

Feb.
1954

SCIENCE FICTION Quarterly

Volume
2
Number
6

Feature Novelet

THE CHILDREN OF THON

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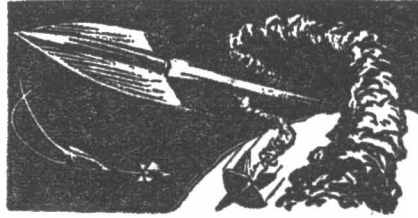
Interior illustrations by Luross, Orbán, and Sibley

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY, February, 1954, published February, May, August, and November, by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, Inc., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy 25c yearly subscription \$1.00. Entire contents copyright 1953 by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, Inc. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed envelopes to insure return if not accepted, and while reasonable care will be extended in handling them, it is understood that they are submitted at author's risk. Printed in U. S. A.

THE LAST HERO

by Bryce Walton



Hendricks didn't care why he wanted to go out to the stars, didn't care what this desire revealed in him. He just wanted to go, and no one was going to stop him . . .



HEY DIDN'T want to go to the stars. None of the old crowd, none of his friends. No one anywhere seemed to understand it. Even Maria didn't want him to go. And that was the least understandable; Maria had always taken so much pride in his achievements.

With anything involving the conquest of the last frontiers of space, Major Hendricks had been first; and he would be the first man to the stars.

There they were though, all not wanting him to go, working at it, all against him, using every wile short of abducting him and hiding him somewhere to keep him from man's final and greatest adventure.

Tonight Maria was even wearing practically nothing, as a distastefully-obvious way of persuading him to stay on Earth, where anyone but an idiot belonged.

"You're pushing your luck," Lieutenant Jake said. He had said the same things so many ways so many times before.

"The big hero," Michelson said. "The big blowoff!" That was lousily-

obvious the way Capt. Michelson always was.

Colonel Comden at least had dignity, with his size and lean face and greying hair, and the fact that sometimes he had a nasty logical persuasiveness. "Look here, Major," he said to Hendricks. "Space? What in hell for?"

Major Hendricks found his laugh seeming slightly uneasy as he sipped his scotch and took two long easy strides to the wall-window that opened out over Washington. Maria slipped near and put her arm around his lean waist, and her glinting brunette hair nestled cozily as ever under his arm.

"Like the man said who finally climbed Everest," Hendricks said. "Because it's there."

Comden's laugh wasn't uneasy. "A mountain *is* there. It has a top to reach, even a view. But where's *there* when you're heading into space, Major? You find one sun, there's always a million more. A billion more after that. They never end, space never ends. Once you start, Major, when are you *there*?"

The uneasiness increased and Hendricks felt the rage of cornered emotion seeking release. Only Comden could do it to him. "*Because it's there.*"

Really, what kind of answer was it, after all? It was full of philosophical evasions, but Comden cut through that stuff.

Comden moved toward Hendricks—a big, impressive uniformed figure of conviction, beneficent and a little condescending. His face was slightly flushed with Hendricks' bourbon. Maria, sensing a strong ally who needed the complete stage, moved away and into the shadows. Lord, she was beautiful, Hendricks thought. Why hadn't he ever convinced himself he ought to marry her? She didn't want him to go, but she'd said she would go along if he didn't give up the idea. No spirit, nothing but frightened martyrdom. But later, she might feel what he felt about the stars.

"See here, Major!" Comden almost growled. "What's the real reason? Don't be a damn fool! They've sent up monkeys. Rats. There's no challenge of the unknown up there; we know what it's like. The telemeters and servometers have already been there. They've mined, explored, covered it. We know Mars and Venus, and the rest of those balls of clay, as well as we know our own earth—without ever having set a foot up there!"

"We've found out everything," Hendricks said, "except how it feels to be out there." He looked up at the stars. "The rats can't tell, and the monkeys won't."

Michelson laughed. "Some guys never grow up. Even a fifty-year-old Major, who's pushed rockets faster than any other man. Even a distinguished Major with greying hair can still be obsessed with what's behind the looking-glass. Now you're a sucker for the never-never land of zero gravity." He sat down in drunken heaviness and continued studying Maria with desire. "And anyway, Major, maybe Maria doesn't want to go through the looking-glass, into a sub-zero wonderland."

Hendricks turned. "That's her busi-

ness, some of mine, and none of yours!"

"Whoa—whoa there," yelled Lt. Jake and slopped cognac all over his girl friend Lara—who was also against Hendricks going to the stars—but who never said anything, even now. "Hey, wait, you guys! Cut that kind of stuff. Listen, Major, you can trust me, believe in me. And I'm telling you, you're crazy as hell!"

"Thanks, buddy," Hendricks said.

"But it's a fact! What about the psyche tests?" The immediate silence was more painfully accusing and condemnatory than all the yelling that had gone before.

"I've been through that testing-mill already, years ago," Hendricks said. He turned his back to them and poured another double-shot of scotch on the rocks. The glass was shaking slightly. He didn't turn around.

"But you'll be out there for years, that is—if you ever can get started back," Michelson said. "I must admit a deep respect for Maria. But even with her, what's going to happen to you—years bottled up in a metal capsule?"

"In the eternal high noon," whispered Comden, "where nothing ever changes, except some needles on some dials." Hendricks could hear Comden's long military strides behind him. Comden whispered, "The reason you don't take the psyche screening, Major, is because you know that no human being could pass it. No human being can stand it for one year out there, let alone more. You'll be a raving psycho in no time!"

"Sure," Jake said. "And as long as you know that's inevitable, maybe that's what you're looking for."

HENDRICKS felt what he had called rage, long-suppressed, at the negative attitudes, the ridicule, the arguments, the red tape that had kept him from his dream so long.

What was happening, or had al-

ready happened to everybody? No more wars, no more excitement, no frontiers in easy reach. Everybody scared, pretending they'd reached a balance and that it wasn't fear, but happiness. Everything locked in stasis, a mechanical malaise. Like rotting Rome—only with no frontiers left, no barbarians waiting on the fringe of decay. Endless rounds of parties and drinking, and easy safe adventures in childish games!

No more frontiers to call men's spirit out of frightened bounds. That was their excuse.

"You're all a bunch of cowards," he shouted all at once. He wanted to smash Michelson's thin face in. "That's it! The big frontier, the big adventure—it's too much for you. You've quit, all of you; everybody's quit!"

"We're scared!" grinned Michelson. He winked at Maria. "Why should a brave hero go out there for nothing, when nobody cares?"

"You running away from something, Major," James mumbled.

"The Russians still might attack, give you some excitement," Comden said.

"Sure," Hendricks said. He still hadn't turned around. "With tele-meters and electronic eyes. You guys anxious to prove your bravery in the great button-pushing contest?"

"Let's drop this ridiculous wrangling and get down to cases," Comden said. "Nobody thinks much about space anymore. That's old-hat escape stuff. The motivation's gone; nobody wants to run away anymore. There's still plenty to do right here—"

"As long as the liquor holds out," Hendricks said.

"And the pretty girls don't," Michelson said. And he looked at Maria in a distorted, veiled obviousness.

"Anyway," Comden said, "you alone have persisted, Major, overcome every obstacle; and now they're going

to send you out there only because you've earned damn near anything you ask for from the service. You've done it. But why? Good Lord, why? Why haven't you married Maria and settled down to a pleasant and sane life, like everybody else? *Why*, Henry? That's the question—"

The rage, which Hendricks had never thought about as possibly fear, exploded up through the length of his body. He was aware that it was more than rage—something unpleasant, to say the least—buried just below the threshold of consciousness. Why not marry Maria? Why not take one of those nice glass service mansions, more fabulous than the hanging gardens of Babylon, and raise kids in the quiet contented atmosphere of the new era? Why not? Why not indeed why not?

Always conscious of Michelson's libidinous attitude toward Maria, still at this moment Hendricks' tolerance dissolved in pink acid; he heard the faint, far thud, felt the pain in his arm, and Michelson was lying on the floor, still grinning cynically as he dabbled at his split lip.

Hendricks felt his eyes fixed on the blood strangely, then he was sick.

His voice choked. "All of you get the hell out! The party's over!"

So they moved from him slowly, not veiling sadness that was even a kind of pity.

"Get out!" Hendricks yelled hoarsely. "The party's over! Stay here in this sick green paradise of Earth and rot. Stay here in your great big global nursery, kiddies, and play with one another!"

"Wait—" Comden said and raised his hand.

"Get out!" Hendricks yelled, louder and louder. "Make this the farewell party. Goodbye! Farewell, old comrades in each other's arms!"

They filtered like dimming light into the hall, and the heliocars started purring on the gravhook landing that en-

circled the apartment building. Guide-beams hummed as the automatic pilots prepared themselves.

SHE WAS dragging at Hendricks and he pushed her violently to the wall. "You too, baby," he said softly. "You're not in this either. Thanks for trying."

"But, honey—but Henry—let me—"

"You'd keep on saying I was crazy for wanting to do this thing. And then at the last minute, you'd be a martyr and go it with me. But then what? You don't belong out there any more than any of the rest of these soft-bellied dogs!"

How thin her face was suddenly, and shadowed with the dark worry of lonely and frustrated and humiliating years. She touched his hand. "I don't care how wrong you've gotten all the other things, honey. I only care about how you're wrong about me."

She moved back then and he almost moved toward her—as he had almost done many times before. He didn't; he never had. He started closing the door panel. Then suddenly, shockingly to Hendricks, she kicked savagely at the door and screamed at him.

"You've been lucky, you think," she said bitterly. "You've had everything. Handsome, a hero. You've had me the way you wanted me, any time. That would have been all right; I'd have been happy, never marrying you, knowing you were afraid, a scared kid. I would have been happy, honey. You made me feel like somebody. But it's over, and you did it, so thanks."

"Don't mention it, baby," he whispered. "Especially, don't scream it."

"You've had everything you wanted, honey, except yourself."

He slammed the door, turned the lights off, and stood in the starshine that flooded silver over the glass-paned wall. He could see the giant silver heliocar bugs of the night, whirling across the moon.

And then he saw Maria's small red sports job, and that was last to go.

"Goodbye, baby," he said. And for a moment he felt sad. But other things of thought that might afflict him frightened him and he stopped thinking. Why, he had almost thought, was it so nice suddenly—now that everyone was gone and the door was closed so tight against them? He almost thought about how it could be that—all during the years, in spite of the ritualistic acts—he'd never really been with Maria. But these, and so many other things he had almost thought about so many times before, he again did not think about now.

He liked being here alone. He didn't have to drink when he was alone.

At the window, he looked up.

But would it be so up there in the last great silence? In those interstellar silences that the psyche boys said could only, for a human mind, be wastelands of pain and loneliness and inevitable crackup?

He went to bed knowing he had seen the last of them, his buddies, relatives, friends, mild acquaintances. No more Maria; no more longing unfulfilled.

In the morning it was his day and he walked along the walkramps toward Central Headquarters in Washington.

Monkeys had been up there and returned; rats had survived. Men never had been able to take it, and finally they didn't care anymore and stopped dying for it. Meteors. Tempests of radiations; extremes of heat and cold; acceleration and deceleration tearing the weak inner organs from their feeble moorings.

And then, anyway, the enthusiasm waned. Men, who could adapt to anything, solve anything, go anywhere, do anything, no longer cared about the stars.

Only Hendricks cared.

Only one man left who cared about the stars.

Maybe there were others scattered through the apathy. But for him, the conditions were fortunate. He had authority, prestige, seniority, high rank; he'd been able to push himself through against terrific odds.

Well, this was the day. Even for him, the man who was going out there, the man who had pushed it against every conceivable obstacle, the way of his going was still a mystery.

Why, he thought as he walked over the city of the land of the world he would probably never see again, was so much withheld from him?

COMMANDER BURTON, Chief of Biological Research, and several other allied branches, looked at Hendricks for at least two minutes before he got up and went to the window. He was thin and delicate and meditative, but so cold, detached. "Take a good look, Major," Burton said. "You won't be seeing it again."

"I could come back."

"You could."

"Anyway, I've seen it all."

Burton shrugged. He didn't look sad or remonstrative, or anything like that; he didn't care. Hendricks had always liked him because he never seemed to care.

Burton said casually, "It'll take some time to prepare you, Major. Quite a while—"

Hendricks jumped up. "What's that? Some time? I've been waiting for some time. This was supposed to be the day!"

"It is," Burton said. "But a flight into space doesn't start with the ship blasting hydrogen flames. It starts—" he hesitated and pressed at his stomach and his heart and his head—"in here."

Hendricks felt a slight tremor in his knees. And in his stomach where Burton said a space flight really started, a

pool of ice-water seemed to form. "All right," he whispered. "What do you mean, Burton? I pushed this thing through impossible channels and I got an okay. I signed away myself and gladly. Who has anything to lose? Why in hell don't we get started?"

"We *are* getting started."

"I've had to do everything from beginning to end. Nobody was interested—"

"Not entirely true," Burton said. "Purely from an experimental point of view, we've always wanted to send a man out into space. Not that it's necessary, but the results would be of some clinical interest. We had to know for certain of someone who really wanted to go, whose psychological reasons were sound—even though hidden from himself. And the better reasons for that. It's a funny thing, Major, but you're the only one."

"I know that!" Hendricks shouted. "And here I am. This is the day, and I'm ready! I've been ready for a year, waiting, waiting. A lot longer than that! Now you give me a song and dance about getting ready! I am ready—"

"Psychologically," Burton nodded. "Physically, you have to be prepared."

"No one can take more G's than I can! You know that! If any man can take a blast-off, I can—"

"That's just it," Burton said. His eyes weren't looking at Hendricks, but at the wall. "Monkeys, rats, yes. But men can't take it, that's for sure."

Hendricks took a deep breath. "All right," he finally said. "What do you mean? And whatever you mean, why haven't I been in on it before this?"

"The process wasn't perfected, now it is. So now, Major, you'll be in on it."

Burton came back to his desk and picked up the phone. "Martin, is the lab ready for Major Hendricks?"

He nodded and dropped the receiver. "Let's go over to the lab now,

Major, and you can be in on it."

Hendricks turned Burton around. "I don't care what it is. All I want to know is—how long will it take?"

Burton hesitated. He had never obviously hesitated before. "A year."

Burton's face began to blur slightly like something seen distorted through watered glass. Hendricks felt the man's hand on his shoulder.

"But it won't matter, Major, believe me. Time won't have any meaning like that to you. There's too much anesthetizing necessary; time will resemble a dream."

Hendricks didn't say anything then. He wondered what it was he was feeling somewhere deep that stirred his heart and swelled his throat.

"Have you settled up everything thoroughly, Major? Said goodbye to your friends, and so forth?"

"Yes."

"Then why not just consider your flight as beginning today?" Burton opened the door. "A year, more or less, won't matter to you." He turned, holding the door open for Hendricks. "Will it, Major?"

Hendricks had to admit that it wouldn't. Or that it shouldn't. He thought about it on the way down in the elevator to the big labs, trying to figure how it ever could.

And it never did.

It was like a quick nap that somehow seems long but you know it isn't, and you dream complex, involved dreams that makes the false duration bearable, and often times pleasant.

Only when Hendricks woke up, and knew he was awake, it was still a dream, and the pleasantest dream of all.

He wasn't really one of men anymore. Perhaps in a purely symbolic sense he represented the spirit of *Man*. He was something that could stand to get alive into space, and once there stay alive indefinitely.

Oh—he would die there too if he

stayed long enough perhaps, but it would take a lot longer for him to die than if he had been still one of men.

He had known what was coming. And now that he no longer really was capable of knowing in his former capacity, he was happy.

COMMANDER BURTON was there when the spaceship blasted off, and was no longer distinguishable from the stars of night that received it without question. He stood by the big window and watched it disappear.

"No one will follow you, Hendricks. You're the last of your kind. And where's the heroic concepts of this moment they used to dream about, Major? Your motive is fear, the old fears that most have lost."

Burton smiled thinly to show that he didn't really care. "Fear, Major. Fear of too much complexity, of no identity, fear of obligations, and—" Again for the second time that he could remember, he noticeably hesitated. "And what else, Hendricks? Fear of the awful challenge of a bounded life that no longer offers neurotic frontiers into which to flee?"

He sat down at his desk and straightened some papers which he scarcely saw. "Running away, Major. The last escapist, and the final escape."

He switched off the light and sat there in the starshine filtering through the panes. And if he really cared, now only the moon could see.

And somewhere beyond the orbit of Saturn, beyond the Black Planet, the ship was a speck in the immensity that has no end, and after a while Hendricks remembered no beginning.

His eyes were closed in that basic kind of sleep from which there is no compulsion to awake. His body was curled up, foetus-like, in its shock-

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THE LAST HERO

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proof liquid tank. This indeed was no wasteland of pain, loneliness, complexity, or regrets. The challenge of frightening unknowns was over for him—over for good.

Ten, a hundred, a thousand years, aeons. What did it matter to Hendricks? Nothing mattered to Hendricks anymore. He floated in his liquid, his body reconditioned to breath-liquid instead of air, to absorb nourishment from self-perpetuating liquid, an amniotic fluid, oxygen-bearing. It filled his loose, vulnerable body-cavities against the shaking shocks, and he was warm in it and safe.

Fifty years before, Hendricks had

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floated in such a liquid, warm, protected from shock, fed, curled up in the soft dark fluid of gentle unawareness.

And as the ship headed on out toward interstellar silence, Hendricks turned lazily in his protective liquid, knowing nothing of future's fears, or yesterday's pains.

Without beginning or end, in an eternal moment of contentment, Hendricks headed outward carrying the spirit of *Man* to the stars.

