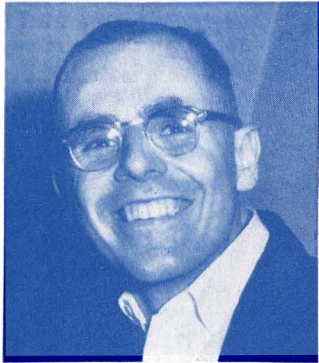


Introducing the



AUTHOR



Frank M. Robinson



MUCH as I might like to think so, there actually isn't much that's exciting or especially interesting to say about myself. I was born in Chicago some 28 years ago and have lived in and around there ever since. I went to college at Beloit, Wisconsin, collected a degree in physics, and am currently at Northwestern University for a Master's degree in journalism.

I started reading science fiction in 1939, cutting my teeth on Simak's "Cosmic Engineers" and Doc Smith's "Lensman" stories, which I still rate among the best. When I graduated from high school, I worked for a stretch as an office boy at Ziff-Davis publishing company, distributing towels and mailing out books and

magazines. Most of my time I spent hanging around the Amazing Stories offices.

Went into the Navy in 1944 and shortly thereafter found myself stationed at Navy Pier. It was about this time I struck up a friendship with a struggling young writer who was a ready market for my cigarette rations. The writer's name was Bill Hamling; he and Chet Geier had an office on Chicago's north side.

There's not a great deal to say about me personally. Somewhat on the thin side, like individual sports and camping in the Wisconsin wilds. I think more people should know a good deal more about science. Think Oppenheimer got a raw deal and think that

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WANTED: One Sane Man

by

Frank M. Robinson

Personnel Incorporated bragged that they could supply a man for any job. Maxwell doubted this, needing a space pilot for the first Lunar trip. Now, if he had just asked for a lunatic . . .

THE small man adjusted his bi-focals and stared critically at the huge brass nameplate over the glass entrance doors. The plate read "Personnel Incorporated" in neat, modest lettering. Directly above the plate was a traveling neon sign which informed the public in letters six feet tall that:

PERSONNEL CAN SUPPLY THE MAN FOR ANY JOB!— SEVENTY-FIVE PER CENT OF THE PERSONNEL PROBLEMS ON THE AMERICAN CONTINENT ARE HANDLED BY PERSONNEL — DOES YOUR JOB SEEM BORING LATELY? SEE PERSONNEL AND BE PSYCHOLOGICALLY FITTED FOR YOUR WORK!— PERSONNEL CAN SUPPLY THE MAN FOR ANY JOB!— SEVENTY-FIVE PER CENT OF THE. . .

The small man looked at it for a minute and turned to his tall companion.

"Tell me, Maxwell, why the seventy-five? Why not eighty or eighty-three?"

Maxwell glanced up at the sign. "If they do seventy-six per cent or more of the business, they're a monopoly. It must pain Whiteford to have to hold himself down to only seventy-five."

"Whiteford?"

Maxwell looked surprised. "You haven't heard of him? The newest boy wonder in the business world? He's the genius who runs this modern slave market." He looked at his watch. "And, incidentally, he's also the guy we've got an appointment with in five minutes."

They joined the crowds streaming up the wide, granite steps and found themselves in the large en-

trance lobby, directly opposite the battery of ascending elevators.

The small man approached the starter. "—ah—pardon me, but would you tell us what floor Personnel Incorporated is on?"

The starter looked shocked. "Poisonnel ain't just on one floor, Mister, it's the whole building. Who'dja wanna see?"

"We wanted to— well, that is— whoever's in . . ."

The starter brushed him aside. "Step outta the way of the passengers, Mister. Be with ya in a second. . . . Okay, lady, maid sovice and domestics is on the thoity-foist floor. Don't shove in the elevator, please! Next elevator, *please!*"

He turned back to the small man.

"We got administration on the foist floor. Second floor, automotive and transportation. Assemblers, welders, painters, cushion upholsterers, sprayers, mock-up men, testers and greasers. Thoid floor, electrical. Solderers, cabinet workers, wirers, draftsmen, coil-winders, and design expoits. Next floor, entertainers. Everything from acrobats to zither players and concert ottists. Fifth. . ."

"We want to see Whiteford," Maxwell cut in impatiently.

The starter looked impressed. "The Chief, eh? Administration's on the foist floor, like I told ya, Mister. Straight down to the end of the curridor and to your left. Ya

can't miss it." He had a second thought and turned and shouted after them. "If ya want a job, General Employment's on the second curridor to your right!"

"**T**HINK this will do any good?" the small man asked, mopping the sweat off his bald head.

"We don't have any choice. We've got to try it." Maxwell pushed open one of the double swinging doors marked "Office of the President."

They walked into the outer fringes of a whirlpool of noise and bedlam, rivaling that of a stock exchange or a grain pit in the middle of the harvesting season. The room covered more than an acre, with ninety per cent of the floor space devoted to adding machines, typewriters, tabulators, collators, sorters, key punches, automatic alphabetizers and the other ten per cent to their operators. A battery of sorters on their left digested stacks of small, white cards and spewed forth more stacks of them into waiting hoppers. On their right, the nearest of three switchboard operators smiled a weak greeting and turned back to her board.

"Personnel Incorporated. National Carbide and Carbon? Just a moment, please. I'll connect you with the president's office . . . Personnel Incorporated. Chrysler

Corporation? That's the automotive division, extension 2214 . . . Personnel Incorporated. Shanghai Importing Company? I believe our sales division can furnish you with the men, extension 230."

She turned to the small man. "The monster's office is that glass enclosure down there"—she pointed to a glassed-in office at the end of the room—"and while there, tell him he'll have to get some more help for the switchboard." She mopped her forehead with a soggy handkerchief. "It's more than we can handle."

The center of the whirlpool was the glassed-in office, with the name WHITEFORD on the door—nothing else. Whiteford himself, neatly dressed in a business suit with creases sharp enough to shave with, was sitting behind half an acre of mahogany desk. He was young, about 30, with the healthy and slightly overfed look of a graduated college halfback. Maxwell decided he didn't like him. He looked like a character who exuded confidence like perspiration.

Whiteford didn't bother looking up but continued barking into the intercom.

"Lyons? About the Amazon Valley deal. Fly in three thousand semi-skilled next week. Get 'em housed in quonset huts and make arrangements with a coast concern for shipments of fresh fruits and

vegetables for the central kitchen." He paused. "Better call in the bug experts to liquidate the mosquitoes instead of spending the money for netting and anti-malaria. Cheaper in the long run."

He took time out to gulp some pills from a bottle and wash them down with water from a desk side tap. "Just a quick lunch," he apologized. His voice was brisk. "What can I do for you?"

The small man gestured to himself and his companion. "I'm George Burger, director of the experimental division at Atlantic Motors. And this is Frank Maxwell; he's with the government. We have something important we'd like to discuss . . ."

"Be glad to,"—Whiteford looked at his watch—"for about four minutes. I have an engagement at eleven. As you were saying, Mister Bircher?"

The small man winced. "Burger. We need . . ."

A secretary came in on the run. "Call for you from London, Mr. Whiteford! About dredging the Thames . . ."

". . . a man . . ."

"I'll take it out there in a moment. Miss Hancock."

". . . to pilot . . ."

The phone rang.

". . . a rocket . . ."

"IBM? Call me back in half an hour."

"... to the..."

Whiteford flipped the intercom switch.

"Tell the man from General Motors we'll be able to supply the gear specialists, Miss Hancock."

"... moon."

Whiteford glanced at his watch again and frowned.

"Really, Burger, I'm a very busy man. You'll have to cut it short."

Maxwell shouldered past Burger and leaned possessively on Whiteford's desk, his jaw an inch from Whiteford's own.

"It so happens that what concerns Atlantic Motors vitally concerns the government, Whiteford! We'd appreciate it if you could stretch that generosity of yours and give us five minutes of your undivided attention. After all, we *did* have an appointment!"

WHITFORD turned off the intercom and leaned back in his swivel chair, his fingers tapping nervously on the chair arm.

"Sorry Maxwell, but keeping the organization running keeps me on the hump."

"Like it kept the slavers of the eighteenth century on the hump," Maxwell growled.

Whiteford's eyebrows shot up.

"Personnel Incorporated was founded on one of the most obvious needs of our civilization, Maxwell!

With the expansion of production after the first atomic war, the demand for personnel, and increasing labor-management difficulties, it was obvious that dozens of little employment agencies and company employment divisions were only hampering manufacturing facilities. A single, centralized bureau was needed. Personnel Incorporated filled that need. From myself on down, everybody who's been handled by Personnel has been psychologically tested for their job—which means strikes and walkouts have been cut to a minimum.

"Modern civilization would be impossible without Personnel, Maxwell! But that's water over the dam." He nodded to Burger. "You have a personnel problem?"

"That's why I came here," Burger said testily. "As you may know, Mr. Whiteford, Atlantic Motors has constructed a rocket to make the first flight to the moon. We need a pilot for that rocket."

Whiteford looked bored. "All the Sunday supplements have carried articles about the A-M rocket. As for the pilot, there are thousands of men in this country alone who are probably qualified for the job. To find one would be routine, I should think."

"It's somewhat more complicated than picking a pilot out of a hat, Mr. Whiteford. Not just any pilot will do. There are, of course, cer-

tain technical qualifications but there are more important ones than that. Our man would have to be perfect mentally—no nervousness, neurosis, streaks of instability or anything of the sort. We could hardly trust 75,000,000 dollars worth of rocket to a man who wasn't sound physically and mentally."

"I take it you couldn't find any?"

Burger shook his head.

"Where does the government come in?"

"The government is naturally interested in rockets," Maxwell said. "It's rumored the Russians aren't far behind us. At any rate, without a pilot, the rocket is useless."

"And the government has been unsuccessful, too?"

Maxwell hesitated. "As a matter of fact we found a pilot—at least we thought we had. He piloted the first rocket that was sent—one flight has been attempted before. From what little evidence we can gather, it appears he deliberately crashed the rocket on the moon."

"Why?"

Maxwell shrugged. "Off his trolley, I suppose. That's reason number one for our qualifications being so high."

"I frankly don't think you can find one," Burger added nastily. "Atlantic Motors has tried for months with no success."

"Personnel Incorporated is not

Atlantic Motors, Burger," Whiteford said sarcastically. "We've never failed! *Never failed!*" He repeated it like a liturgy. "We don't intend to fail now. Come back in a week and we'll have your man."

"Just like the Royal Canadian Mounted," Maxwell muttered.

When they had gone, Whiteford flipped the switch of the intercom.

"Miss Hancock? Cancel my appointment with the directors of AT&T. Call in the company psychologists to prepare a personnel test. Contact Haskins at our London office and Schubert in Paris and tell them we intend to launch a campaign for rocket pilots immediately. Examination papers for applicants will be forwarded at once. Notify our other branch offices to the same effect. All on the QT, you understand. And Miss Hancock—have the psychologists test our advertising for confidence appeal. A representative of Atlantic Motors just implied we couldn't supply them with help!"

"**T**HOSE cards represent exactly 250,342 applicants," Whiteford said proudly, gesturing to stacks of tabulating cards by the sorting machine. Burger looked mildly surprised. "All of them qualified to be the pilot?"

Whiteford smiled indulgently. "Probably only a small propor-

tion— several thousand or so. Each hole punched in the card represents either the applicant's physical condition, his technical knowledge, or answers to carefully phrased questions which will reveal his mental state. The sorting machine here,"—he patted the mechanical monster at his side—"has been set to sort out only those cards that meet with the qualifications the company psychologists have set up.

"I've arranged this demonstration to show the efficiency of the corporation; we have quite a reputation for fulfilling contracts." He shot a glance at Burger. "We'll run through this large stack here— applicants from England— first."

Maxwell pointed curiously to a small pile. "Where's that stack from?"

Whiteford glanced at it casually. "That stack was forwarded from our branch office in Hindustan. Some Indians make darn good pilot material."

He inserted part of the stack of cards from England into the chute of the machine and started it up. There was a slow snick-snick-snick as the cards passed through the intricate system of metal "fingers" that would separate the sheep from the goats—or, in this case, the pilots from the remainder of the applicants.

The chute emptied and no cards

had been tossed out into the acceptance hopper.

"No luck, eh?" Maxwell couldn't help grinning.

Whiteford frowned. "We've just started."

Two hours later the entire stack of cards—including the stack from Hindustan—had been run through.

The acceptance hopper was still empty.

Whiteford was in his shirt sleeves, beads of sweat dripping unnoticed off the tip of his nose.

"I can't understand," he muttered. "I can't believe . . . Miss Hancock! Call in Dr. Burroughs!"

When the doctor had showed up, Whiteford pointed to the cards lying in heaps on the floor.

"Not a one qualified—not a single one! Why, Burroughs?"

Burroughs hemmed and hawed and finally decided to risk it. "Well, that's ah—not too hard to understand. Unfortunately the majority of applicants were nothing more than—if you'll pardon me—crackpots. The kind who will volunteer for anything. Most of them lacked the technical knowledge. Those who had it either failed the physical or were again, mentally unstable. Only slightly, in most cases, but enough so there was a danger of it becoming pronounced while in the rocket. Those who might've qualified weren't interested."

"Why not? The pay was good."

"Let me pose a question. What *entirely* sane man would volunteer, for any amount of money, to pilot a plutonium engine rocket around the moon and back?"

Whiteford looked blank.

"In other words—personnel can't supply the man. Is that it?" Maxwell interrupted.

Burroughs spread his hands in an expansive gesture. "Well, now, I wouldn't say that. Someplace there must be a man. . ."

Whiteford turned and went into his office, slamming the door behind him. They could see him collapse into his swivel chair.

"Well, what do you suppose came over him?" Burger gasped.

"I suspect that God has finally found a stone he couldn't lift," Maxwell murmured.

WHITFORD kneaded his knuckles and stared morosely out the window. From time to time his hand strayed to the intercom and then he'd snap it back.

He'd been sitting that way for two hours. For two hours the gigantic cogs of Personnel Incorporated had been stopped by a grain of sand. Or at least, so it seemed.

Suddenly his hand lashed out and he flipped the intercom switch.

"Would you please come here a minute, Miss Hancock?"

"Y-yes, Mr. Whiteford?"

"Do you think you could run Personnel Incorporated while I'm away?"

"Well—I don't—I hardly think I'm capable. . ."

"You're not," Whiteford said drily. "But you're more capable than anyone else that's here. You'll assume my duties until I return."

He paused at the door.

"In case anyone asks, I'll be gone for a month."

* * *

Burger wrung his hands nervously. "Only a half hour until take-off time, Mr. Whiteford. I think we've thought of everything. You realize that your position on the rocket, actually, is only the safety factor of the rocket itself. And, of course, an observer is preferable. First hand accounts of human reactions on board the rocket will be invaluable. You've been drilled for two weeks in your duties on board, the listing of meter readings in the log book, a careful diary of your own physiological reactions, etc. And naturally, what to do in case of an emergency. Of course, the chances are several million to one of anything actually going wrong with the rocket.

"Oh yes, the pictures of the first rocket flight. The film actually doesn't show much but it might be of interest."

Whiteford followed him to the small projection room.

"The camera was tracked by radar," Burger exclaimed. "We can follow the rocket all the way. I'll speed up the action a little." The pin-point of light on the screen leaped ahead and in a few moments the pock-marked face of the moon came into view. Burger slowed the action down to normal. The tiny tad-pole of light swam closer to the moon. Suddenly it swerved and in a moment there was a tiny burst of light on one of the craters and the screen went blank.

"The crash, eh?"

Burger nodded. "You can still back out, you know. You can up until the moment you step inside the rocket."

"Don't be silly!" Whiteford snorted.

They went out to the landing field.

"Incidentally, Mr. Whiteford, you'll find a small cabinet on board with various books, puzzles, and what-not for your leisure hours. They've been scientifically selected for your type of personality." Burger smiled faintly. "In fact, you'll discover that the pilot has been provided for very well, considering weight limitations and all. Practically every possible occurrence has been provided for. I'm sure you'll experience no difficulty on the flight."

Whiteford nodded absently. "Just be sure and tell Maxwell

that Personnel Incorporated can always supply the man! Always!"

INSIDE the cabin, Whiteford methodically went through the take-off preparations he had practiced during the previous two weeks. He gave the chronometer, synchronized to start with the take-off, a quick inspection and turned to the meters on the instrument panel. He quickly went over the small control board that would permit him to make deviations and corrections in the ship's course of as much as five degrees and checked the geiger counter apparatus which emitted a faint burp as a stray cosmic ray hit it. The Counter was designed to warn against stray radiation from the engines (but the chances were ten million to one that there would be any, Burger had said). He flicked through the pages of the ship's log and idly noted the entry pages for meter readings and observations.

Against the rear bulkhead of the small cabin was a hammock-like affair, suspended by coil springs. He punched the hammock casually. It would serve to cushion the effects of acceleration at the take-off and as a bunk for the pilot the rest of the trip. Near it and almost a part of the deck was a food locker. There was a small spigot at the top that served as a water tap for the tank below.

Around the top of the cabin there was a series of small ports of steel-strong plastic, permitting an outside view. The ports were currently closed with steel over-lap caps.

He looked down at his watch. Two minutes until take-off. He strapped himself in the hammock and bounced once or twice to test the springs. They hardly gave at all under his efforts; they were designed to give way under the acceleration of 8 or 9 g's. The hammock and the skin tight pilot suit were supposed to keep him together under the crushing weight of acceleration, at which time he'd be like jelly in a mould.

A light sweat sprung out on his forehead. If something went wrong with the apparatus, they could scrape him off the rear bulkhead like a pancake off a hot griddle. He hadn't thought of that before. Not only that but how about radiation from the engines? Shielded, of course, but even the best engineers could sometimes . . . Good God, how did he ever get . . .

There was a sudden surge of the ship and the springs holding the hammock stretched as easy as a dime store rubber-band. He felt his weight double and treble. His breath came in tight little gasps as if a sorting machine had been dumped on his chest. The weight kept increasing and the cabin start-

ed to spin. Little black dots danced around the edges of his area of vision and gradually covered it. He felt he was smothering in a dark, black pit. . .

Maxwell's face flashed at him out of the darkness. "Always supply the man, eh?" it sneered. Hands appeared before the face and dropped application cards until they fluttered in front of it like snow. The snow cleared and he could see prim Miss Hancock coming toward him, a suddenly alluring Miss Hancock sans glasses and most everything else. He had a faint impression of being shocked. The image faded and he saw himself being chased down the boulevard by a group of animated tabulating machines. He made it to the Personnel building and made a dash for the elevator. Instead of going up, the elevator went down, faster, faster . . . He felt the bottom of the elevator drop away from under him and he floated in the air, vainly kicking at the walls. . . .

Whiteford opened his eyes slowly. The hammock quivered a little on the springs but they were no longer stretched. The chronometer read five minutes since takeoff.

HE unstrapped and tried to get out of the hammock. An instant later he found himself floating at about the same level as the hammock, not touching the deck. A

fragment of a dream about an elevator touched his mind and it suddenly occurred to him that he was falling—falling faster than he had fallen before. He closed his eyes, which promptly made it worse. He was falling—falling hundreds of miles to earth. An image formed in his mind of the ship entering the atmosphere, the screaming of the tortured air, the heating of the metallic shell from friction until it glowed a cherry red, roasting its occupant to a blackened cinder.

He screamed and the sound of his own voice brought him back to sanity. The sensation of falling was what he should expect from weightlessness. It was like being in the elevator he had imagined that kept going faster and faster until it fell away from beneath him. He kept his mind on the concept with an effort.

He managed to control his imagination but his nervous system kept sending the impulses which screamed that he was falling. He clutched at the hammock in a sudden wave of nausea. The feeling didn't leave him and he closed his eyes and vomited. It was amazingly easy to do—in free flight gravity no longer helped in holding down his meal.

He was in the middle of an agonizing attack of what any sailor would recognize as the "dry heaves" before he managed to gain control

of his knotted stomach muscles.

The hammock served as a point of orientation and he dragged himself on to it and buried his face in the canvas. He tried not to feel anything or hear anything or think anything. He had lain like that for a long time when he felt something brush his face.

He opened his eyes and saw a few little spheroids of matter floating in the cabin. He batted idly at one with a free hand and it immediately broke up into smaller spheroids which drifted apart from each other.

He groaned. It had been a mistake to vomit. Whether he liked it or not, his next duty would have to be to gather up all the spheroids and stuff them into the disposal chute. He found a rubberized bag in the medicine kit and went after the spheroids much in the same way a little boy catches butterflies.

When he had finished the unpleasant task of collecting the spheroids, he glanced over at the chronometer. It read some fifty minutes since the beginning of the trip. Time to begin his tour of duty. He took the log book and made his round of the meters and jotted down their readings. Under *Personal Reactions* he jotted down *sick; steady and unremitting feeling of nausea.*

Ten minutes later he had accomplished his duties for the next eight

hour period. That left only—well, fourteen days going, same time returning. He had left only twenty-seven days and twenty-three hours before he'd see earth again.

Twenty-seven days and twenty-three hours of sheer hell.

Things — unpleasant things—seemed to pile up on him. He had suffered from migraine headaches before— but nothing like he did now. It was easier for his heart to pump blood to his head, and the minute enlargement of the blood vessels in his head caused splitting pains to shoot through it. He had noticed the headaches shortly after he had attempted to look through one of the ports. Not that they weren't there before—he had been too busy vomiting to take note of them. The ports were a fiasco in themselves. The practically solid beams of light coming through had blinded him temporarily, even when he wore sun-glasses; enough to show him that sight-seeing and human observation were out of the question.

And mixed in with all of these were the difficulties of getting around the small compartment. He could kick himself around, inasmuch as he was weightless in free flight, but the piping and equipment in the compartment turned it into a hazardous obstacle course. He nearly broke his arm, once, trying to stop from running into a

bulkhead.

And there were other things. Embarrassing things. Or, considering he was alone in the compartment, just mildly annoying things.

After trying to look through the ports, he pushed back to the hammock and lay down. He could just as easily have rested floating in the air but the hammock was a great mental aid. He tried to keep his mind blank but snatches of thought kept running through it. Today was Friday on earth. About time for the evening meal. Fried perch and scalloped potatoes . . .

He groaned again. Nowhere on the examinations they had made out for the applicants was there a question asking if the prospect was susceptible to space-sickness.

WHITEFORD lay on the hammock and thought about what it had been like on earth a few hours before. It would be near quitting time and the five o'clock rush just beginning. Most people would be going home to a hearty dinner—he skipped that—and then a quiet evening with the television, or perhaps a ringside table at any of the local night spots where he used to entertain clients. There would be the many little tables with the clean, white tablecloths and the neat arrangement of polished silver, the glasses filled to the brim with sparkling clear water . . .

He rolled his tongue around the inside of his mouth. It felt like fur. Sparkling clear water might be just what he needed. A few sips of ice water and a cold, wet-rag on his face would work wonders. Clear, cool, gushing, water . . .

He had to have water! He rolled out of the hammock and dove for the water tap. A split second later he remembered his first accident and twisted frantically in the air, trying to slow his momentum. He grabbed for some pipes that threaded through the cabin, missed, and hit the water tap butt first: the plastic panels at the front splintered and broke and the tiny aluminum tubing, scientifically designed to deliver water under conditions of free flight bent and crumpled.

Whiteford felt wet. He turned and grimly surveyed the demolished water tap. A few drops of water floated lazily, tantalizingly in the air. He *had* to have water! A kit near the food locker yielded some cooking utensils and an old-fashioned can-opener, one end of which might serve as a crude lever. He had to wedge himself between the tap and the bulkhead to get leverage to pry with; otherwise, a hearty twist only resulted in his body turning a slow circle in the air.

The tubes didn't straighten very easily. Finally, the can-opener broke; a loss that didn't become

immediately apparent. He grabbed the pipes with his hands and heaved outward. They bent. He heaved again and they bent still more. On the third heave he felt a slight pain in his side. He was exerting quite a bit of effort—effort which on earth would have made him sweat and his heart pump faster. He was sweating now but his heart wasn't only pumping faster, it was racing.

HE grasped the pipes harder for a final effort. With a brittle snap, one of the connections burst and a few drops of water sprayed out at him. He didn't notice. He was holding his sides in pain while his heart took off like a race horse. The veins in his wrist swelled to the size of lead pencils and he could feel the throbbing pulse of blood. He floated stiffly in the air, half paralyzed by sudden fear.

When the pumping had slowed down he turned his attention back to the battered pipes. He straightened one of them out—being careful not to over-exert himself—and used it to suck the water through. The water was clear and cold but tasted a little of metal. It refreshed him and he began to think of something to go with it. Whether he felt like eating or not, it was obviously going to be necessary.

It wasn't—too bad—so far. He could take the headaches and the nausea if he had to. There were—

other things, though. Fear of what might happen. Meteorites, for one thing. Chances of his ship colliding with a speck of dust were ten million to one against it. But still . . .

He went to the food locker and broke out a small electric hot-plate, a skillet, and a dozen eggs. The skillet was a little flatter than an ordinary one with a hinged cover to keep the contents in.

It wasn't pleasant to think about . . . The ship a drifting derelict, riddled and airless, with his body frozen as hard as stone floating on the inside. What rubbish! Let's see, a one kilogram meteorite with a velocity of ten miles a second hitting the hull . . . probably fuse a section of it. Ten miles . . . sixteen kilometers a second, approximately . . .

Five minutes later, he was trying to coax an egg, floating sedately in mid-air, into it. He'd have the affair around it, hurriedly close the lid, and watch the air forced out from between the skillet and the lid push the egg away.

A one kilogram meteorite at that speed could fuse about fifteen kilograms of hull . . . about thirty-three pounds, enough to . . .

The trick was to close the lid slowly. With that accomplished he discovered that grease wouldn't stay in the bottom of the skillet. Finally he filled the skillet with water and poached the egg.

. . . vaporize a section of the hull big enough so he could poke his fist through it . . . with a velocity of a hundred miles a second there probably wouldn't be enough left of the ship to identify . . .

He dumped the egg into the disposal chute. He had lost his appetite.

* * *

Read the meters, list the readings in the log book. Note any changes between consecutive readings. Test the air, note the humidity. Read the meters, list the readings in the log book. Note the—oh hell, he knew the order by heart as it was. Under *Personal Reaction* he wrote: *damn sick and tired of it. Ten days to go before halfway mark.*

HE flipped the switch that cut the light circuit and floated lazily in the dark. It was peaceful and quiet and his eyes closed in sleep.

Tick . . . tick . . . tick . . .

He jerked awake. What the hell!

Tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick!

It sounded a little faster now.

Tick-tick-tick-tick!

The ticking swelled to a roar and then subsided to a gentle, purring *tick . . . tick . . . tick!*

He crouched there in the dark, straining for the sound, wondering what it was. It almost sounded like a slow-motion tabulator . . .

The geiger counter!

His heart skipped and a cold sweat broke out on his skin. There was a counter on board to warn against stray radiation. Not that there would be any — the Cameron-Smith energy converters were shielded so thoroughly that not even a single stray particle could get through.

They were supposed to be, that is. Was it possible that the engineers could have slipped up?

Pictures of the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, hideous with radiation keloids, flashed into his mind. A news story about radiation poisoning gibbered in the back of his imagination.

Tick-tick-tick-tick!

Sterility . . .

He flipped the light switch and floated over to the counter readings on the instrument panel. The row of tiny lights flashed rapidly in succession and the counter added another digit.

Stray radiation . . . stray . . . It came to him, then. For a moment he had forgotten that the counter was apt to read high, due to the increase in cosmic ray radiation once outside the atmosphere of the earth. He laughed weakly. What a thing to forget!

Something snickered in the back of his mind. *Yeah, what a thing to forget! And how will you tell whether the counter is reading stray radiation from the converters or the*

increase in cosmic rays? The engineers never make mistakes, though. Never? Well, hardly ever!

The question of adequate shielding of the converters haunted him continuously.

BY the sixth day out, Whiteford had become accustomed to the life in the cabin. He took it easy getting about and kept up with the business of the ship. By splitting the "day" into segments, as on earth, he managed to keep up a fairly normal routine. Sixteen hours on duty and about eight for sleeping, although sleeping wasn't too easy. He was rarely physically tired and made the mistake of trying to force himself to sleep. By the sixth "evening" he had developed into a first rate insomniac.

And by the sixth evening he was aware that the job of pilot was one of sheer boredom. It was dull routine with nothing to break the monotony but worry. There was no radio, no television, no telephone to shatter the silence. The first day or so he had whistled and sung to himself; now he hated the sound of his own voice.

He floated disgustedly in the hammock. He had read the meters, he had listed the readings in the log book. He had noted the changes between consecutive readings. He had tested the air and noted the humidity; he had listed his own

physiological reactions from acne to watering eyes. He had cleaned and loaded the automatic cameras. All of which took about one hour out of every twenty-four.

He threaded his way over to the locker containing the books and games Burger had mentioned. Odd that he hadn't thought of it before.

This was more like it. Everything was designed to appeal to the businessminded type of man, which was all to the good. He picked up the thin books, printed on india paper to conserve weight, and frowned. One of them was almost a text on finance; ordinarily, if he could have curled up in an easy chair with nothing around to bother him, he'd be interested. The other book he had read before. That left one—and fifteen minutes later he discovered that he couldn't concentrate. His eyes bothered him and the type blurred; he was a little too sick to drum up interest in a book.

He went back to the cabinet and got out a popular parlor game. It was designed so that one person could play at it. The game itself was simple; based on a combination of finance and mathematics the object was to corner all the real estate on the board and "break the bank." It provided an hour of amusement. After that he discovered he always won; the board was *too* simple—he had memorized the exact sequence of moves to win the

game every time. The remaining game was a complicated three-dimensional chess set. This he discarded even sooner. He couldn't win at all.

He fell back on a deck of cards and tried to play solitaire but the cards were too slick and their weight wouldn't hold them down anymore. He would manage to arrange them in neat rows and then accidentally jar them and they would go skitting off through the cabin. He finally tore the pack in two with disgust and spent the rest of the day picking up the pieces from the various corners where he had thrown them.

His nerves were fraying rapidly. He couldn't shave and he couldn't shower. The air was dry—a little too dry—and he began to itch, a vague, annoying sensation that shifted over his body.

And the cabin smelled. The air purifiers worked to satisfaction as far as the meters were concerned but the odor of unwashed humanity still clung to the cabin. He had a hunch it would get worse as time went on.

He no longer bothered to prepare full meals for himself. He was too tired, he didn't want to go to the effort, he didn't feel hungry anyways. He ended up by nibbling on cold meats and bread at idle moments. With the change in diet, his face broke out in large, ugly

splotches that bothered him considerably. Among other things, the diet he had been originally supplied with had been designed to avoid just that. If he had kept on the original diet . . . if he had the energy to prepare a full meal . . . if he didn't feel so damned sick . . . if only that had been taken into consideration!

The steady, irritating ticking of the geiger counter worried him constantly. He could never be sure that the ticking was entirely innocent; he grew to have a superstitious dread of the rear bulkhead that stood between the cabin and converters. He unconsciously avoided it, keeping to the front of the cabin as much as possible.

Little noises startled him. If an occasional drop of water happened to collide with him in the cabin, it sent him into a raving fury—blood pressure be damned. He even derived a certain grim amusement from it, thinking of the times he had laughed at the typical picture of the apoplectic businessman.

ON the eighth day, when making the check of the instrument panel, he noticed that the panel on the board reading "Manual Control" was lit; the one marked "Automatic" was out. In the middle of the board was the face of an oscilloscope with two hair lines intersecting at the middle. A small red

dot, representing the rocket, should have been set exactly at the intersection.

It wasn't. It was at the bottom of the 'scope, almost off the face altogether.

To hell with all engineers, he snarled to himself.

He would have to jockey the dot back to the center before the automatic controls would take over again. If he failed, the rocket would be hopelessly off course, a tiny wanderer in space. The auxiliary chemical rockets, allowing for two degree corrections in the line of flight, would have to be used. They consisted of four sets at right angles to each other around the hull. By jockeying between them, he should be able to work the ship back.

He pressed the key for firing the portside jets. The next moment he felt himself hurled from his position and thrown against the left-hand bulkhead. The cabin exploded into a pinwheel of stars that quickly faded into blackness.

* * *

His head hurt and something that felt very much like oozing blood was sticking his eyelids together. He wrenched them open and rubbed his head with his hands, then wiped the stickiness off on the pilot suit. It *was* blood, flowing from a cut in his scalp. Judging from the cabin, he had lost quite

a bit. But the cut was of secondary importance.

He clawed his way back to the oscilloscope. The spot on the face had moved way over to the other side of the scope. He braced himself into position so that the sudden acceleration wouldn't affect him again. He pressed the key very lightly again and waited for the dot to shift. Sweat collected on his nose and stayed there. He shook his head and a spatter of drops flew off.

The dot on the scope shifted—too much. He felt weak. This was going to be a precision job; the slightest pressure on the firing stud might prove to be too much again. He'd have to jockey it back and forth until, by sheer luck, he hit the center of the scope. He could do it—but it would take time.

Five hours later a worn out, nervous Whiteford left the control panel and drifted wearily over to the hammock. He was dead tired—so tired he couldn't sleep.

IT was the thirteenth day out. A floating drop of water brushed lightly past Whiteford. He batted at it, swore, and began to cry; a peculiar sobbing that shook his whole body. He blubbered for ten minutes.

He was sick and hungry. The cut on his head begun to fester and

his whole head throbbed with pain. There was a first aid kit in the cabin but he felt too weak to get it. His beard itched and his body felt slimy; sweat didn't drop off but stuck and spread over his skin until it formed a thin coating.

Just a poor little lamb who is lost in space, ha—ha—ha!

The tune slipped into his mind and at the end he laughed with the chorus. He couldn't stop laughing. It built up to a hysterical roar that left him shaking silently in the hammock.

Oh, Whiteford had a spaceship, its hull as white as snow; but every time he pressed the stud, the ship refused to go!

That was hilariously funny, too.

He was sick, he was tired, he was dirty. He hadn't had enough energy or ambition to fill in the log books for the last two days.

Besides, who gave a damn?

He was just the stupid jerk who piloted the thing. What did it matter if he got killed in the attempt.

My rocket started out for the star-speckled void, my rocket started out in great haste; but the g's were far too many for me, and I stuck to the bulkhead like paste!

Burger and Maxwell had sent a rocket as far as the moon, hadn't they?

He was sick—he didn't care whether he lived or died.

He was a sucker. A dope. A sick

dope who wished to hell it was all over.

The moon was close now. If he waited until he got just a little closer and then pressed the port-side firing stud, he could wreck their blessed rocket. Serve Burger and Maxwell right. As for himself, he was so sick of the whole thing that death would come as a relief.

That's what he'd do . . .

My bonny, my bonny, my bonny so true, do you think you will miss me if I die in the blue?

C day for Crack-up day! He put his thumb on the key and allowed himself five extra seconds of gloating. The company would have a tough time sending a wreath to his funeral. The company . . .

Who in hell would run Personnel Incorporated if he failed to return? He nodded his head thoughtfully, faintly surprised that he hadn't thought of it before.

Who *would* run the company? He was the only one who knew how. He *was* the company. He had practically raised it all by himself to where it was now.

He took his thumb off the key.

And what would happen to the company's reputation if he failed to come back? That meant that their slogan no longer held—that they hadn't found the man for the job. And he hadn't kidded about the mottos. They had been capable of finding a man to do any job—

even this one. Not just to go out on a job. To *do* a job.

He had a sudden vision of Maxwell shouting gleefully: "I told you so! Personnel can't supply the man!"

Five minutes later he hardly remembered his desire to crash the ship. He thought fleetingly of the movies showing the crack-up of the first ship. Something pretty much the same as had happened to him must have happened to the pilot on the first flight.

He shuddered and kicked his way over to the first-aid kit.

THE next day the ship began the long smooth curve that would carry it around the moon and on the last leg of the journey. Whiteford went to the panel board and pressed the key releasing the steel porthole caps. He pressed the key again and when they still didn't move realized they were stuck. It wouldn't be hard to find the trouble but . . .

It wasn't worth the effort. He didn't give a damn whether he saw the moon or not.

He drifted back to the hammock and went into an almost coma state staring dully at the overhead. He lay that way until time came for his next round of readings.

* * *

Two thousand miles out from earth the ship started the first of a

dozen trips around the earth that would slow it down for a landing. Five hundred miles up the ship entered the first tenuous wisps of atmosphere. A hundred miles up, the air was screaming past the ship and the hull began to get warm. Ten miles up Whiteford jettisoned the rocket tubes and engine over the Atlantic ocean. At the same time he released the double duty nylon parachute attached to the cabin.

Inside, Whiteford had begun to experience discomfort as his weight returned. It was an effort to move around and his heart beat seemed sluggish. His stomach sagged heavily and he thought wistfully of a gentleman's girdle. Water bubbled merrily from the broken water pipes and splashed unheeded on the deck.

The cabin thudded on something soft and Whiteford crawled to the hatch and opened it. The ship was floating on a large body of water. Waves slapped cheerfully against the hull and overhead a few startled gulls cawed angrily. A cool gust of fresh air blew in. Whiteford hauled himself erect and stripped off the pilot suit. He stood nude in the opening, inhaling the air in greedy gulps. It smelled as clean and cool as the conditioned air in his office at Personnel Incorporated.

* * *

"Ahoy, there!"

There was a boat a few feet from the hatch.

"Coming aboard!" They drifted closer and one of the men in the boat grabbed the ladder by the hatchway. Five men and a woman tumbled aboard.

"The Coast Guard at your . . ."

"I'm from the Daily Newsworld, Mr. Whiteford. I wonder . . ."

"What was it like in space. . ."

"You must have been simply *thrilllled* . . ."

Burger's bald head pushed itself forward. "How did the moon look to you, Mr. Whiteford?"

Whiteford had to think a little. "Come to think of it, I never saw it."

There was a dead silence.

"Oh, it's all on the films the automatic cameras shot. I wasn't too much interested myself."

The reporters frowned in disappointment but tried again.

"What do you intend to do now that you're back? Do the town, go on a fishing trip . . ."

Whiteford looked at them as if they had crawled out from under a rock. "Nonsense!" he snarled. "I'll get back to my office, of course!"

MAXWELL looked at the president of Personnel approvingly. "I honestly didn't think you could do it, once I heard that you had gone." He paused and fumbled

with his pipe. "Pretty tough, wasn't it?"

Whiteford knocked the ash off his cigarette and reached for the bottle of pills on his desk. "I wouldn't say so," he said expansively. "Just a matter of being fitted for the job."

Maxwell inspected his fingernails. "You didn't take the examinations your own outfit rigged up. Any particular reason?"

Whiteford looked annoyed. "I was technically qualified—engineering course in college. As for the rest, I successfully piloted the ship which should establish something on that score."

Maxwell twirled his hat self-consciously. A half smile played on his lips. "Oh, sure. Absolutely." He tamped his pipe. "You know, it's hard to visualize anybody wanting to go to the moon. It must be—well, some terrific drive that makes them do it."

Whiteford stared at him suspiciously. "What are you getting at?"

Maxwell looked innocent and gave exaggerated shrug. "Why, nothing! Nothing at all. It's just that it seems . . . seems so unusual that you couldn't find a qualified man, a completely *normal* man who wanted to go!"

The temperature in the room dropped thirty degrees. "Implying,"

Whiteford said icily, "that I'm not quite sane?"

Maxwell stood up and chuckled. "Exactly, Hasn't it occurred to you that the qualifications you set up for a pilot were all wrong? When has a *completely* normal man ever succeeded at *anything* that was a little difficult? Why did you succeed? Because you're just a shade neurotic, because you've got a streak of monomania in you. It's what built up Personnel Incorporated. It's what got you to the moon and back. Hell, Whiteford, after this when we want pilots we'll just run your characteristics on the sorter and pick them out that way!"

Whiteford glared at him and for a moment Maxwell felt sorry. He had pushed a big man off a pedestal; he had punctured an ego.

Suddenly Whiteford grinned self-consciously. "Maybe you've got a point there. I never thought of it that way."

Maxwell started for the door and paused, his hand on the knob. The look he gave Whiteford was one of sudden admiration.

"There's something else, too. Something that it takes to send a man to the moon and back and something you can't measure on an IBM machine." He paused. "It takes courage, A hell of a lot of it."

THE END

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR

★ *Frank M. Robinson* ★

(Continued From Page 2)

politicians who talk about any words, war—are dangerous men
kind of existence other than and scientifically illiterate. Pet
“peaceful co-existence”—in other prejudice: supposedly intelligent

men who believe the clap-trap in books like "Worlds in Collision".

My own tastes in science fiction are catholic, ranging from a good, taut "chase" story to the intricately woven "idea" tale. As a writer, I admire Heinlein's ability to tell a story, Tucker's flair for characterization, Kornbluth's knack for satire, Bob Bloch's humor, and Richard Matheson's sheer ability at writing.

Science fiction is about the last remaining outpost of the vanishing pulp magazines and if this page seems tear-streaked, there's good reason. They served as a training ground for many excellent modern writers and they were good, clean

entertainment. Hackneyed phrase though it is, it's far more than can be said for most of the pocket-books, comics, and dime-sized magazines flooding the newsstands.

I like the field of science fiction for many reasons. It's one of the few really live and original entertainment fields left. It's probably the only field where you can discuss social and political and scientific trends and make them vastly exciting.

And besides, in what other field do editors have wives like Frances Hamling, who is not only charming and brainy but can cook like nobody's business?

—*Frank M. Robinson*