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the
odyssey
of
sam
meecham

by . . . Charles E. Fritch

Sam Meecham did not realize that his chance discovery of unlimited power would bring back that which he had lost eight long years ago.

TO LOOK at Sam Meecham you'd never have dreamed he was a man of decision and potential explorer of the unknown. In fact, there were times when Sam wouldn't either. He was a pink, frail-looking person with a weak chin and shoulders used to stooping, and stereotyped thinking immediately relegated him to the ranks of the meek and mannerly. These, oddly enough, happened to be his characteristics—but that was before he discovered the hyperdrive.

In his capacity as an atomic engine inspector, his work was most uncreative. He was a small cog in a large cog-laden machine. A government worker helping to produce engines that would send supplies and immigrants and tourists to the U. S. Sector of the Moon Colony.

Day after day, week after week, freshly made engines would come sliding down the conveyor belt. And mechanically Sam Meecham would attach to each two wires that led from a machine by his side, flip a switch, and if the dial on his machine read at least fifty, he could pass the machine on as being adequate for the job of Moon ferry. He'd been attaching

This story may, in a sense, be tongue-in-cheek. But the underlying struggle, if you look into the characters' hearts, is terrifyingly real and human—the kind of struggle so many of us go through. But Sam Meecham was lucky. He not only got what he wanted, but something he hadn't realized he wanted.

those two wires in place and watching fifties for five years, and it looked as though he'd be doing it for fifty-five more.

Then one day a defectively wired machine came sliding along, and dutifully Sam hooked it up and flipped the switch. Automatically, his eyes glanced disinterestedly at the dial showing Comparative Thrust. His eyes bugged. The needle had passed fifty, had gone to the 100 mark (never before reached), struck the metal projection, bent, and was whirling in a rapid circle!

Sam quickly cut off the motor, then he glanced furtively about to see if anyone had noticed. The room was a flurry of men busy at routine tasks and none of them seemed particularly interested in anything that was going on at his table.

Sam checked his own machine and found the tester in perfect working order. He hesitated a brief moment, then flipped the switch again. He was prepared for the whir of the dial now but still it frightened him a little. There must be something wrong; no atomic engine could have that much Comparative Thrust. Yet—the tester was perfect.

Sam Meecham shut off the tester and stood very still for a minute and thought about it. His glance fell on the intricate wiring within the atomic engine and he saw with a start that it looked different from usual. Wires were where wires had never been be-

fore, where wires were not supposed to be.

With another quick glance about him Sam began copying the wiring pattern on a sheet of paper. He thrust the paper into his pocket as the foreman came up to him.

"Say, Meecham," the foreman said, "that last engine okay?"

Sam Meecham hesitated briefly, then said, "The wiring was a little fouled up. Busted the dial on the tester."

The foreman shook his head. "I was afraid of that. Some wireman on the third floor came in half drunk a few minutes ago. That was only his first machine, so the others ought to be okay." He jabbed a finger at the engine. "You'd better send it back up."

When the foreman was gone Sam checked the wiring with his diagram to make certain he hadn't made any mistakes, and then he disconnected some of the wires—just in case.

For the first time in years Sam Meecham felt a new freedom. He'd always been a dreamer hampered by cold reality—a man with his head in the stars and his feet chained to solid earth. He'd wanted to go to the Moon when the government first started colonizing; but Dorothy, his wife, talked him out of it.

At various times he had felt that secret longing, that beckoning of the stars, but each time he had shelved the desire and turned to attaching his two wires of the

tester to their proper terminals on each atomic engine, and then when his shift was up he turned homeward to face an existence equally uninspiring.

The moment he had seen that needle pass into the hundreds, Sam Meecham knew what he was going to do. He had planned it years ago, when he first stood alone in the night and gazed upward at the glittering diamonds that lay beyond reach. Even then he had known what he would do if ever the opportunity presented itself. In those moments of self-pity that came too often, however, he had told himself that it was only wishful thinking and cursed himself for being a weakling and a dreamer who did nothing about his dreams. But he had resolved that someday he *would* go out among the stars.

That day had come, and as Sam Meecham went homeward that evening he felt his heart beat in time with the pulsing light of the stars overhead. But with this new exultation he felt a desperate fear. A fear that he might again bypass his opportunity as he had done so often before. Yet he knew that this was his greatest chance, perhaps his last chance. He must be brave and strong, and above all confident that his intense longing would make his venture successful.

"How did everything go?" Dorothy asked when he came in.

It was a mechanical question and he answered it mechanically,

"Okay. Everything went as usual."

He didn't want to look at her. She had grown plump since they had married eight years ago, and by not looking at her he could somehow pretend she was still slim and attractive.

She was lying on a couch, wearing a housecoat, and didn't look up from the magazine in front of her. "Supper's on the table," she said.

For eight years he'd had flat, uninspiring meals, meals that kept one from starving and no more. His complaints had met with more hostility than he cared to cope with, and always, meekly he had retired from the scene of battle wishing he had submitted and thus avoided the tongue lashing before which he felt so helpless.

Once more in the surroundings that bred it, a familiar, distasteful helplessness rose to envelop Sam Meecham. It came across him as a feeling of despair and bewilderment, and he wondered sickly if he would ever escape this.

Yes, he told himself, clenching his fists determinedly. But he would have to bide his time. Slowly, not really tasting it, he ate the cold, uninviting meal set on the table.

Securing the engine was the least of his worries—at least from a commercial standpoint. The factory was turning out atomic engines at almost production-line rates, and civilians could easily get them for private use—so long as they operated them at low

speeds and within the atmosphere of Earth.

That last thought drew a long secret laugh from Sam Meecham. At low speeds. The government considered anything above a 50 CT as high speed. And here he was with a secret that could enable him to travel at—who knows what speeds? He could give it to the government later, but right now he had his own use for it.

Dorothy would prove an obstacle, however. She always was an obstacle, and there was no reason to assume she wouldn't be one now. And he was right about that. The following payday, when he took his check and splurged it on an atomic engine, Dorothy was madder than a Uranium pile approaching critical mass.

"Here I scrimp and save on that measly paycheck you bring home," she wailed, "and you go out and buy luxuries we don't need if we could afford them. Look at this dress! It's old—all my clothes are old. And you know why? You want to know why?"

Sam Meecham already knew why. It was because as a manager of his financial affairs Dorothy was a flop. Often he had wanted to tell her so, but the more times he attempted to open his mouth the louder she had wailed. It was a lot easier just to let her explode and then fizzle out. Even now he had the desire to shout at her to see what would happen.

But her shrieks made him grow sullen and unsure of himself. Perhaps he *had* wasted the money. After all, the engine they had in their outdated model rocket was good for a few years more. But for a long trip through space—it would never do.

The explosion was over and she was merely sizzling. She had folded her arms resolutely, determined that he should cancel the order for the engine immediately.

Sam Meecham felt a wave of helplessness surge over him. He felt lost and bewildered. Perhaps she was right; maybe it *was* foolish. Here he was: Sam Meecham, thirty-five, whose mediocre living was made attaching two wires to two terminals day after day, week after week—a man who suddenly saw a pointer go unexpectedly beyond the fifty mark, and who immediately began having delusions of grandeur. He was a dreamer—but dreams and reality were two different things, and sometimes he confused them. He shook his head, feeling like a fool.

"Well?" Dorothy's face was before him, determined, demanding.

Sam said, "All right I'll take it back."

She smiled condescendingly, like a mother does when a child admits a wrongdoing.

Conditioned responses, Sam thought bitterly; that was the whole trouble. This cravenness, this kowtowing before any idiot

with a louder voice, certainly wasn't in his genes. The trouble was in his conditioning, started when he was an adolescent. Give somebody an inch and they'll take two. Pretty soon they're walking all over you, and you've become so used to it you don't complain.

He thought of his job, of the eternal fitting of two wires in place. He was a cog and nothing more—a cog that could be replaced as swiftly, as efficiently as any part of an assembly-line atomic engine could be replaced. He looked up into the blank, smiling, self-satisfied face of his wife. He thought of the stars beckoning overhead. The *stars!*

"No," he said suddenly, decisively. The word fell like a sledgehammer blow in the stillness of the room.

Dorothy's vacuous smile faded, uncomprehending. "What?"

"No," Sam said, trying to keep his voice even. "I've changed my mind. I'm keeping the engine whether you like it or not."

Dorothy's mouth hung open in surprise, and before she could recover enough to launch a fresh tirade Sam Meecham had walked out, slamming the door behind him. He paused in the cool evening and gazed upward. The government had gone only to the Moon. Sam Meecham was going to the stars!

The next day he was given the silent treatment. It had begun the night before when he returned from his walk. Dorothy was in

bed, awake and sniffling over the cruelty inflicted upon her by an unthoughtful husband, and when he came in she turned her back and wouldn't speak. Sam didn't mind that; in fact, it was a welcome relief. But all night long she sniffled into her pillow, trying to win him over.

Sam felt an odd mixture of sympathy and anger. "Oh, shut up," he said finally, and stuck his head under the pillow.

In the morning the treatment continued, but it was not totally silent—for Dorothy's air of hostility was now accompanied by low, sometimes indistinct mumblings.

Suddenly Sam said, "This coffee's cold."

"If you don't like it," Dorothy said, and thrust her face near his, "make some yourself."

Sam half-rose and gripped the table. "Look, my lovely one, *I'm* the gent who brings home that weekly paycheck you can't get along without. Measly or not, it's good, honest American dough that lets us live a little decently—and the least *you* could do is give me warm coffee in the morning!"

His voice had risen almost to a shout and Sam himself was surprised at it. Dorothy's eyebrows crept into a bewildered frown, and like one in a trance she moved to turn on the heat beneath the coffee pot.

Sam's heart was beating swiftly as he sat down. Conditioned responses, he thought a little wild-

ly. He'd started it off last night by defying Dorothy—and now, bit by bit, it was becoming easier. All he'd have to do was keep it up, see that he didn't lapse.

He sipped the coffee slowly, as if tasting his recent triumph in the black liquid.

"You'd better hurry," Dorothy said, looking at him a little uneasily.

Sam glanced at the wall clock and began gulping the hot liquid. Ten of eight! He'd have to hurry. He paused suddenly, the cup in mid-air, and wondered. Hurry to what? To those two wires and the tester and the endless stream of untested engines flowing toward him?

With an infinite firmness, Sam Meecham placed his cup on the saucer. "I'm not going in," he said.

Dorothy looked at him as though he were crazy. "What do you mean, you're not going in?" she demanded. "Just because you've got some mulish notion in your head, do you think we have to starve. You're going in and liking it."

"The engine I bought is coming today," he said in a quiet voice. "I want to install it." In Sam Meecham's eyes there was a deadly fire that even his wife had not seen before. She gulped and backed away a little.

"But—"

"Call up the foreman," Sam said. "Tell him I'm sick. No, wait." He paused, smiling coldly.

That would leave him an out; he could always go back to the job if he changed his mind. He said slowly, "Tell him I've quit."

"Sam!"

"Tell him I've quit," Sam insisted. That was the thing. Burn your bridges behind you so you can't turn back, so the only road is ahead.

Sam Meecham was going to the stars, and he would never return!

The atomic engine came that afternoon, neat and shiny and sleek, with all the wires in their proper places, checked and double-checked by a sober human cog in the prison from which Sam Meecham had just escaped.

Sam busied himself in the hangar, lifting out the old engine and replacing it with the new one. Carefully, he settled it into its housing and bolted it down. Then he rearranged the wires into the pattern outlined on the sheet of paper.

Dorothy brought him coffee. That surprised him but he accepted it gratefully.

"Can—can I help you, Sam?" she offered.

He looked at her, perhaps a little disappointed that her face was serious. He said, "Sure you're not just trying to be nosy?"

A sharp pain darted into her eyes and she turned away.

"Wait," he said.

He called himself a fool. It was another of her tricks and he was falling for it. He put a re-

straining hand on her arm and remembered another time eight years ago when the touch would have sent electric thrills coursing through him. Oddly, he felt a small remnant of the pleasure stir within him.

"All right," he said gruffly. "All right, you can help."

So he was a fool. He'd been a fool before and chances were he'd be one again more often than he'd care to admit. In a short while hours perhaps, he'd be gone—and he'd never see Dorothy again. Somehow the thought was not as comforting as he had expected, and he tried to work off a lingering doubt that rose to plague him.

They worked through the afternoon, testing any weak parts the rocket might have, bracing the struts, checking for leaks. Sam found two space-suits in the locker. He'd better leave one, he thought. They were expensive and Dorothy might need one sometime. With him gone, she couldn't afford to throw money around. Yet he might need it more than she ever would. For a minute he stood undecided, and then he put them both in the locker.

Dorothy came into the room and smiled wearily at him. "It'll go any place now," she told him proudly.

In her eyes Sam saw an indefinable something. Something he might have seen eight years ago—but mixed with it was a sadness he had not known she

could possess. Guiltily, he turned his gaze away.

"We—we'd better go in and eat," he said, looking at his watch without seeing it.

She didn't say anything, and that was odd. Sam wished she would nag and complain as she always had before. He wondered why he wished that, when only a short time before he had wanted just the opposite. It was with a start that he realized the reason. He was running away! That was it. He was running away, and he wanted to be deathly certain that he had good cause to run. Slowly the suspicion was creeping over him that the situation had changed slightly, was changing more.

He would leave tonight, he told himself, before he weakened enough to shelve his plans for another comfortable rut.

Sam's voice was a little hoarse. "What are you doing here? What do you want?" He had finished loading enough supplies aboard the rocket to last him months.

Dorothy came toward him from the darkness.

"It's no use," he said. "You can't talk me out of it this time."

But she only smiled sadly and said, "I know that, Sam. I came to say good-bye."

"Good-bye?"

"You're leaving, aren't you?"

"Yes." He looked at the ground, studying the darkness.

"I'm sorry, Sam," she said. "We started out wrong. Maybe, if we tried again—"

But Sam said quickly, "No. I'm sorry too, but people don't change."

The remark startled him. He had used it occasionally to rationalize his position, had been convinced of its undeniable truth—yet suddenly he realized that he himself was its living denial. People *could* change, just as he had changed, just as Dorothy could change. It had been partly his fault when he first gave in to something he didn't want to do, and then to something else, and something else after that. He had helped dig the rut in which he had found himself, taking it for granted just as Dorothy had taken it for granted.

Her hair was soft in the same moonlight that had shone eight years before, and Sam Meecham felt a desire that had been too long unfulfilled.

"Dorothy, I—"

He hesitated. The decision came hard to him, for much of his life had been devoted to giving in to the decisions of others. This was the moment he had been waiting for, and now at the last moment he was uncertain.

He said suddenly, "Can you pack a few things?"

"Sam—" Her voice in the darkness was eager. Her hands touched his. Soft hands.

"You'd better hurry," he told her.

Sam watched her go to the house, and doubts began to gnaw at him. Was he going to destroy

his plans now at a whim? He felt an impulse to get into the rocket and leave without her—yet he thought of the cold emptiness of space and himself drifting through alien worlds, alone, lonely. Perhaps it was wrong but he couldn't condemn her for something that was partly his fault. He was trying to become the person he once might have been, and it was only fair that she should have the same chance.

Dorothy came hurrying back, a suitcase in her hand, and there was an eagerness about her that pleased him. He helped her put the suitcase on board.

"Dorothy—"

Her voice was soft and low. "Yes, Sam?" Starlight danced in her eyes.

He pulled her gently to him. He kissed her, and that night eight years ago came back, and in his arms was the young eager bride he had known, the one he loved.

Minutes later they rose on wings of fire, in a slow upward spiral that quickened painlessly. Sam had not questioned the hyperdrive. It had worked in the factory and it would work here. He watched the needle cross the dial in a swift, steady movement.

Dorothy placed her hand in his. "Where are we going, darling?"

Sam Meecham smiled at her, confident that he had made the most important decision in his life. He pointed through the forward window.

Ahead of them lay the stars.