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A Mixture of Genius

BY ARNOLD CASTLE

Illustrated by Paul Orban

Who, but the imaginative young, shall inherit the stars?

T

he sleek transcontinental airliner settled onto one of the maze of runways that was Stevenson Airport. With its turbojets fading into a dense roar, it taxied across the field toward the central building. Inside the plane a red light went off.

Senator Vance Duran unhooked the seat belt, reached for his briefcase, and stepped into the crowded aisle. The other passengers were all strangers, which had meant that for nearly an hour he had been able to give his full attention to the several hundred pages of proposed legislation and reports presented to the Committee on Extraterrestrial Development, of which he was chairman. But now there would be reporters, local political pleaders, the dinner at the Governor's, and the inevitable unexpected interruptions which were a part of every trip home.

As he strode through the door and onto the mobile escalator, he donned his smile of tempered confidence in the economic future of the nation. A television camera went into action at once and news-men formed a small circle at the bottom of the ramp.

"That was a great little debate you put on with Ben Wickolm last week," one of the reporters said. "You really tied him up."

"You can thank Senator Wickolm for arousing me," Duran answered, observing

to himself that perhaps *all* of his efforts on the Hill did not go unnoticed in his home state, if most of them seemed to.

"What do you think, Senator, of the FCC's modified ruling on the integrated lunar relay station plan?" another asked.

"I haven't had time to get fully acquainted with it," the senator evaded, stepping onto the ground and out of the way of the ramp.

"Say, Senator, what about the Mars colony project?" a third put in. "How come it's bogged down?"

"No comment at present," the senator said. But he gave them an ambiguous little grimace which was meant to suggest a minor but sticky snarl behind the scenes. He hoped it would satisfy them for the moment.

Making his escape as quickly as possible, he climbed onto the shuttle car already loaded down with the other passengers. Finding an empty seat, he folded himself into it, and was immediately joined by someone else.

"Well, Senator, how does it feel to be home?" his companion asked with sympathetic irony.

Duran turned, grinned, and reached for the man's hand.

"Great, Wayne," he answered, recognizing an old friend who had been of no small aid during his earlier years in politics. "Say, I'd ask you over for dinner if we weren't going to the Governor's tonight. Molly would love to see you. Unfortunately I'm leaving for Washington again in the morning."

"Why doesn't Molly move to D.C. with you, Vance?" the journalist asked.

Duran hesitated. "Maybe in a year or so. After the boys are out of highschool. *If* I get the job again."

The smile on the younger man's face was heartening.

"Don't play coy with me, Vance. You know you've got this state sewed up." Then came the slight frown of doubt. "Just one thing, though. A lot of people are wondering why the hold up on the colony project. You're bound to get a little of the criticism. What the hell's wrong, anyway?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Yeah. I can guess. There's only one possibility, since the government scientists assure us they've ironed out all the technical wrinkles. But it's pretty hard to believe that out of the thousands of people who volunteer every week, not even a couple of hundred are acceptable."

Duran considered his answer carefully before voicing it.

"Ever ask yourself *who* volunteers, Wayne?"

The journalist looked at him oddly, then nodded.

T

he senator took an elevator directly to the helicopter landing on the roof of the building. It was several minutes before he had located the little runabout he had bought for his wife the previous Christmas. Jack Woodvale, their caretaker, gardener, and chauffeur, was just retrieving his suitcase from the baggage lift as the senator arrived.

Waiting until Woodvale had secured the suitcase in the luggage compartment and climbed into the pilot's seat, Duran squeezed himself into the cabin. A minute or two later the little craft was rising from the port, directed automatically into the appropriate channel and guided off toward the city.

"How've things been going, Jack?" the senator asked. He felt good. Wayne's friendship and assurances had provided a needed boost. "Everything okay?"

"I'd say so, sir," Woodvale told him. "Had a little trouble with the solar screen. The store sent a man out to fix it. It's all right now."

The new power unit had been another of Molly's ideas, Duran recalled. The old crystal sulfide screen had been perfectly reliable. But Molly had thought it looked ugly up there on the roof. Molly's main faults, he decided, derived from her concern with the neighbors' opinions.

"Oh, there was something else came up while I was on my way out to get you," Woodvale continued abruptly. "The state's Attorney General called—said it was important you contact him immediately."

Duran sensed anger surging up as he remembered the times when, as District Attorney, Sig Loeffler had openly snubbed him. That, of course, had been back in the days when Duran had been a junior partner in one of the city's smaller law firms. He had not forgiven Loeffler, nor had Loeffler given him any reason to do so. Only the Governor's back-slapping mediation had allowed them to reach a politically stable relationship. The relationship did not involve Duran's compliance with the man's whims, however.

"Get him on the phone, Jack," Duran said at last. "But just make one call. If he's not at his office, forget it."

In less than a minute Woodvale was turning around to say:

"He's in, sir. You want to talk to him?"

Duran grunted and lifted the phone from the clamp beside his seat.

"Senator Duran speaking," he said.

"Vance, this is Loeffler," boomed a voice in considerable contrast to the senator's own mild tone. "Something pretty fantastic has happened. We're trying to keep it quiet, at least until we decide on what action to take. But if you can make it over here some time this evening, I'll tell you the story. You're going to be in on it eventually, and I thought you'd prefer getting in on it early."

Duran had intended quite bluntly to explain that he had more important business. But there was something compelling about the man's apparently ingenuous urgency that caused the senator to change his mind.

"Okay, Loeffler. I'll be right over."

He broke the contact and told Woodvale to dial his home number.

"Ernie, this is Dad," he said at the sound of his younger son's voice. "Tell Mother I'm going to stop off at the Attorney General's office—that's right—but that I'll be home in plenty of time to get ready for the dinner. Got that? That's right. How's school? Something wrong? Okay, son, I'll see you later."

Ernie had said that everything was all right, but with an uneasiness in the way he spoke. Grades, maybe, Duran thought. The boy had been doing pretty well, almost as well as Roger, but was showing the inevitable adolescent ramifications of interest. Duran found himself musing briefly upon his own youthful extra-

curricular forays up the tree of knowledge and sighed.

"Go to the capitol building, Jack," he said.

"Which port should I use, sir?" the younger man asked.

"The official one," Duran told him. This was Loeffler's idea.

T

he senator was surprised to find one of the Attorney General's harried-looking secretaries working late. She glanced up from her typewriter and gave him an equivocal smile of recognition.

"He's expecting you, Mr. Senator," she said, nodding toward the inner office. "Go right in."

Sigmund Loeffler was not alone. But the two other visitors were paled by the aura of importance which emanated from the large black-haired man behind the desk. He rose grandly at Duran's entrance, and without bothering to shake hands proceeded with introductions.

"Fritz Ambly, Senator Vance Duran. Fritz," he explained, "is chairman of the state Youth Welfare Board."

Duran took the thin hand which the other extended to him and noted the concern on the man's slim freckled face. His features were appropriately almost those of a child, but of a worried child.

"And Bob Duff, Senator Duran," Loeffler went on. "Bob is head of our Civil Defense now."

The second man was, in contrast, short and homely, but not without a touch of the other's anxiety.

"Well, gentlemen, you're welcome to stay if you wish," the Attorney General told them. "I'll have to repeat all the facts to Senator Duran, of course."

"I'd better be off," Ambly said. "Perhaps I'll see you at the Governor's tonight?"

"Not me, I'm afraid," Loeffler told him. "The DA and I have a little problem to

work out together. I'll call you both tomorrow about the press release."

"We can't wait too long," said Duff. "Rumors can be a lot worse than the truth. Especially about something like this. In fact, I don't see the point in waiting at all."

"Tomorrow, Bob. Tomorrow," Loeffler promised. "Noon at the latest."

His heavy smile faded as the two visitors closed the door behind them. With an unthrottled groan, he lowered himself into the chair and turned his dark gaze upon the senator.

"They think *they* have troubles," he said.

"And you think *I* have," Duran returned, seating himself.

"I know *you* do. Unfortunately I happen to share them to some extent."

He paused to relight the stub of a cigar, then went on.

"It's a crazy world we live in, Vance. Things change. Sometimes it's hard for us adults to keep up with it. The kids seem to, though."

Duran tried to appear suavely bored with the other's musings. But in spite of himself he could sense his gaze becoming intently expectant. Whatever connection there might be between himself, Ambly, and Duff completely eluded him. And that elusive connection had aroused his curiosity.

"Yeah, they keep up with things, all right," Loeffler went on. "And sometimes they get some pretty big ideas."

He halted, puffed thoughtfully, then barked:

"Remember Mel Skinner's lodge out on that island in Wakataoga Lake? Big Spanish-style place. Built it for that wife of his he brought back from Chile or somewhere."

"Yes, I remember it. Molly and I spent a weekend there a couple of years ago. Why?" the senator asked, realizing more than ever how much he disliked Sigmund Loeffler. "What are you getting at?"

"Well, the next time you go you'd better take along some sleeping bags," said Loeffler. "Because the house isn't there anymore."

"Okay," Duran said, strangely anxious. "Let's forget the riddles and get down to business. What happened to Mel Skinner's hacienda?"

The Attorney General stared at his guest for a moment, before remarking harshly:

"It got blown up."

"A bomb, you mean?" Duran asked.

"Oh, no, no—nothing so crude as that. This was a guided missile. With a warhead."

The senator was thinking fast now, but still the pattern eluded him.

"Not an act of war, surely?" he remarked.

"More like an act of revolution," Loeffler told him. "Because the agents behind it were *kids*. Kids from our state, our city. Kids from decent homes, educated families. Bright kids. Happy kids. Kids with every opportunity. *Kids who ought to know better—*"

"Hold it, Loeffler!" Duran interrupted, rising from the chair to place both hands on the edge of the desk. "Just one question—was anyone killed or injured?"

The other man hesitated melodramatically, then looked down at his cigar.

"No. There was no one on the island. The place had been closed down for the winter. That's the only pleasant thing about it."

Duran found it such unexpectedly good news that he was actually able to smile when he dropped back into the chair.

"In other words, Loeffler, it was a prank."

But the Attorney General seemed not to see it in precisely that light.

"A prank, yes!" he exploded. "A hundred thousand dollar prank! My God, Vance, don't you see what those boys did? They demonstrated the grossest lack of respect for private property. And what if they'd miscalculated? That rocket was fired from a distance of some fifty or sixty miles. It could have killed any number of people along its course had it fallen short."

"Well, I'll admit it's not the sort of thing I'd like to see encouraged," said Duran.

"Now give me the details. Who were they? Where did they get the rocket? What was the point of it, anyway?"

Sigmund Loeffler opened a folder which lay on his desk and started sifting through its contents. He pulled out several memoranda and a list of names, closing the folder again.

"There was a gang of eight, all in the eleventh or twelfth grades at Eisenhower High. Five of them were members of the school rocket club. Three of them had juvenile delinquency records—minor stuff, mostly, like copter stunting and public disturbance. The youngest had won a couple of science awards for demonstrations in—" he glanced significantly at the senator, "the chemistry of explosives."

Duran said nothing, but his sense of concern was growing.

"Let's see," Loeffler went on. "Two of the boys were taking vocational courses. One had his own machine shop, in fact. Then there was the electronics expert—Ceasar Grasso's son—know him?"

The senator nodded.

"He runs the highschool T-V station. Knows a lot about radio, I understand. Oh, yes. There was also the lad who drew up the plans for the gadget. Pretty sharp at engineering design, they say—"

Duran peered numbly across the desk at the grim faced official. This was what he had been fearing all along. But despite his apprehension, he was not entirely ready for it.

"That, I suppose," he said quietly, "was my son Roger."

Loeffler nodded slowly. "That was your boy, Vance. Sorry I had to be the one to break it to you."

"But where is he?" Duran asked. "And does Molly know about it?"

"She knows he's been detained, but not how serious the charges are."

"Just how serious *are* the charges?"

"I don't know yet," said Loeffler. "That's not really my province, of course," said Loeffler. "But the problem is complicated by the fact that Lake Wakataoga is

state property, with the island merely leased to Skinner."

Duran fumbled through his pockets for his cigarettes. He found them and lit one.

"When did this happen?" he asked, aware that the painfully tangled knot in his stomach was beginning to untie itself.

"This afternoon around one-thirty. A couple of guys fishing on the lake saw the explosion and called the local civil defense head-quarters. They claim they heard the rocket fall. Damned near had a war scare till the pieces were found. They were easy enough to trace, and the kids gave themselves away by all eight of them being awol from their one o'clock classes. Especially since five of them were absent from a physics class—that was one class they never cut."

"I don't see how they managed to go all the way through with it without someone finding out," Duran said, bewilderedly.

"I know," agreed Loeffler, nodding. "That's the way we all felt. But they admit doing it—hell, they're proud of it!—and we found the shed where the thing was assembled."

"I don't suppose they offered any motive," Duran said.

"Oh, sure. They claim they'd been planning it ever since Skinner wouldn't let them land copters on the island. Pretty weak, huh?"

The senator made no response.

"Well, Vance, I guess you'll want to talk to the boy," Loeffler concluded. "I had him brought up here. Figured it would be best all around that way. I knew you had to get back to Washington tomorrow and probably wouldn't have time to see him then. Shall I have him come in?"

When Duran hesitated, he added, "Oh, I've got to duck out for a few minutes. Get some supper. Got a long evening ahead of me."

"Okay, Loeffler, send him in. And—" This was the hardest part. "And I appreciate this."

"No trouble, Vance," the man said, rising and stepping around the desk. "No more than we've got already."

He removed a suit coat from a hanger and left the office with it under his arm. A

moment later the door opened again and the senator saw the shaggy head of his older son peer into the room. The boy was the one who finally broke the silence which followed.

"Hi, Dad," he said, sauntering casually into the office. "Guess you're pretty sore at me. Can't blame you."

Duran remained seated, indicating a chair against one wall. He waited till his son had sat down.

"I'm a little dumbfounded, Rog, that's all. I suppose you had a good reason for it."

"Sure. Old skinflint Skinner wouldn't let us—"

"*Roger!*" the senator growled threateningly. He was not going to allow the interview to start off with a half-truth.

"Yeah, but that's state land," the boy persisted. "He hadn't any right—"

"Roger, I said a *good* reason."

"Okay, Dad," he sighed. "No, we didn't have *that* kind of a reason."

"What it amounted to," Duran said, "was that you wanted to do something spectacular like building a rocket and firing it at something. Only to be fun it had to be illegal, if not immoral. And Melvin Skinner's place seemed like the least objectionable target. Isn't that about it?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Only we had just about finished the rocket before we started wondering about a target. That was the trouble. Once we'd built it, we had to do something with it."

"How do you think that's going to sound in court?"

"I don't know, Dad. You're the lawyer."

Duran cringed, but tried not to show it.

"Roger," he said slowly. "Flippancy is the easiest defense, and the least effective. I hope you won't feel you have to resort to it too often."

The boy said nothing.

"Well, tell me about it," his father suggested, sensing his son's isolation.

"About what?"

"The rocket. Wouldn't a jet have been easier to make?"

"A rocket was cheaper."

The source of the money required for the project was something Duran had overlooked. However, it was, he realized, one best postponed for the present. The important thing now was to regain his son's confidence.

"Did you design it?"

"Yeah. Well, I drew it up. Nothing very original about it. But it was a good little machine."

Duran noticed the boy's restless squirming, saw him perfunctorily place a hand to the baggy pocket of his jacket and quickly withdraw it, then arrived at a decision. Reaching into his own coat, Duran took out the pack of cigarettes, extending it to his son.

"Care for a cigarette?" he asked.

The youth looked at him doubtfully for an instant. Then he smiled his first smile that evening.

"Thanks, Dad," he responded, taking one and lighting it self-consciously. He added, "You've been out of town so much, I didn't think you knew I'd started—"

"I know, Rog," the man said, aware of a rising flood of self-condemnation. "Go on, son. About the rocket. What kind of fuel did you use?"

"Oh, nothing special. It had a liquid bi-propellant motor. We used ethanol and liquid oxygen. Pretty old-fashioned. But we didn't know how to get hold of the fancier stuff, and didn't have any way of synthesizing it. Then, at the last minute, we found that one of the valves feeding into the nozzle was clogged up. That's why we were late to class."

"Couldn't that have been dangerous?" Duran asked, and realized at once that he had said the wrong thing.

The boy merely shrugged.

"Well, it must have been a pretty good machine if it flew sixty miles and hit its target," Duran went on.

"Oh, we had it radio-controlled, with a midget T.V. transmitter mounted in it. Grasso took care of that. He did a terrific job. Of course, it was pretty expensive."

He glanced at his father tentatively for a moment, then bent his gaze to the cigarette.

"I don't have my car any more. But I guess I won't be needing it now."

There was a cautious knock on the door.

"Listen, Rog," Duran began, "I'll try to get to see you tomorrow before I leave. Remember that your mother and I are both on your side, without qualification. You've done a pretty terrible thing, of course. But I have to admit, at the same time, that I'm really rather proud of you. Does that make sense?"

"Sure," said Roger huskily, "I guess so."

T

he flight home was a quiet one. Duran found himself with many thoughts to think, not the least of which was what his wife's reaction would be. The difficulty lay in the fact that their married life had been too easy, too free of tragedy, to enable him to foresee her response. But life would not be quite the same now, even if Roger escaped the more concrete forms of punishment. And perhaps it would be the most difficult for Ernest, who would forever be expected either to live up to or down to his older brother's reputation. When all poor Ernest seemed to want these days was to play the saxophone.

And then there was his own political future to consider. This would certainly not help it. But perhaps the affair would be forgotten in the next three years. After all, it might have been far worse. It might have happened in a campaign year. This way he still had a fighting chance. Three sessions with a good record might overbalance the loss in public confidence this would incur. And then he thought of the Mars colony mess and winced.

Telling his wife about the matter was not nearly so difficult as the senator had feared. She had been ready for news of a crime of passion, or at least of armed robbery. What her husband had to relate stunned her at first. But once she had ridden out the shock, she recovered quickly.

"You don't have to go tonight, Molly," Duran told her.

"You think it might look better if I didn't?" she asked gently.

"That wasn't what I was getting at," he said. He thought it over for a moment, then added, "No, I don't. In fact, I think it would look better if we both went to the Governor's. Roger is not a juvenile delinquent. That, I believe, is understood. If we must accept some of the responsibility for what he did today, then let's do so gracefully. Were you to stay home tonight, it might appear to some that you had reason to be ashamed of the business, which you don't."

"It might also look as if I were afraid that Ernest might do something similar, as if I felt I had to watch him," she said. "Oh, people can be so ridiculous! Why wasn't Millie Gorton's boy in on it?"

Duran smiled at the idea of the Governor's tubby, obtuse son involved in the construction of anything more demanding than a paper glider.

T

he Governor's mansion, a century old edifice typifying the moribund tendency to confuse dignity with discomfort, was teeming with professional and political personages when the Durans arrived. The dinner went off routinely, with no overt references made to the missile matter. However, the senator noticed that no one inquired into the health and happiness of his two sons, so that he presumed word had got around.

It was not until after dinner, when he had seated himself alone in a corner of the luxurious old living room, a B and B in one hand and a cigar in the other, that his host approached him.

"Evenin', Vance. Sure glad you could make it," exclaimed the familiarly jovial voice of Governor Will Gorton.

Duran sat down his drink and took the Governor's plump hand, shaking it vigorously. Then the senator observed the intense youngish face of Fritz Ambly, who had followed the Governor.

"Guess you know Fritz," Gorton went on, seating himself next to Duran. "Says he met you at Sig's office this afternoon."

"That's right," Duran said. "Good to see you again, Ambly."

The Youth Welfare board chairman nodded affably and took the remaining chair. His look of concern had mellowed somewhat with the evening. But the pale close eyes remained set in an expression of aggressive earnestness.

"How's Roger?" Gorton asked, after a moment's silence.

"As normal as ever," said Duran, unprepared for the question. Then, slyly, he added, "Thanks for talking Loeffler into letting me see him."

"Well, Sig agreed it was the only thing to do, after I told him you'd be leaving for Washington again tomorrow," the Governor said.

Duran grinned wryly. It had been a guess, but a good one. And Loeffler's having passed the interview off as a personal favor put their relationship back in its proper perspective.

"Well, what's to be done about the boys? They're all under eighteen, I suppose."

"That's right," Gorton said. "It's entirely a matter for the juvenile authority. At least we're going to try to keep it there. But there's more to it than that. Which is why Fritz is here. He has something on his mind which he thinks is pretty important. I do too."

"You see, Senator," said Ambly, coming in promptly on his cue, "it's this way. If the case were an isolated one, it would be easy enough for us to deal with. But it's part of a pattern which few people have yet noticed. Let me cite several other similar incidents.

"Perhaps you read about the group of fifty teen-aged copter jockeys who decided to hold a transcontinental scavenger hunt. Ignoring all air-traffic regulations, they managed to run up the magnificent total of seventeen collisions and thirty-two casualties."

"Hear about that one, Vance?" the Governor asked, his earlier festiveness gone.

"Yes, I think I saw something about it," Duran said. "It was pretty unfortunate, but—"

"And then there was the case of the promising young New England biologist who was discovered to have evolved a particularly deadly strain of bacteria, which he had been toting around with him in an aspirin bottle," Ambly went on, his thin hands clasped tightly in front of him. "Of course, at the age of sixteen, one perhaps can't be expected to foresee all of the possible consequences.

"So let us consider the two seventeen-year-olds who caused something of a sensation in Florida when they used the Branski-Baker method of genetic exchange to breed a quite fabulous species of winged alligator. Several of these so called 'alli-bats' escaped into the everglades, but it is doubted that they will be able to reproduce themselves. At least there is *some* doubt."

The senator reached for his drink and sipped it thoughtfully. He was beginning to see Roger's gang's misadventure in a new light. But it was an unfamiliar light, one that would take him a while to become accustomed to.

"Perhaps the most startling case of all," Ambly went on, "concerns the Nuclear Fission Society of Urania, Nevada. It is not a well publicized fact that this quasi-academic group of adolescent physicists was exposed in the act of assembling an elementary but workable atomic bomb. Many of the elders in this fast-growing little community are engaged, as you no doubt know, in atomic development of one sort or another. It seemed that this interest had trickled down to their offspring, who showed an impressive amount of ingenuity in getting the necessary materials. Fortunately, one youngster asked his father entirely too many questions concerning the actual fabrication of fission weapons. The man investigated and—"

"Now, wait a minute," Duran interrupted, wondering momentarily if the whole tale might not have been a hoax. "How much of this am I really expected to believe?"

"It's all fact, Vance," Governor Gorton responded solemnly. "Fritz has a couple of scrapbooks I'd like you to look at some time. Each case is pretty well authenticated. But the important thing is the pattern. It's really sort of frightening in a way."

"Many similar incidents have no doubt occurred of which I have no record," said Ambly. "I'd estimate that ninety percent of such cases are suppressed, either in

the interest of national security or because the children's parents are sufficiently influential to have the story squelched."

"Just as we'd have sat on this one," added Gorton, "if the dang thing hadn't actually been shot off."

Duran smiled inwardly at the picture evoked by the Governor's metaphor. However, he had to admit that the press would in all probability not have learned about the rocket at all, had it been discovered prior to being launched.

"Still," he remarked, "it's odd that the papers haven't shown more of an interest in it."

"I wrote an article on the subject some time ago," Ambly told him, "but was never able to get it published. It seems that people, for the most part, are more interested in the traditional sordid-sensational type of juvenile delinquency.

"Whereas, this is something different, something unique. It isn't the result of poverty or broken homes, ignorance or twisted personalities—this is a mixture of genius, knowledge, restlessness, and something else I don't think we understand."

"What do you suggest be done about it?" Duran asked.

"Well, the first step," said Ambly, "is to get Congress to recognize the problem for what it is. And even that won't be easy."

"That's where you're supposed to come in," the Governor said, grinning a little guiltily. "Fritz has been tryin' to get me to talk to you about it for some months. I've got to admit, though, that the business this afternoon involvin' your son was what finally convinced me you might be sold."

"I'm sold, Will," Duran told him. "But what's the solution? We can't supervise the activities of every kid in the country with an IQ above a hundred and ten. Anyway, they're too limited as it is. That, it seems to me, is part of the trouble. And we can't hold their parents accountable. Responsibility has to be an individual matter. So what's the solution?"

Governor Gorton raised a quizzical eyebrow at Fritz Ambly, who in turn merely shrugged. The senator glanced at each of them, then down at his drink.

"So there isn't one," he said.

"Whatever it is," said Ambly, "it won't be simple or painless. There's only one such solution, and that's the time-honored technique of letting them grow into maturity. And even that is far from painless and simple to those doing the growing, nor is it always the solution."

"Yet you're convinced this—" the senator paused briefly, "phenomenon constitutes a danger to the nation?"

Ambly merely smiled. But very, very grimly.

"Well, think it over, Vance," the Governor said, getting to his feet. "Say, there are a couple of hydroponics men here somewhere who are pretty interested in meetin' you. You've heard of Van Neef Industries. He's one of 'em."

So much for the welfare of the nation, Duran thought with a taste of bitterness. *Now back to politics.*

But he finished off his drink, and put out his cigar, and rose to follow the Governor. Politics, after all, was the reason he had come.

I

t was two a.m. before Senator Vance Duran wearily dropped into bed. But he found no rest in sleep that night. For in his dreams he seemed to see a youngster walking, now through a forest, now through a city, now through an autumn countryside. And in the boy's hand was a tightly capped bottle. And the expression on his face was an enigma....

Early the next morning Jack Woodvale parked the helicopter in a lot back of the city youth detention home. Five minutes later the senator was again talking to his older son.

"I have to get back to Washington this morning, Roger," he said. "I've scheduled a committee meeting for ten-thirty. I suppose I could call it off, but we've got to do something about the Mars colony project before public apathy forces us to drop the whole thing. You understand, don't you?"

"Sure," the boy said with apparent indifference. "Maybe you should have let *me* volunteer. You'd have solved two problems at the same time."

"Now, Roger—" Duran began. But he stopped, suddenly alert.

"Son, you weren't ever serious about that, were you? I mean all that talk I used to hear about your wanting to go to one of the planets?"

"Ah, I don't know, Dad—"

"Please, Roger, you've got to be honest with me. I want to know exactly how you feel about it. I know you've tried before, and I refused to take you seriously. I realize that. But now—now tell me the truth."

And the curious thing was, he realized, that he wanted to hear from his son what he feared most to hear.

"Well—sure, I wanted to go," his son said. "I kept telling you, didn't I? Of course, I wouldn't want to go unless some of the gang were going too."

"You really think that you'd be willing to leave Earth, your home, your family —"

Duran hesitated angrily, knowing it was the wrong approach. He waited a moment, then began again.

"I'm not condemning you for it, Roger. I just find it hard to believe. And I have to be sure you know what you'd be sacrificing."

"I think I do, Dad," Roger said. "But you've got to make a break sometime. I guess there'd be some girls going along, wouldn't there?"

Duran grinned numbly.

"I guess there would, son," he said.

T

he Senator watched the land of his home state sink rapidly into the morning haze as the jetliner soared upward. It was a sight he had seen often, but never with the sense of challenge he experienced now. For every moment brought him closer to what beyond all doubt would be the toughest fight of his political career. But he felt that he had logic on his side, though sentiment would very probably be

against him.

He sat back, lit a cigarette, and considered the irony of the situation. When legislation had been passed authorizing the Department of Extraterrestrial Development to start the colony project, a list of criteria had been drawn up for the would-be settler. It had meticulously specified the requirements of health, intelligence, and adaptability. And most rigidly adhered to of all had been the provision that the applicant be over the age of twenty-five. For, above all, it was assumed, a colonist must be mature.

And in that assumption, Duran concluded, had been hidden the fallacy which had made a fiasco of the project. For was not maturity largely a matter of finding an acceptable place for oneself in the scheme of things? Was not maturity essentially a realistic, but wholly irrevocable, resignation? If so, it had been inevitable that those who came to volunteer would, for the most part, be the misfits and the malcontents, men who hoped to escape the imagined or to find the imaginary.

The mature, the resigned, had assuredly inherited the earth. Only the young could seek the stars.

END

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