

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

- THREE SURVIVED *by Robert Silverberg* 2
Roy thought his two companions would be dead weight
- THE SEARCH FOR SALLY *by A. Bertram Chandler* 46
Sally was dead. But her mind still survived!

SHORT STORIES

- ALTERNATE UNIVERSE *by Robert Bloch* 36
That mescaline drug had an odd effect
- I'LL TAKE OVER *by George Whitely* 76
The mechanical Brain ran the huge starship
- HUNT AND STRIKE *by Raymond E. Banks* 96
The ultimate guided missile will seek one man alone
- TWICE-TOLD TALE *by Theodore L. Thomas* 114
If space is curved, then the universe is round
- INVASION FOOTNOTE *by Cortwainer Bird* 121
Sim was just a robot—but he got ideas

FEATURES

- LOOK TO THE STARS *by Scott Nevets* 45
- NUCLEAR NEWS *by Steven Rory* 75
- THE MAIL BAG 126

COVER *by Kelly Freas*

ILLUSTRATIONS *by Emsch, Orban and Bowman*

W. W. Scott — Editor

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TWICE-TOLD TALE

by THEODORE L. THOMAS

If space is curved, then the universe is round and a starship speeding on a straight course must in time return once again to the earth—in theory that is

IT was a cold night in December when Nathaniel Dove came home. The first sign of his return was a gentle stirring on the radio of a lonely outpost in the Arctic. The stirring grew louder and became static. And faintly, ever so faintly through the static, a human voice began to emerge.

The sleepy operator paid little attention to the stirring but he looked up at the sound of the static. And when he heard the faint human voice he got up and went over to the powerful set and began adjusting the dials and the directional antenna. The voice began to pulse and the static changed to waves of sound. Then for the first time the operator began to dis-

tinguish words. Dimly, sounding like a whisper amidst the crashing roar of surf, he heard words.

“...ing Earth. Nathaniel Dove calling Earth. Nathaniel Dove calling Earth.”

Stunning shock gripped the operator and he had to force his trembling hands to a sufficient degree of steadiness to continue manipulating the dials.

“... calling Earth. Acknowledge, please. Give me landing directions. Estimated time of arrival about four hours Earth. Nathaniel Dove calling...”

Under normal conditions the operator would have immediately set about to make contact with the starship. But now

he put that aside. He looked at the reading on the directional antenna and stepped over to the transmitter and called Communicent in Washington, D.C. It took him only ten seconds to relate what had happened. And the world began to go mad.

A long black car screeched out of Communicent on Congress Heights and wheeled onto South Capitol Street. By the time it reached the bridge it had picked up a motorcycle escort and the sirens rent the still night air. Citizens fresh in bed grumbled and rolled over and mumbled about the sirens that seemed to forever roam the streets of Washington. Straight to the White House the car sped and when the guards saw who was inside, the wide gates swung wide immediately. And just as quickly someone went to wake the President.

He heard the news in his upstairs office. His jaw dropped and he sat down quickly. He recovered swiftly and picked up the phone and placed half a dozen calls. And each of the men he called placed several

calls of their own. Like the ever-widening ripples on the calm surface of water the word spread.

People began moving from house to house and crowds started to gather in the streets. Afternoon newspapers routed their staffs out of bed and began setting up an extra edition. Scientists the world over were besieged with questions and requests for statements. Universities and colleges buzzed with activity.

With the people alerted, additional news spread faster than ever. Radios other than that of the Arctic operator could now pick up the messages from Nathaniel Dove. The three starships were intact and all aboard were well. Yes, they had traveled in a straight line; the sealed monitors would prove it once they landed. No, the fifteen years had not passed easily; more than once they had been sorely tempted to turn back. And more.

A series of scientists and tee-vee executives descended on Doctor Wilfred Hindman and demanded that he appear be-

fore the cameras and explain his position. He refused.

IT WASN'T for three hours after the first radio contact that anyone thought to call Marie Dove. A reporter reached her by telephone and broke the news and waited for a reaction.

She hung up. Marie Dove hung up. She stood straight and tall and looked out the windows at the dark forest beyond. Unmoving she stood in the darkness, her black hair falling long over her shoulders. Her breathing came slow and steady and the tears welled from her eyes and coursed down her cheeks.

Marie Dove remembered. Fifteen years of remembering fell onto her at once. Her man had come home.

She saw him as he had been when they first met, a young man of 22 with quiet grey eyes and a slow smile that spread up one side of his face more than the other. Even then he had had the dream, the dream to make the great voyage. The dream to *prove* that the curvature of space was a reality and

not just a mathematical abstraction.

But they laughed at him. Space curved? Certainly, as a means of expression, as a mathematical tool. But who would be fool enough to try to make the trip to prove it? A man would be throwing his life away in a useless gesture. The incalculable immensity of space waited to swallow so foolhardy an individual. So Wilfred Hindman said, and all believed.

But Nathaniel Dove stuck by his theory. The curvature of space is as real as gravitation. A man has only to leave Earth and maintain a straight line and he will return again from the opposition direction.

They laughed louder. They pointed out that no one knew the limit of velocity of the Hindman drive, not even Hindman. That only a governor to limit the velocity of the drive to ten times the speed of light allowed men to fly safely. And that even then ships got lost; the rare slight error that spacemen must make condemned an occasional ship to an eternity of flight.

Hindman himself pointed out the fatal weakness in the theory of a flight around space. "Even should you succeed in circum-navigating the Universe," he said, "Earth will not be here when you return. So should you accomplish the impossible and return to your starting point, you will still be lost."

Nathaniel Dove had an answer. "Whatever motion Earth has at the time I take off will be imparted to my ships. So if I plot a straight-line course from the surface of Earth, my ships will be subjected to the precise forces that control the motion of Earth. Thus when I complete the circle I will be at Earth's new position. I believe in the simplicity of the laws that govern the Universe. It will come out right."

"Mysticism," shouted the opposition, and Hindman agreed. And then they hammered at other things. "How long do you anticipate such a flight would take?"

"If my calculations are correct," said Nathaniel Dove, "the Hindman drive will produce an effective velocity of

4x10²⁸ times the speed of light. Thus I would complete the trip in fifteen years Earth time."

"Madman," they said. And the whole world took up the cry. Doctor Wilfred Hindman tried to get Nathaniel Dove committed as a mental case, and he very nearly succeeded. The only thing that saved Nathaniel Dove was an inspired plea by a skillful lawyer.

Try as he could Nathaniel Dove could not find funds to try his grand experiment. Everywhere he went the mighty Hindman name condemned him. Nobody wanted to be connected with such a hair-brained proposition as testing the curvature of space by flying in a straight line at incomprehensible speeds.

SEVERAL years passed and only Marie had faith in Nathaniel. She gave him faith when his own wavered. She was always by his side to absorb some of the shock of public contempt. And it may be that her quiet belief was what finally produced a backer.

Madame President of Brazil

supplied money from a fund for which she was not accountable. It was barely enough to fit out three small starships, old ones at that. For awhile it looked as though the ships would not leave the ground for want of a crew. Few wanted to waste their lives. Madame president solved that problem too. She offered pardons to convicted criminals if they would accompany Nathaniel Dove as crew. And so the three ships were readied.

Take-off was late one night in December. There was no fanfare, only Marie to wish her husband a safe journey and to wet his cheek with her tears. The three ships took off and immediately slipped into the frame of reference called faster-than-light flight. It wasn't until the next day that the newspapers learned about what had happened.

The reaction was laughter, with relief in it, almost as if a menace had been removed. For certain no one ever expected to see Nathaniel Dove again. Marie Dove was referred to as the Widow Dove. Doctor Hindman again reviewed the many rea-

sons why Nathaniel Dove was more than a fool; he was a stupid fool. Hindman effectively deprived him of the role of a man willing to die for something he believed in; no one admires stupidity. Marie Dove isolated herself from people and took up her lonely vigil.

Earth was a bustling community with ships scouring the galaxies and reporting new wonders every month. The Dove affair swiftly faded away, washed out by more important things. Men were busy, too busy to worry about crackpots. They remembered the name Nathaniel Dove as of a foolish man who had flung himself into the fire.

Then came the gentle stirring on the radio of a lonely outpost in the Arctic.

For a long time Marie Dove stood and watched the dark forest on the other side of the window. The phone rang and she answered. It was the White House saying that a helicopter was on the way to pick her up. She dressed and went out to the strip and waited until the copter came. When she got in

she found a general there. He helped her to a seat.

"I wanted to make this as complete as possible for you and Nathaniel," he said. "This is a great thing he has done and it is even greater since the rest of us were against him. Your husband has opened the entire Universe to mankind. We shall never forget him."

The copter took off and the general said, "He is really well, you know. He has suffered nothing as a result of this voyage. But I understand that he had some trouble with the crew on several occasions; they wanted to turn back. But he forced them on. Your husband is a brave man."

Marie Dove nodded, but she smiled to herself. She knew what had driven her husband on; they had talked about it before he left. The only way home to her was straight ahead. To turn was to run the risk of getting lost. Both knew the voyage would be successful only if his theory was right. They would never see each other again if he were wrong. And straight ahead was the only answer.

IN an hour the copter came to the great field where the ships were to land. A large crowd had gathered. The general led Marie Dove to the tower where a small number of people waited. When she shook hands with the President he took her hand in both of his. He did not speak.

Then Doctor Wilfred Hindman came toward them, flanked on each side by a burly sergeant. They led him up to where Marie Dove stood close by his side. He looked at her and tried to turn away, but they blocked his path. He turned back.

She looked at him with pity in her eyes, thinking of men and the way they turn on their leaders once they have been proved wrong. Hindman saw the look, hesitated a moment, then stepped diffidently to her side.

"What can I say?" he said. "I have done you and your husband a great wrong. And I just learned how great. It has happened before."

Far above three tiny dots appeared. The crowd stirred

and a gentle rumble arose as they saw the starships.

Hindman said, "I have often wondered about the ridiculous names your husband gave his ships. Today, when I learned he had returned I looked and found out why he named them the way he did. Long ago there was another man. He too was a foolhardy man—."

The roar of the crowd surged up and drowned him

out. But even above the roar could be heard the deep booming bellow of the Hindman drive. Over the field the three ships poised, a shimmering white band below each. Slowly they lowered themselves to the ground and then they rested motionless. Nathaniel Dove had come home safely with his three ships, the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria.

THE END