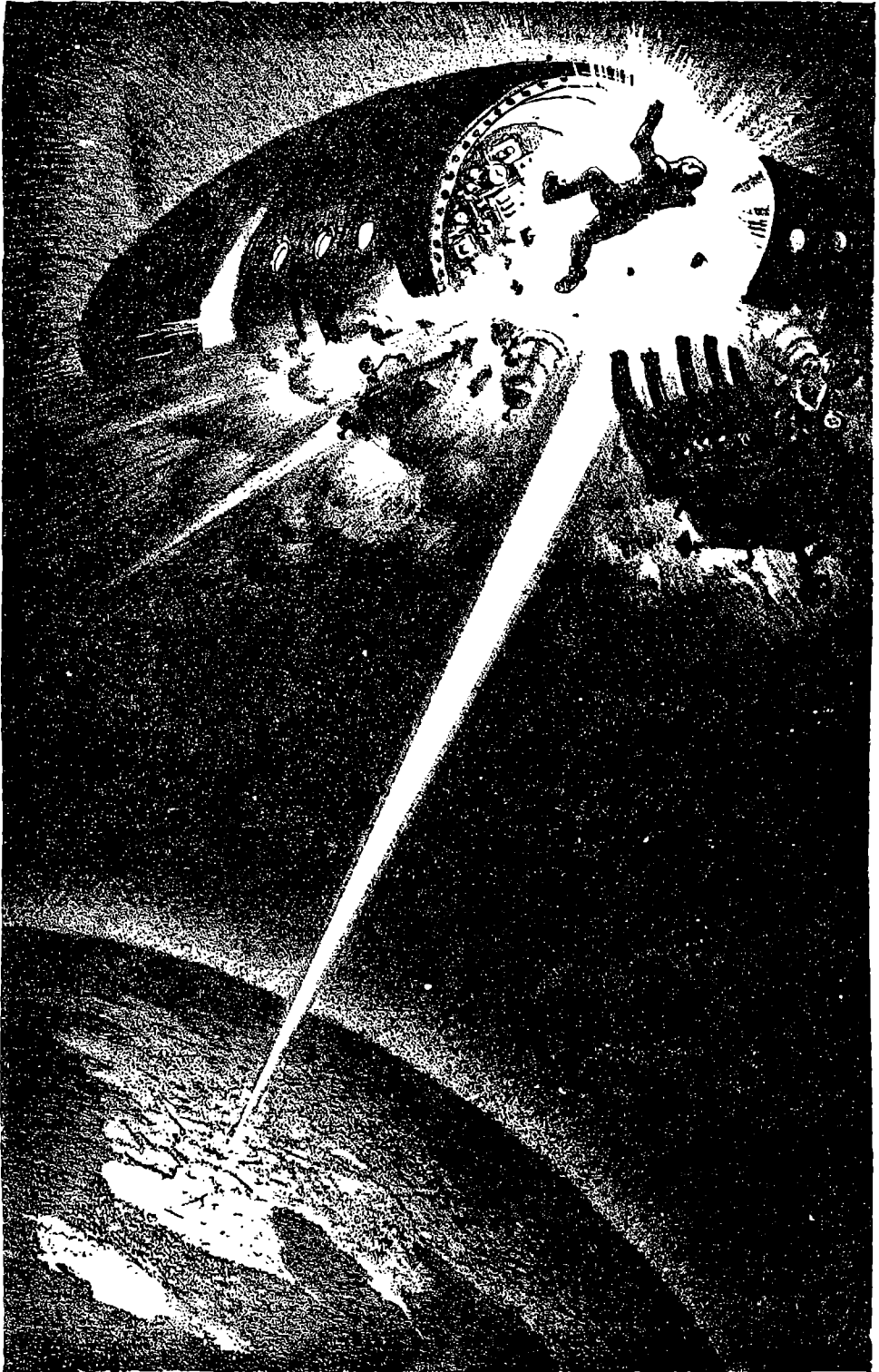
But afterwards-- "I'm afraid," Marena had blurted. "So--so many things could happen. Out there." Then she bit her lip, for she had promised not to mention it. They were to spend that last evening as if nothing waited for him on the morrow.

"I'll be all right," he told her with a confidence he did not feel.

She swallowed and smiled weakly. "I'll--we'll all be praying for you. Praying as long as we live. And we'll teach our children--" She broke off there, and turned and ran.

Lying there, he shook his head savagely and muttered to his brain:

■ **By Kris Neville** ■



"Forget it!"

Think about something else.

Commander Haden had said: "Look well at him—after tonight we will not see him again. Tomorrow he will be speeding upon the epic journey of all time. The very scope and audacity of the undertaking leaves the imagination spellbound."

"He is the first man who will attempt to fulfil our longing to reach out to the stars!"

Epic. That word tasted stale to him now. In the cold loneliness of space, in the horrible void, nothing man could do deserved the title "epic." And he had been there. It had been a living nightmare of staring into impersonal instruments, of recording passionless data. He had been overpowered by a sense of loss and cosmic loneliness. Epic! He smiled bitterly.

That morning, lost in swirling time, had been the last moment when he believed it to be epic. Commander Haden, radiant with joy, shook his hand and said, "Good luck." Marena and her brother stood without joy, filled with the overpowering sadness of two pallbearers. And all the watching millions, indifferent to him as a living, breathing entity, saw instead a myth and legend in the making.

Then the port clanged shut hollowly behind him, and he stood alone in deathly silence.

Finally the all clear bell went off, horribly loud and fear inspiring. The last thing he wanted to do was to push that red firing stud.

He pushed it.

LATER, in space, he hurried to the "space coffin" in nervous haste. Sleep came almost immediately and the cold of space seeped in to surround him and force his strong, healthy metabolism lower and lower

into the deep, dreamless sleep of suspended animation.

Now he lay awakening from the return trip to the stars.

More than two centuries should have passed according to the master schedule. Lethargy covered him; his job was done; his only remaining duty was to arise, land the ship and then—Dead past.

And he would be as dead, inside. Powerful emotional currents tugged at him, for he came from a kindly, emotional race. He would be outdated, more of a scientific curiosity than an individual. No matter how they treated him, that was the way he would feel.

He would be denied even the consolation of further service. He would be a misfit. Times would have moved along and there would be no place for him.

He smiled bleakly. Because of the speed-limiting factor of mass in interstellar flight, he was sure no one had returned from the stars before him. That honor, at least, was his.

But his life of service was done; he had nothing to look forward to but the slow decline from fame to oblivion. Time was relative.

Two days. Two weeks, perhaps, of his time had been two centuries of theirs. "You can't go home again," he told himself bitterly.

All his friends, even the seemingly indestructible Commander Haden, were dust.

And Marena!

His mouth was fuzzy. He reached for water and drank. It was wondrously cool; he swished it back and forth in his mouth before swallowing. But so shriveled from disuse was his stomach that he could scarcely retain it. Only by some deep well of will-power could he force himself to take three energy pills and another sip of

water. Weakness came. He sank back and waited for it to pass, wondering if it was a psychological reaction.

He felt old. Older than time! Older than space. One hand fluttered to his face in frightened motion and found that it had changed, had shriveled like his stomach. He glanced at the back of the hand. Hard but thin. Old, too.

He lay long, unthinking, marshaling his energy. Finally he felt that he could stand, and somewhat later moved weakly to his seat before the control panel.

After a timeless period, he switched on the electronscope and swung it in a broad, searching arc. For a second he felt a chill of pure terror—

Then!

There! There, the Earth, swimming in emptiness. It was a shimmering, indistinct, misty blue.

He cut in the jets and blasted in a routine that was almost reflex toward the spinning ball.

The loneliness and alienness and oldness came back a hundred times more powerfully. All, all dead. Replaced by their children's children.

After what seemed hours, he set a circular course around the Earth and switched the scope to magnification.

His heart pumped wildly, painfully. He felt faint and for a moment he trembled on the edge of insanity.

The land masses, even, were no longer familiar. Nothing on the surface was recognizable. He tore his horrified gaze away and sat for a long, stunned moment.

After a while he grasped at the futile hope that he was off course—but even as the idea presented itself, he recognized it for what it was. Nonetheless he flicked the scope to the stars and superimposed a comparative star graph over the plate.

Changed. Even the stars. Not so

much as to mean that he was off course. But changed.

It all crashed down on him and staggered his imagination: the immensity of time that had passed.

Again he flashed the Earth on the scope. It was still the same; this was no dream. And knowing this, he felt trapped. He felt as if he were beating his bloody fists against walls slowly closing in on him. For he knew that during this inconceivable span of time his race had died. He knew enough history for that: history is the study of impermanence.

How had they passed from the scene? Slowly? Quickly?

No matter.

Gone.

He tried to explain how two hundred years could have been transmuted into this and found no answer. Nor did it matter greatly; the past was dead.

And what now, below? Sterility?

Instinctively his mind shied away from that—repudiated the concept of all life dying.

There must be life below, he thought. Life, while changing, is eternal. In the cosmos it is the expression of some undying power.

He said, crazily, "The sea is a giant womb, and it will have borne more fruit."

He became logical. "If so," he wondered, "how far have they climbed along the evolutionary path?" He was afraid to guess.

HE FLICKED the controls on manual and blasted down in the slow landing spiral. Finally he pulled the ship up into an almost flat glide. He muttered a prayer to the mother-sea across which he sped.

He passed through light into dawn and then to pre-dawn darkness. And a

ragged coast appeared outlined on the scope.

Out of the darkness—

His heart almost stopped!

Lights?

Lights.

Artificial lights! Living intelligence!
A city!

His mind had never before been so acute; it sang and throbbed with energy. He saw the city and in one instant catalogued it in evolutionary advancement: Product of slightly lower culture than his own. Using a crude form of electricity. Still cramped together in the knot of growing pains—centralization. Fifty to seventy years before complete atomics unless their culture was more rapid than his own had been, unless it was forced by circumstances to develop faster.

The cloak of futility slipped from him. All was not in vain. He knew a

purpose again. He was no longer outdated; no—he was advanced. He had knowledge to give them; he had purpose now!

He was aware that he was shouting aloud in animal joy. The echoes reverberated hollowly, mockingly, in the cramped interior.

He swung his course toward the lights with a gentle blast and fired the retarding jets.

He slowed.

Glittering promise ahead, and he was almost there.

Then a finger of flame lanced out from below like a rocket tail. He glowed with warmth; it was a friendly gesture, like an extended hand. They had sent out a tug to meet a weary traveler.

He felt a questioning tap in his mind: How could they have a tug without complete atomics and space flight? . . .

* * *

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Section I
World News

Vol. XIII, No. 357

Monday, Dec. 2, 1949

Daily 5c

Rocket Shot Down Off Atlantic Coast!

Believe Missile Russian Launched!

Washington, Dec. 2 (AP)—High Army officials announced today in a special meeting that investigation is underway to determine the origin of the rocket shot down this morning 50 miles from Cape Cod, Mass.

ACT OF WAR?

Washington, Dec. 2 (AP)—Informed sources here say that high government officials consider the downed rocket as an overt act of war.

If the military investigation produces evidence that the rocket was of military construction,

Russia Silent As World Unrest Grows

Moscow, Dec. 2 (AP)—Attempts to reach Soviet spokesmen for a statement concerning the Cape Cod rocket met consistent rebuffs this morning. Molotov's secretary, reached by phone, said that no statement