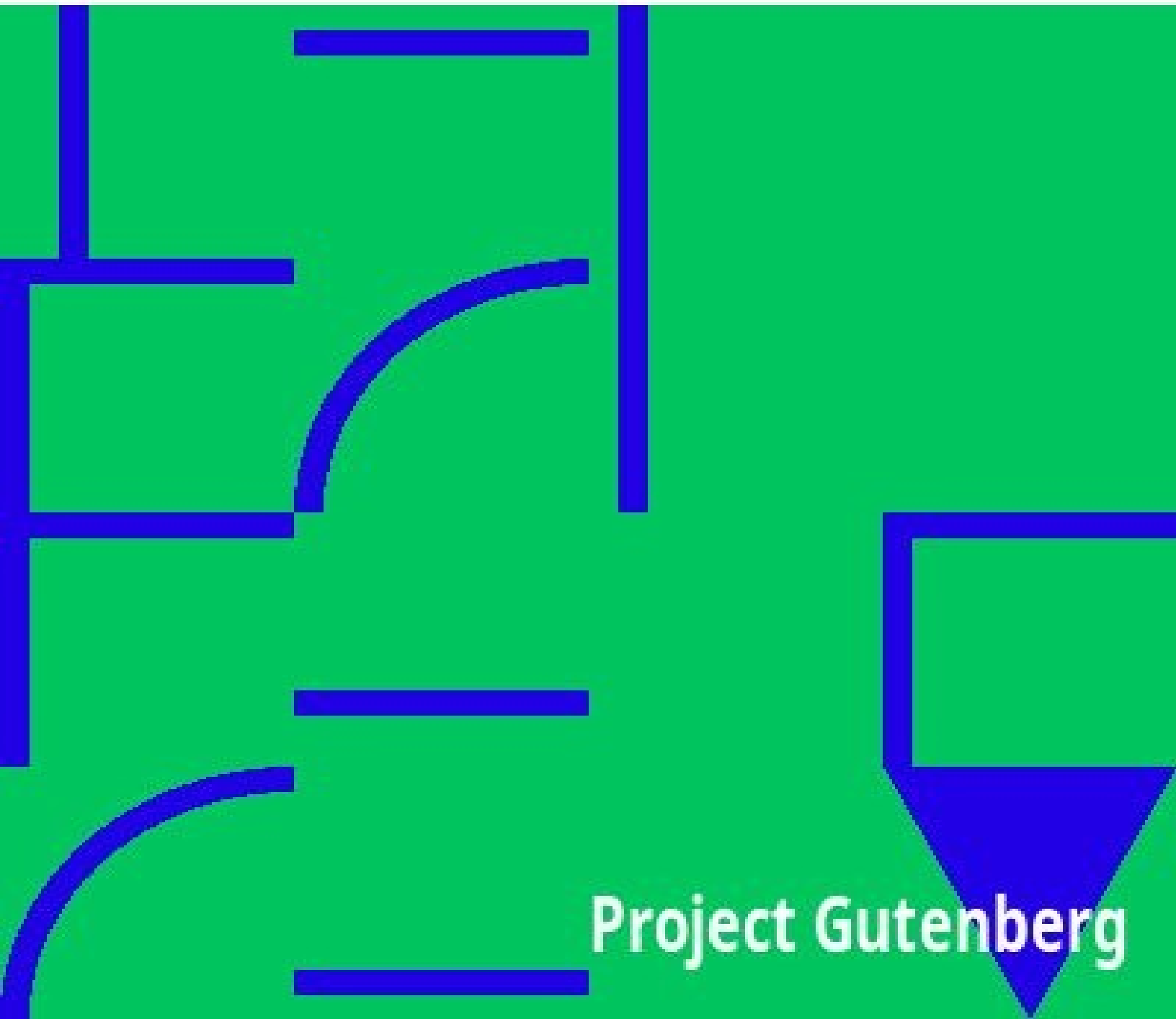


Get Out of Our Skies!

E. K. Jarvis



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GET OUT OF OUR SKIES! ***

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The long-suffering public went along with billboards and singing commercials; they tolerated half a dozen sales pitches in a half-hour radio or TV show; they suffered stoically through the "hard-sell" and the "soft-sell." But when the hucksters turned the wild blue yonder into a vast television screen, they howled—

GET OUT OF OUR SKIES!

By E. K. JARVIS

ON THE first cloudy day in November, Tom Blacker, the shining light of Ostreich and Company, Public Relations Counsellors, placed a call to a shirtsleeved man on the rooftop of the Cannon Building in New York City.

His message brought an immediate response from the waiting engineer, who flicked switches and twirled dials with expert motions, and brought into play the gigantic 50,000-watt projector installed on the peak.

In his own office, Tom paced the floor in front of the three-window exposure, watching the heavens for the results.

They weren't long in coming.

The eyes came first. Eyes the size of Navy dirigibles, with pupils of deep cerulean blue, floating against the backdrop of the gray cumulus. The long lashes curled out almost a hundred feet from the lids. Then the rest of Monica Mitchell's famous face appeared: the flowing yellow locks, the sensuously curved lips, parted moistly from even white teeth. From chin to hairline, the projected image above the city was close to a thousand feet in diameter.

Then, as if the floating countenance wasn't alarming enough, the ruby lips began to move. Monica's sweet-sultry voice, like the first drippings from a jar of honey, overcame the city sounds, and began crooning the syrupy strains of *Love Me Alone*. Which happened, by no coincidence, to be the title and theme song of Monica's newest epic.

**Monica's image—plastered across the heavens—stopped
traffic in all directions.**

It was a triumph. Tom knew it the moment he looked down at the crowded thoroughfare eighteen stories beneath the window. Traffic had come to a more than normal standstill. Drivers were leaving their autos, and hands were being upraised towards the gargantuan face on the clouds above.

And of course, Tom's phone rang.

Ostreich's big scowling face was barely squeezed within the confines of the visiphone screen. He said nothing intelligible for two minutes.

"Relax, Chief," Tom said brightly. "I've been saving this as a surprise."

Ostreich's reply was censorable.

"Now look, D. O. You gave me *carte blanche* with this Mitchell babe, remember? I figured we really needed a shot in the arm for this new picture of hers. The receipts on her last turkey couldn't pay her masseurs."

Ostreich, who had built his firm by establishing golden public images for various industrialists and their enterprises, had anticipated trouble the moment he let the barrier down to admit such unworthy clients as Monica Mitchell. But he had never anticipated that his ace publicist would display such carnival tactics in their promotion. He growled like a taunted leopard.

"This is a cheap trick, Tom! Do you hear me? Turn that thing off at once!"

"Who, me?" Tom said innocently. "Gosh, D. O. I'm no engineer. I left instructions with the operator to keep the projector going for three hours, until sunset. Don't think I can do anything about it now."

"You'll damn well *have* to do something about it! You're ruining us!"

"Look at it this way, Chief. What can we lose? If anybody takes offense, we can blame it on that Hollywood gang."

"Turn that damn thing off! If that blankety face isn't out of the sky in ten minutes, you can start emptying your desk!"

Tom was a redhead. He reached over and snapped the visiphone switch before his boss could have the satisfaction. He stomped to the window, still raging at Ostreich's lack of appreciation.

But he chuckled when he saw the activity in the street. The crowds were thickening at the intersections, and a special battalion of city police were trying to keep things moving. Behind him, the visiphone was beeping frantically again.

He waited a full minute before answering, all set to snap at Ostreich once more.

But it wasn't Ostreich. It was a square-faced man with beetling brows and a chin like the biting end of a steam shovel. It took Tom a while to recognize the face of Stinson, commissioner of police.

"Mr. Blacker?"

"Yes, sir?" Tom gulped.

"Mr. Ostreich referred me to you. You responsible for that—" the commissioner's voice was choked. "—that menace?"

"Menace, sir?"

"You know what I'm talking about. We've got half a dozen CAA complaints already. That thing's a menace to public safety, a hazard to air travel—"

"Look, Mr. Stinson. It's only a harmless publicity stunt."

"Harmless? You got funny ideas, Mr. Blacker. Don't get the wrong idea about our city ordinances. We got statutes that cover this kind of thing. If you don't want to be a victim of one of them, turn that damned monstrosity off!"

The commissioner's angry visage left a reverse shadow burned on the visiphone screen. It remained glowing there long after the contact was broken.

Tom Blacker walked the carpeted floor of his office, chewing on his lower lip, and cursing the feeble imaginations of Ostreich and the rest of them. When his temper had cooled, he got sober thoughts of indictments, and law suits, and unemployment. With a sigh, he contacted the engineer on the roof of the Cannon Building. Then he went to the window, and watched Monica's thousand-foot face fade gradually out of sight.

At four o'clock that afternoon, a long white envelope crossed Tom's blotter. There was a check to the amount of a month's salary enclosed, and a briefly-worded message from the office of the president.

When he left the office, Ostreich's rolling phrases buzzed in his head like swarming gnats. "... a mockery of a great profession ... lowering of dignity ... incompatible with the highest ideals of ..."

At ten o'clock that night, Tom was telling his troubles to a red-coated man behind a chromium bar on Forty-ninth Street. The man listened with all the

gravity of a physician, and lined up the appropriate medicine in front of his patient.

By midnight, Tom was singing Christmas carols, in advance of the season, with a tableful of Texans.

At one o'clock, he swung a right cross at a mounted policeman, missed, and fell beneath the horse's legs.

At one-fifteen, he fell asleep against the shoulder of a B-girl as they rode through the streets of the city in a sleek police vehicle.

That was all Tom Blacker remembered, until he woke up in Livia Cord's cozy two-room apartment. He moved his head and winced with the pain.

"Hi," the girl said.

She was smiling down at him, and for a moment, her floating face reminded Tom of the episode which had just cost him twenty grand a year. He groaned, and rolled the other way on the contour couch.

"Hair of the dog?" she said. There was a gleaming cannister in her hand.

"No, thanks." He sat up, rubbing the stiff red hair on the back of his head. One eye seemed permanently screwed shut, but the other managed to take in his surroundings. It explored the girl first, and appreciatively.

She was wearing something black and satiny, cut in the newest Dallas-approved style, with long, tantalizing diagonal slashes across the breast and hips. Her hair was strikingly two-toned, black and blonde. Her teeth were a blinding white, and had been filed to canine sharpness.

"My name's Livia," the girl said pleasantly. "Livia Cord. I hope you don't mind what I did."

"And what was that?" Tom's other eye popped open, almost audibly.

"Bailing you out of jail. Seems you got into a fracas with a mounted cop. I think you tried to punch his horse."

"Nuts. I was trying to hit him."

"Well, you didn't." She chuckled, and poured herself a drink. "You've had quite a day, Mr. Blacker."

"You said it." There was a taste in his mouth like cigar ashes. He tried to stand up, but the weight on his head kept him where he was. "You wouldn't have an oxygen pill around?"

"Sure." She left with a toss of her skirt and a revelation of silky calves. When she returned with the tablet and water, he took it gratefully. After a few minutes, he felt better enough to ask:

"Why?"

"What's that?"

"Why'd you bail me out? I don't know you. Or do I?"

She laughed. "No. Not yet you don't. But I know you, Mr. Blacker. By reputation, at any rate. You see—" She sat next to him on the couch, and Tom was feeling well enough to tingle at her nearness. "We're in the same line of work, you and I."

"Unemployment?"

"No," she smiled. "Public relations. Only I'm on the client's side of the fence. I work for an organization called Homelovers, Incorporated. Ever hear of them?"

Tom shook his head.

"Maybe you should. It's a rather important company, and growing. And they're always on the lookout for superior talent."

He squinted at her. "What is this? A job offer?"

"Maybe." She wriggled a little, and the slits in her dress widened just a fraction. "We've got the nucleus of a good PR department now. But with a really experienced man at the controls—it could grow enormously. Think you might be interested?"

"Maybe I would," Tom said. But he wasn't thinking about PR right then.

"Mr. Andrusco's had you in mind for a long time," Livia Cord continued. "I've

mentioned your name to him several times as a possible candidate. If you hadn't been fired from Ostreich, we might have tried to tempt you away." Her fingers touched a stray lock of red hair. "Now—we don't have to be surreptitious about it. Do we?"

"No," Tom said guardedly. "I guess not."

"If you're free tomorrow, I could arrange a meeting with Mr. Andrusco. Would you like that?"

"Well ..."

"His office opens at nine. We could get there early."

Tom looked at his watch. Livia said: "I know it's late. But we could get an early start in the morning, right after breakfast. Couldn't we?"

"I dunno," Tom frowned. "By the time I get home ..."

"Home?" The girl leaned back. "Who said anything about home?"

Her bedroom was monochromed. Even the sheets were pink. At five o'clock, the false dawn glimmered through the window, and the light falling on his eyes awakened him. He looked over at the sleeping girl, feeling drugged and detached. She moaned slightly, and turned her face towards him. He blinked at the sight of it, and cried aloud.

"What is it?" She sat up in bed and nicked on the table lamp. "What's the matter?"

He looked at her carefully. She was beautiful. There wasn't even a smudge of lipstick on her face.

"Nothing," he said dreamily, and turned away. By the time he was asleep again, his mind had already erased the strange image from his clouded brain—that Livia Cord had absolutely no mouth at all.

It was hard to keep track of the glass-and-steel structures that had been springing up daily along the Fifth-Madison Thruway. When Tom and Livia stepped out of the cab in front of 320, he wasn't surprised that the building—an odd, cylindrical affair with a pointed spire—was strange to him. But he was taken aback to realize that all sixty floors were the property of Homelovers, Incorporated.

"Quite a place," he told the girl.

She smiled at him tightly. Livia was crackling with business electricity this morning, her spiked heels clicking along the marble floors of the lobby like typewriter keys. She wore a tailored gray suit that clung to her body with all the perfection and sexlessness of a window mannikin. In the elevator, shooting towards the executive offices on the 57th floor, Tom looked over at her and scratched his poorly-shaven cheeks in wonderment.

They plowed right through the frosty receptionist barrier, and entered an office only half the size of Penn Station. The man behind the U-shaped desk couldn't have been better suited to the surroundings by Central Casting. He was cleft-jawed, tanned, exquisitely tailored. If his polished brown toupee had been better fitted, he would have been positively handsome.

The handshake was firm.

"Good to see you," he grinned. "Heard a lot about you, Mr. Blacker. All of it good."

"Well," Livia said airily. "I've done my part. Now you two come to terms. Buzz me if you need me, J. A."

John Andrusco unwrapped a cigar when she left, and said: "Well, now. Suppose we get right down to cases, Mr. Blacker. Our organization is badly in need of a public relations set-up that can pull out all the stops. We have money and we have influence. Now all we need is guidance. If you can supply that, there's a vacant chair at the end of the hall that can accommodate your backside." He grinned manfully.

"Well," Tom said delicately. "My big problem is this, Mr. Andrusco. I don't know what the hell business you're in."

The executive laughed heartily. "Then let me fill you in."

He stepped over to a cork-lined wall, pressed a concealed button, and panels parted. An organizational chart, with designations that were meaningless to Tom, appeared behind it.

"Speaking basically," Andrusco said, "Homelovers, Incorporated represents the interests of the world's leading real estate concerns. Land, you know, is still the number one commodity of Earth, the one priceless possession that rarely

deteriorates in value. In fact, with the increase in the Earth's population, the one commodity that never seems to be in excess supply."

"I see," Tom said, not wholly in truth.

"The stability of real estate is our prime concern. By unification of our efforts, we have maintained these values over a good many years. But as you know, a good business organization never rests on its laurels. Sometimes, even basic human needs undergo unusual—alterations."

"I'm not following too well," Tom said frankly. "Just where does public relations come into this? I can't see much connection."

Andrusco frowned, but without wrinkling his serene brow too much. He went to the multipaned window and locked his hands behind his back.

"Let me put it this way, Mr. Blacker. With the Earth's population approaching the three billion mark, you can imagine that real estate is at a greater premium than ever—yes, even the remotest land areas have gained in market value. But let me ask you this. If there were only a hundred apples in the world, and you owned all of them, what would you do if you learned that someone else had discovered a fruitful orchard, which contains ten million apples?"

"I'd go out of the apple business."

"Precisely." Andrusco rocked on his heels. "In a sense, that's very much the problem that Homelovers, Incorporated may have to face in the next generation."

"Somebody swiping your apples?"

"In a way." The man chuckled. "Yes, in a way." He raised his arm slowly, and pointed to the sky. "The apples," he said, "are up there."

"Huh?" Tom said.

"Space, Mr. Blacker. Space is opening its doors to us. Already, the UN Space Commission has launched some two dozen manned vehicles into the outer reaches. Already, the satellite-building colony on the moon is well under way. The progress of our space program has been accelerating month by month. The expert predictions have been more and more optimistic of late. In another ten,

twenty years, the solar system will be beckoning the children of Earth ..."

Tom said nothing for a while. Then he cleared his throat.

"Well ... I'm no expert on these things. But maybe the population could stand a little more real estate, Mr. Andrusco. In twenty years ..."

"Nonsense!" The voice was snappish. "The best authorities say it isn't so. There's plenty of room on Earth. But if ever a mass exodus begins—"

"That doesn't seem possible," Tom said. "Does it? I mean, only a handful of guys have ever gone out there. A drop in the bucket. I mean, Mars and all that may be fun to visit, but who'd want to live there?"

Andrusco turned to him slowly.

"The apples in the new orchard may be sour, Mr. Blacker. But if your livelihood depended on your own little stack of fruit—would you be willing to sit by and take the chance?"

Tom shrugged. "And is that the public relations job? To keep people out of space?"

"Put in its crudest form, yes."

"A pretty tough job. You know that guff about Man's Pioneering Spirit."

"Yes. But we're worried about the public spirit, Mr. Blacker. If we can dampen their ardor for space flight—only delay it, mind you, for another few years—we can tighten our own lines of economic defense. Do I make myself clear?"

"Not completely."

"Will you take the job?"

"What does it pay?"

"Fifty thousand."

"Where do I sit?"

By the afternoon, Tom Blacker was ensconced in a fair-sized office with vaguely oriental furnishings and an ankle-deep rug. Livia's pretty ankles visited it first.

"Here's an outline I began on the PR program," she told him briskly, dropping a sheet of paper on his desk. "I didn't get very far with it. I'm sure you can add a lot."

"Okay. I'll read it over this afternoon." He tipped the chair back. "How about dinner tonight?"

"Sorry. Busy tonight. Maybe later this week."

But it wasn't until Friday, three days later, that he saw Livia Cord again. He accomplished that by calling her in for a conference, spreading his own typewritten notes on the desk in front of him.

"Got some rough ideas drafted on the program," he told her. "The possibilities of this thing are really unlimited. Granted, of course, that there's money in this picture."

"There's money all right," Livia said. "We don't have to worry about that."

"Good. I've put down a list of leading citizens that might be enrolled as backers for anything we might come up with, people who have been outspoken about the expense or danger of space flight. We'll keep it on file, and add to it as new names crop up in the press. Then here's a listing of categories for us to develop subprograms around. Religious, economic, social, medical—Medical's good. There's a heck of a lot of scare-value in stories about cosmic rays, alien diseases, plagues, zero gravity sickness, all that sort of thing. Sterility is a good gimmick; impotence is even better."

Livia smiled. "I know what you mean."

"Mmm. Come to think of it, we ought to set up a special woman's-point-of-view program, too. That'll be worth plenty. Then there's the tax question. We'll have to see what we can set up in Washington, some kind of anti-space lobby. Good feature story material here, too. You know the stuff—one space vessel equals the cost of two hundred country hospitals."

"Sounds great."

"We'll have to plan on press parties, special stuff for the magazines and networks. I've got a plan for some Hollywood promotion to counteract all this Destination Space garbage they've been turning out. And as for television—"

He talked on for another hour, feeling mounting excitement for the job he was doing. Tom wasn't sure that he liked the aims of Homelovers, Incorporated, but the challenge was enjoyable. Even at dinner that night, in Livia's snug apartment, he rattled on about the PR program until the girl began to yawn.

The bedroom was still monochrome. Only Livia had transformed it magically into powder blue. Tom slept blissfully until morning, and went into the office that weekend for sheer love of what he was doing.

After less than a month, his efforts started producing results. On a crisp December morning, he found the following in his mail:

"EARTH SONG"
A Screenplay
by
Duncan Devine

Roger Tenblade, a dashing young rocket pilot in the UN Air Force, yearns to join the Space Expeditionary Force now planning the first landing and colonization of the planet Mars. Despite the protest of his lovely fiancée, Diane, he embarks upon the journey. The trip is fraught with hazards, and the ship is struck by a meteor en route. Every member of the crew is killed, except Roger, who heroically brings the vessel back to home base. However, Roger is exposed to large amounts of cosmic radiation. When he is so informed by the medical authorities, he realizes that he can never make Diane a normal husband. So rather than return to her and ruin her life, he changes his identity and disappears to South America, where he takes a job as a shuttle pilot for a third-class airline.

Meanwhile, Diane marries Harold Farnsworth, scion of one of America's wealthiest families ...

Tom Blacker chuckled, and slipped the scenario back into the envelope. He marked the manuscript "O.K. for Production," and turned to the other mail.

There was the prospectus of a television series that sounded interesting. He looked it over carefully.

"CAPTAIN TERRA"

Half-hour Television Series
written by
Craig Comfort

Captain Terra, and his Earth Cadets are dedicated to the principle of "Earth Above All" and have sworn their lives to the preservation of Earth and its peoples, and to the protection of Earth against the hostile aliens constantly threatening the planet.

Program One, Act One

Bobby, Captain Terra's youthful aide, is attacked one day by a strange creature which he describes as half-man, half-snake. He reports the incident to Captain Terra, who calls a special session of his Earth Patrol to determine how best to deal with this enemy ...

Tom read the prospectus through, and then dictated a letter to its producers to call for an appointment.

At the bottom of the mail pile, he found an enthusiastic letter from a theatrical producer named Homer Bradshaw, whom he had dealt with briefly during his career at Ostreich and Company.

Dear Tom,

Great to hear about your new connection! Have a fabulous gimmick that ought to be right down your alley. Am thinking of producing a new extravaganza entitled: "Be It Ever So Humble."

This will be a real classy show, with plenty of chorus line and top gags. We plan to kid the pants off this spaceman business, until those bright boys in the glass hats cry uncle. I've already lined up James Hocum for the top banana, and Sylvia Crowe for the female lead. You know Sylvia, Tom; she'll make space flight sound about as chic as a debutante's ball on the Staten Island Ferry. This is the way to do the job, Tom—laugh 'em out of it.

If you're interested in a piece of this, you can always reach me at ...

He was about to call it a day at five-thirty, when he got a visiphone call from John Andrusco. When he walked into the immense office at the other end of the floor, he saw a glassy-eyed man standing at Andrusco's desk, twirling his hat with nervous fingers.

"Tom," Andrusco said cheerfully, "want you to meet somebody. This is Sergeant Walt Spencer, formerly of the UN Space Commission."

Tom shook the man's hand, and he could feel it trembling in his own.

"I called Walt in here specially, thanks to that memo you sent me, Tom. Great idea of yours, about talking to some of the boys who've actually been in space. Walter here's willing to cooperate a hundred percent."

"That's fine," Tom said uneasily.

"Thought you two ought to get together," Andrusco said, reaching for his hat. "Think he can help a lot, Tom. Talk it over."

"Well—suppose we have a drink, Sergeant? That fit your plans all right?"

"Suits me," the man said, without emotion.

They went down in the elevator together, and slid into a red-leather booth in the Tuscany Bar in the base of the building. The sergeant ordered a double Scotch, and gulped it with the same respect you give water.

"So you've been in space," Tom said, looking at him curiously. "Must have been quite an experience."

"Yeah."

"Er—I take it you've left the service."

"Yeah."

Tom frowned, and sipped his martini. "How many trips did you make, Sergeant?"

"Just one. Reconnaissance Moon Flight Four. About six years ago. You must have read about it."

"Yes," Tom said. "Sorry."

The man shrugged. "Things happen. Even on Earth, things happen."

"Tell me something." Tom leaned forward. "Is it true about—" He paused, embarrassed. "Well, you hear a lot of stories. But I understand some of the men on that flight, the ones who got back all right, had children. And—well, you know how rumors go—"

"Lies," Spencer said, without rancor. "I've got two kids myself. Both of 'em normal."

"Oh." Tom tried to hide his disappointment behind the cocktail glass. It would have made great copy, if he could have proved the truth of the old rumor about two-headed babies. But what *could* Sergeant Spencer do for the PR program? Andrusco must have had something in mind.

He asked him point-blank.

"It's like this," the man said, his eyes distant. "Since I quit the service, I haven't been doin' so good. With jobs, I mean. And Mr. Andrusco—he said he'd give me five thousand dollars if I'd—help you people."

"Did Mr. Andrusco describe this help?"

"Yeah. He wants me to do a story. About the kid my wife had. The first kid."

"What about the first kid?"

"Well, she died, the first kid did. In childbirth. It was something that happens, you know. My wife's a little woman; the baby was smothered."

"I see. And what kind of story do you want to tell?"

"It's not my idea." A hint of stubbornness glimmered in his dull eyes. "It's that Andrusco guy's. He wants me to tell how the baby was born a—mutant."

"What?"

"He wants me to release a story saying the baby was a freak. The kid was born at home, you see. The only other person who saw her, besides me and my wife, was this doctor we had. And he died a couple of years back."

Tom slumped in his chair. This was pushing public relations a little far.

"Well, I dunno," he said. "If the baby was really normal—"

"It was normal, all right. Only dead, that's all."

Tom stood up. "Okay, Sergeant Spencer. Let me think it over, and I'll give you a buzz before the end of the week. All right?"

"Anything you say, Chief."

In the morning, Tom Blacker went storming into John Andrusco's plush office.

"Now look, Mr. Andrusco. I don't mind slanting a story a little far. But this Spencer story of yours is nothing but a hoax."

Andrusco looked hurt. "Did he tell you that? How do you like that nerve?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, that story's as genuine as gold. We've known about the freak birth for a long time. Cosmic rays, you know. Those men on that reconnaissance flight really got bombarded."

Tom wasn't sure of himself. "You mean, it's true?"

"Of course it is! As a matter of fact, we've got a photograph of the dead baby, right after it was delivered. The doctor who attended Mrs. Spencer took it without their knowledge, as a medical curiosity. He sold it to us several years ago. We've never used it before, because we knew that the Spencers would just deny it. Now that Walt's willing to cooperate ..."

"Can I see the photo?"

"Why, certainly." He opened the top drawer and handed a glossy print across the desk. Tom looked at it, and winced.

"Scales!" he said.

"Like a fish," Andrusco said sadly. "Pretty sad, isn't it?" He looked out of the window and sighed cavernously. "It's a menacing world up there...."

The rest of the day was wasted. Tom Blacker's mind wasn't functioning right.

He told Livia about it at lunch.

Livia Cord continued eating, chewing delicately on her food without flexing a muscle or wincing an eyebrow.

On the Third of April, the story of Sergeant Walter Spencer's first-born monster broke in newspapers, magazines, and telecasts across the country. It was a five-year-old story, but it carried too much significance for the space-minded present to be ignored.

Two days later, Sergeant Spencer, 32, and his wife, Laura, 30, were found dead of asphyxiation in their new home in Greenwich, Connecticut. The cause of death was listed as suicide.

Tom Blacker didn't hear the news until a day after it happened. He was in Washington, setting up a series of meetings with members of a House group investigating space flight expenditures. When he returned by 'copter that evening, he found Police Commissioner Joe Stinson waiting for him in Tom's own favorite chair.

The square, heavy-jowled face was strangely calm.

"Long time no see," he said mildly. "You've been a busy man lately, Mr. Blacker."

"Hello, Mr. Stinson. Won't you come in?"

"I'm in," the commissioner shrugged. "Landlord let me wait here. It's chilly outside. Do you want the preliminaries, or should we have the main bout?"

"It's about Spencer, isn't it?" Tom built himself a long drink. "I heard about it on the 'copter radio, flying in. Too bad. He was a nice guy; I never met his wife."

"But you knew him, right? In fact, you and the sergeant did a lot of business together?"

"Look, Mr. Stinson. You know what kind of job I'm trying to do. It's no secret. Spencer's story happened to gear in nicely with our public relations effort. And that's all."

"Maybe it is." The commissioner's eyes hardened. "Only some of us aren't satisfied. Some of us are kinda restless about the coroner's verdict."

"What?"

"You heard me. It's fishy, you know? Nice young couple buys a new house, then turns on the gas. Leave behind a couple of kids, too. Boys, nice boys."

"I couldn't feel worse about it," Tom said glumly. "In a way, I can almost feel responsible ..."

"How?"

"I dunno. They were perfectly willing to release that story about their first-born. But maybe when they actually saw it in print, they couldn't stand the spotlight —"

"And that's your theory?"

"Yes. But I hope I'm wrong, Mr. Stinson. For my own sake."

The commissioner drew a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket.

"Let me read you something. This hasn't been released to the press, and maybe it won't be. Interested?"

"Of course."

"It's a letter. A letter that was never mailed. It's addressed to Tom Blacker, care of Homelovers, Incorporated, 320 Fifth-Madison, New York."

"What?" Tom reached for it.

"Uh-uh. It was never mailed, so it's not your property. But I'll read it to you." He slipped on a pair of bifocals.

Dear Mr. Blacker. I've been trying to reach you all week, but you've been out of town. Laura and I have just seen the first news story about our baby, and we're just sick about it. Why didn't you tell us about that photograph you were going to print? If we had known about that, we never would have consented to doing what you wanted. My wife never gave birth to that damned thing, and I don't care who knows it. I've called Mr. Andrusco to tell him that we don't want any part of this business any more. I'd send you back every penny of the five thousand dollars, only we've already spent half of it. I'm going to call the newspapers and tell them everything ...

The commissioner paused. "It goes on for another half page. But no use reading any more. I'd like a reaction, Mr. Blacker. Got one handy?"

Tom was on his feet.

"I don't believe it!" His fist thudded into his palm. "The letter's a fake!"

"That's easy to prove, Mr. Blacker."

"But the picture was genuine! Don't you see that? Sure, we paid Spencer something for his cooperation. But the picture was the real thing, taken by his family doctor. You've heard what the medical authorities said about it."

Stinson said nothing. Then he got up slowly and walked to the door.

"Maybe so. But you're missing the point I want to make, Mr. Blacker. This letter was dated the same day as the Spencer suicides. Does it sound to you like the kind of thing a man would put in a suicide note? Think it over."

Tom looked at the door the commissioner closed behind him.

"No," he said aloud. "It doesn't."

Tom didn't go to the Homelovers building the next morning. He proceeded directly to the Lunt Theatre, where Homer Bradshaw was putting *Be It Ever So Humble* into rehearsal.

He was in no mood for the theatre, but the appointment had been made too long before. When he came through the doors of the theatre, Homer leaped halfway up the aisle to greet him, and pounded his back like a long-lost pal. Actually, he had met the producer only twice before.

"Great to have you here, Tom!" he said enthusiastically. "Great! We've just been putting things together. Got some red-hot numbers we had written specially for us. Wait 'til you hear 'em!" He waved towards the two shirtsleeved men hovering around the on-stage piano. "You know Julie, don't you? And Milt Steiner? Great team! Great team!"

They took seats in the sixth row while Homer raved about the forthcoming production that was going to cost Homelovers, Incorporated some hundred thousand dollars. A dozen shapely girls in shorts and leotards were kicking their heels lackadaisically in the background, and a stout man with a wild checkered

suit was wandering around the stage with an unlit cigar in his hand, begging the stagehands for a match.

"Hey, fellas!" Homer Bradshaw called to the men at the piano. "Run through that Gypsy number for Mr. Blacker, huh?"

They came to life like animated dolls. The tallest of the pair stepped in front of the stage while the other thumped the piano keys. The tall one sang in a loud nasal voice, with an abundance of gestures.

*"Gypsy!
Gypsy!
Why do you have to be a gypsy?
Life could be so ipsy-pipsy
Staying home and getting tipsy
Safe on Earth with me!"*

He swung into the second chorus while Tom Blacker kept his face from showing his true opinion of the specialty number. The next offering didn't change his viewpoint. It was a ballad. A blonde girl in clinging black shorts sang it feelingly.

*"There's a beautiful Earth tonight
With a beautiful mellow light
Shining on my spaceman in the moon.
Why did he leave me?
Only to grieve me?
Spaceman, come home to me soon ..."*

"Did you like it? Did you like it?" Homer Bradshaw said eagerly.

"It'll do fine," Tom Blacker said, with his teeth clenched.

When he left the theatre, Tom visiphoned the office to tell Livia that he was taking the rest of the day off. But he found that Livia herself was spending the day in her two-room apartment downtown. He hung up, and decided that he had to talk to her about Stinson's visit. He hopped a cab, and gave him Livia's address.

John Andrusco answered the door.

"Well! Thought you were at the office, Tom?"

He found himself glaring at the lean-jawed executive. What was Andrusco doing here?

"I've been over at the theatre," Tom explained. "Watching that musical we're spending all that dough on." He stepped inside. "I might say the same about you, Mr. Andrusco."

"Me? Oh, I just came to talk over some business with Livia. Poor kid's not feeling so hot, you know."

"No, I didn't." He dropped his hat familiarly on the contour couch, with almost too much deliberation. "Livia in bed?"

"No." The girl appeared at the door of the bedroom, wrapping a powder-blue negligee around her. "What brings you here, Tom?"

"I—I wanted to talk something over with you. Now that you're here, Mr. Andrusco, we can *all* talk it over."

"What's that?" Andrusco made himself at home at the bar.

"It's about Walt Spencer. I had a visitor last night, the police commissioner. He showed me a letter that Spencer had written just before he—before he died. It was addressed to me, only Spencer had never mailed it."

Andrusco looked sharply at the girl. "And what was in this letter?"

"He was upset," Tom said. "He wanted to back out of the deal we made. Said the picture was a phoney. But the thing that's bothering the police is the *tone* of the damned letter. It just doesn't sound like a man about to kill himself and his wife —"

"Is that all?" Livia took the drink from Andrusco's hand and sipped at it. "I thought it was something serious."

"It is serious!" Tom looked sternly at her. "I want to know something, Mr. Andrusco. You told me that picture was genuine. Now I want you to tell me again."

The man smiled, with perfect teeth. "How do you mean, genuine? Is it a picture of a genuine infant with scales?"

"Yes."

"I assure you. In that respect, the picture is absolutely genuine."

Tom thought it over.

"Wait a while. Was the story genuine, too?"

John Andrusco smiled. He sat on the sofa, and rubbed the palms of his hands over his knees. Then he looked towards Livia Cord and said:

"Well—I didn't think we could hold out on our clever Mr. Blacker as long as we have. So we might as well enlist his cooperation fully. Eh, Livia?"

"I think so." The girl smiled, her teeth sharp.

"What does that mean?" Tom said.

"The infant," John Andrusco answered slowly, "was not Walter Spencer's child. That, I'm afraid, was nothing more than a little white lie."

Tom looked confused.

"Then what was it?"

Livia finished her drink.

"It was my child."

The man and the woman, whose grins now seemed permanently affixed to their faces, were forced to wait a considerable amount of time before Tom Blacker was both ready and able to listen to their explanation.

Livia did most of the talking.

"You'll probably be horrified at all this," she said, with a trace of amusement around her red mouth. "Particularly since you and I have been—" She paused, and looked towards Andrusco with a slight lift of her shoulder. "Well, you know. But you needn't feel too squeamish, Tom. After all, I was born and raised on Earth. I am, you might say, an honorary Earth woman."

Tom's eyes bulged at her.

"This civilization from which my husband and I claim ancestry is perhaps no older than your own. Unfortunately, we were not blessed with a planetary situation as agreeable as Earth's. Our sun is far feebler, the orbital paths of our moons act drastically upon our waters, causing generations of drought and centuries of flood ..."

"What are you talking about?" Tom said hoarsely.

"I speak of home," Livia Cord said. And her eyes gleamed.

"Antamunda is the name we give it," John Andrusco said cordially. "A world very much like your own in size and atmosphere, Mr. Blacker. But tragically, a world whose usefulness has been gradually coming to an end. Our ancestors, who were scientists of much ability, foresaw this some hundreds of years ago. Since that time, they have been seeking a solution to the problem."

"I don't believe this!"

"We have," Livia said carefully, "excellent evidence."

"Some five hundred years ago," Andrusco continued, "our people despatched an exploratory space vessel. A home-hunting force, seeking to relocate the surviving members of our race. It was a long, trying odyssey, but it finally culminated in the selection of a new home. I needn't tell you that the home is in your own solar system."

Tom shot to his feet. "You mean Earth? You mean you want to take over here—"

Andrusco looked shocked. "Certainly not! What a violent thought, Mr. Blacker!"

"The planet you call Mars," Livia said coolly, "was the selected destination. A planet with only limited facilities for the support of life. But a planet even more like our own dying world than Earth, Mr. Blacker. So you needn't cry havoc about alien invaders." She laughed sharply.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Merely waiting," Andrusco said. "We are the offspring of the surviving members of the expeditionary force from Antamunda, placed here on Earth as a vanguard of the immigration that will shortly take place to this system. But your own world is in no danger, Mr. Blacker. That you must believe. Physically, our people are not your equals. Scientifically, we are advanced in certain fields and

shamefully backwards in others. Biologically—" He frowned. "This is our greatest weakness. To the Antamundans, your breeding capacity is nothing short of grotesque." His handsome lip curled. He enjoyed watching Tom's reaction.

Tom swallowed hard. "How long have you been here?"

"Some four generations have been born here. Our duty has been merely to await the arrival of our people. But in the last fifty years, we found ourselves faced with another obligation. It was that obligation which brought about the formation of Homelovers, Incorporated."

"I don't understand."

"We had underestimated the science of Earth. Our own necessity drove us towards the perfection of space flight. Earth had no such urgency. But now—" Livia looked mournful. "Now we were faced with the possibility that Mars would soon be a colony of your own planet, before our people had a chance to make it their rightful home. You can see the consequences of that. A conflict of interests, a question of territorial rights. Even the possibility of an interplanetary war—"

"War!"

"A possibility greatly to be abhorred," Andrusco said. "And one we were sure we could eliminate, if we could merely *delay* the colonization of Mars."

"Don't you see?" Livia said earnestly. "If we could make Mars our natural home, then the people of Earth would come to us as friendly visitors—or invaders, whichever they prefer. But if we arrived too late— No, Tom. We feel that it is imperative—to the peace of *both* our worlds—that Antamunda reach Mars first."

"Then it's a race!" Tom was bewildered.

"You may call it that. But a race we are determined to win. And we *will* win!"

Tom thought of another question.

"The infant," he said. "The creature with scales ..."

"It was mine," the girl said sadly. "Born to John and me some ten years ago. Unfortunately, it did not live. And while your Earth eyes may consider it a creature—" She drew herself up proudly. "It was a perfectly formed

Antamundan child."

Tom gaped at her.

"No," she said, answering the question in his gaze. "You are looking at us as we are. We lose our scales after our infancy, when our mouths are formed ..."

After a while, Tom asked:

"And what about Spencer?"

"Unfortunate," the man said. "His betrayal to the press would have done us incalculable harm. It was necessary to do what we did."

"Then you did kill them?"

Livia turned her head aside.

"And you think I'll stand for that?" Tom said.

"Perhaps not," Andrusco said. "But frankly—I don't really know what you can do about it. Except, of course, repeat this explanation to the authorities. You're free to do that, Tom. Any time at all." He smiled, slyly.

"You think they won't believe me?"

Livia came over to Tom's chair, and slithered one arm around his shoulder.

"Why, Tom, darling. Are you so sure that *you* believe it?"

He left the apartment some ten minutes later, and took a cab to 320 Fifth-Madison. It was almost five o'clock, and the steel-and-glass cylinder was emptying rapidly of its Homelovers employees. He watched the stream of ordinary people stepping off the elevators: the young secretaries with their fresh faces and slim figures, laughing at office anecdotes and sharing intimate confidences about office bachelors; the smooth-cheeked young executives, in their gray and blue suits, gripping well-stocked brief cases, and striding energetically down the lobby, heading for the commuter trains; the paunchy, dignified men with their gray temples and gleaming spectacles, walking slowly to the exits, quoting stock prices and planning golf dates.

The crowd eddied about him like a battling current as he made his way towards

the elevators, and their images swam before his face in pink-and-white blurs. And for one terrible moment, in the thickest vortex of the crowd, he began to imagine that the faces were melting before his eyes, the mouths disappearing into the flesh, and below the white collars and black-knit ties and starched pink blouses appeared a shimmering collection of ugly scales.

He shuddered, and stepped into an empty car, punching the button that shot him to the executive floor of the Homelovers Building.

In his office, he switched on the visiphone and made contact with a square-faced man who frowned mightily when he recognized his caller.

"What do you want?" Stinson said.

"I have to see you," Tom told him. "I learned something this afternoon, about Walt Spencer. I don't know whether you'll believe it or not, but I have to take that chance. Will you talk to me?"

"All right. But we'll have to make it down here."

"I'll be there in an hour. I want to organize a few things first. Then we can talk."

Tom switched off, and began to empty his desk. He found nothing in the official communications of the Homelovers that would substantiate his story, but he continued to gather what information he could about the PR program.

He was just clicking the locks on his brief case, when a gray-haired woman with a pencil thrust into her curls popped her head in the doorway.

"Mr. Blacker?" she smiled. "I'm Dora, Mr. Wright's secretary. Mr. Wright wants to know if you'll stop in to see him."

"Wright?" Tom said blankly.

"The treasurer. His office is just down the hall. He's very anxious to see you, something about the expense sheets you turned in last week."

Tom frowned. "Why don't I see him in the morning?"

"It won't take but a minute."

"All right."

He sighed, picked up the brief case, and followed Dora outside. She showed him

the door of an office some thirty paces from his own, and he entered without knocking.

A frail man, with a bald head and a squiggly moustache, stood up behind his desk.

"Oh, dear," he said nervously. "I'm terribly sorry to do this, Mr. Blacker. But I have my instructions."

"Do what?"

"Oh, dear," Mr. Wright said again.

He took the gun that was lying in his out-box, and fired it. His trembling hand sent the bullet spanging into the wooden frame of the door. Tom dropped to the thick carpet, and then scrambled to the tall credenza set against the right wall of the office. He shoved it aside with his left hand and ducked behind it. The treasurer came out from behind his desk, still muttering to himself.

"Please," he said in anguish, "this is very painful for me!"

He fired the gun again, and the bullet tore a white hole in the wall above Tom's head.

"Don't be so difficult," the little man pleaded. "Sooner or later—"

But Tom insisted upon being difficult. His fingers closed around a loose volume of New York State Tax Laws, and jiggled it in readiness. When the little treasurer came closer, he sprung from hiding and hurled the book. It slammed against Wright's side, and surprised him enough to send the arm holding the weapon into the air. That was the advantage Tom wanted. He leaped in a low-flying tackle, and brought Wright to the carpet. Then he was on top of the little man, grappling for the gun. Tom fought hard to get the gun.

He got it, but not before it was fired again.

Tom looked down at the widening stain that was marring the smooth texture of the carpet and was horrified. He bent down over the frail figure, lifting the bald head in his hands.

"Mr. Wright!"

The treasurer groaned. "Sorry," he said. "Instructions, Mr. Blacker ..."

"From whom? Andrusco?"

"Yes ... Your message reported from switchboard ... had orders ..."

"Is it true?" Tom said frantically. "About Antamunda? Is the story true?"

The little man nodded. Then he lifted one hand feebly towards the desk. "Gary," he said. "Tell Gary ..."

Tom looked in the direction of the gesture, and saw the back of a framed photograph.

When he turned to the treasurer again, the thin lips had stopped moving.

He lowered the body to the floor and went to the desk. The photo was that of a young man with stiff-bristled blond hair and a rugged smile. The inscription read:

"To Pop, with deep affection, Gary."

Tom shook his head, wonderingly. Were these creatures so very different?

When Tom stepped out on Fifth-Madison some ten minutes later, it was just in time to watch a police vehicle draw up to the entrance of 320. Sensing danger, he stepped into the shade of the Tuscany Bar awning, and watched the uniformed men pound their way down the marbled lobby floor towards the elevators. He thought fast, and decided that the arrival of the police was connected with the shooting in Wright's office.

The question was—who were they after?

He walked into the Tuscany, and headed for the bank of visiphone booths. He dialed the police commissioner, but ducked out of the path of the visiphone eye.

Stinson growled at the blank screen. "Who is it?"

"Never mind," Tom said, muffling his voice. "But if you want the killers of Walt Spencer and his wife, pick up John Andrusco and a gal named Livia Cord."

"Okay, Blacker," Stinson thundered. "I knew you'd be calling in."

Tom swore, and showed himself. "Listen, I'm telling you the truth. They told me the whole story. Then they tried to have me killed."

"Is that so? And I suppose the assassin was a guy named Wright?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, wise guy. We're on to you. You've been pocketing some of that Homelovers dough, and the treasurer found you out. Isn't that the story?"

"No! Wright's one of *them*."

"Sure, pal. Whatever you say. Only stay right where you are so you can do your explaining proper."

Tom tightened his lips. "Uh-huh. I don't like the sound of things. I'll see you later, Mr. Stinson."

"Blacker!"

Tom switched off.

By the time he was settled behind the red neck of a cab-driver, Tom was wiping a dripping film of sweat from his forehead. He couldn't return to his apartment; there was bound to be a stake-out. He couldn't go to Livia's; that would be walking right into danger. And he couldn't go to Stinson, without risking a murder charge.

He leaned forward.

"Driver—make that the LaGuardia Heliport."

However efficient Stinson's operations might have been, their tentacles hadn't reached the 'copter-rental station at the heliport. Tom signed out a speedy vessel under an assumed name, and taxied it down the runway. Then he pointed the nose west, and radioed ahead to his destination at Washington, D. C.

Colonel Grady Mordigan had the thoughtful air of a scholar and the body of a college wrestler. When Tom Blacker's name was announced to him, his mouth turned down grimly. He was commanding officer of the Space Flight Commission of the UN Air Force, and he had good reason to frown at the sound of the PR man's name.

But he invited him into his office.

"So you're Tom Blacker," he said, pinching his jaw. "I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Blacker."

"I'm sure," Tom said. "Only I want to tell you this, Colonel. I've broken my connection with Homelovers. I'm on your side now."

"Side? There are no sides in this issue, Mr. Blacker. As far as I'm concerned, Homelovers is nothing but a flea on the lip of a lion. A damned annoying flea, maybe—but nothing more than that. Now what do you want?"

"I have to talk to you about something. Something I just found out. Will you listen to me?"

The colonel leaned back, looking at his watch.

"Five minutes," he snapped.

Tom talked for fifteen. Mordigan didn't call a halt until he was finished, listening without a change of expression. When Tom ran out of words, he merely tapped his fingers on the desk.

"And that's your whole story?" he said gently.

"Yes, sir. I know it's a wild one. That's one of the things they're counting on. It's just wild enough to get me put into a laughing academy, where I can't do them any mischief. But I had to take that chance, Colonel."

"I see. And this—man you killed. What's happening about that?"

"I don't know," Tom said. "The way I figure it, Andrusco and the girl have told the police that I was embezzling money from the firm—that I killed the treasurer for my own protection. But it's not true! He's one of *them*—one of those creatures—"

"But you have no real proof?"

Tom's back stiffened. "No," he said grimly. "If I had proof, I'd have gone to the police. But I came here instead. Now you can tell me if I did the right thing."

Mordigan grimaced. "I don't know, damn it! I don't have any love for the Homelovers. To me, they've always been a bunch of greedy businessmen, intent on salvaging their franchises at any expense. But it's not easy to think of them as a bunch of—" His mouth twisted. "Loathsome aliens ..."

"Maybe not so loathsome," Tom said miserably. "I just don't know. Maybe their cause is as just to them as ours is to us. But they're determined to reach Mars before we do—before you do! And they'll do anything to make sure—"

The colonel stood up. "But I'm afraid that question is academic, Mr. Blacker. Because if our calculations are right, an Earth vessel will be on the planet Mars within the next thirty-six hours."

"What?"

"No announcement has been made. But a Mars-bound ship was launched almost a month ago, containing seven members of the space commission. Our last radio contact with Captain Wright leads us to expect—"

"Who?" Tom was on his feet.

"Captain Gary Wright, the commander of the ship." His brow knitted. "Why? Do you know him?"

"I'm not sure," Tom said weakly. "But if he's the same man—then that flight's in danger."

"What are you talking about?"

Tom concluded his story about the death of the Homelovers treasurer, down to the last detail of the framed photograph on Wright's desk. The tale brought Colonel Mordigan into immediate action. He buzzed for his orderly, and in another minute, was fumbling through a folder marked Classified.

"Yes," he said numbly. "It's the same man. Father's named Benjamin Wright, and he's vice-president and treasurer of Homelovers, Incorporated. I never connected the two ..." He looked up, his eyes heavy. "If your story is true, Mr. Blacker, then Captain Wright is one of these so-called Antamundans. And if their mission is what you say it is—"

Tom clenched his fists on the blotter. "Please, sir! Let me stay here until the flight is concluded. After that, you can do what you like."

"All right," Mordigan said wearily. "I'll fix you up with something in the officer's quarters. But I'm sure you're wrong, Mr. Blacker. You *have* to be."

Twenty-four hours later, radio contact with the Mars expeditionary ship ceased abruptly.

From Mt. Wilson observatory, a hurried message arrived, reporting a small, brief nova in the orbital vicinity of the planet Mars.

Tom Blacker, dozing fitfully on a cot in the quarters of a grumpy Lieutenant-Colonel, was awakened suddenly, and summoned to the office of Colonel Grady Mordigan.

"Very well, Mr. Blacker," the colonel said stiffly. "I'm willing to help. Just tell me what you want me to do."

The receptionist smiled icily at Tom, and then the smile vanished like a Martian polar cap.

"Why—Mr. Blacker!"

"Hi, Stella," he grinned. "Mr. Andrusco in his office?"

"Why, I don't know. Suppose I give him a ring—"

He stopped the hand that was reaching for the telephone. "No need of that. I think I'll just surprise him. After all, it's been some time."

He turned the knob of John Andrusco's door slowly.

Livia was with him. When he entered, they both stood up hastily, their eyes wide and their mouths unhinged.

Livia reacted first. She cried out his name, and then sat down heavily, as if the words had been a physical force.

"Hi, Livia," Tom said casually. "Good to see you again, Mr. Andrusco. Sorry that I haven't been around—but things have been pretty hectic for me lately."

"How did you get here?" Andrusco's voice was choked.

"I've been here all weekend, if you want to know." Tom seated himself blithely. "As a matter of fact, the Homelovers Building has had quite a lot of visitors this weekend."

"What do you mean?"

"You know the staff of cleaning personnel that invades this place every Saturday? Well, there were some changes made this particular weekend. I'm sure you'll be interested in hearing about them."

Livia said: "Shall I call the police, John?"

"The police were represented," Tom said. "Don't worry about that. In fact, the top technicians from three government agencies were doing the housework around here this weekend, Mr. Andrusco. They probably didn't get the building much cleaner—but they swept up a lot of other things. Yes, they certainly uncovered other things."

Andrusco walked over to Livia, and touched her shoulder in a comforting gesture. The sight of them made Tom scowl.

"All right!" he said roughly. "I'm not blaming you for what you're doing. But things were getting out of hand, Mr. Andrusco. That's why we had to put a stop to it."

"And have you?" Andrusco asked politely.

"I'm afraid so. It was quite a shock, let me tell you. We didn't know what to expect when we dissected this building of yours. But the last thing we expected to find was—a spaceship."

Andrusco smiled. "It was cleverly done. You'll have to admit that."

"I do," Tom said fervently. "You've got those space flight experts absolutely insane with curiosity. They'll want to hear the whole story. Will you give it to them?"

The man shrugged. "It doesn't matter, I suppose. I presume the engines have been dismantled?"

"Made inoperable, yes. It would have been a great trick, if you could have done it."

Livia spoke sadly. "It was the only thing we could have done. There's no place on this Earth where we could have erected a spaceship without being observed. So we created this building. In time, we would have perfected the mechanism and left this silly planet of yours."

"That's what I don't understand," Tom said. "What about Antamunda—and the survivors—"

"There's no longer an Antamunda," John Andrusco said hollowly. "The story we told you was true in its essence, but not, I'm afraid complete. You see, the exodus that took place five hundred years ago was a total exodus. The entire population of our world—a handful, a pitiful ragged thousand—left Antamunda for this planet. We thought to make it our new home, for all eternity. But in time, we learned that we had emigrated to an extinction just as certain."

"What do you mean?"

"This world is cursed to us, Mr. Blacker. I can't tell you why. We breed slowly, infrequently—you might even say, thoughtfully. And on your planet, but one child in a thousand has survived the rigors of childbirth on Earth." He looked at

Livia, and the woman lowered her eyes in remembered sorrow.

"That's why we had to leave," Andrusco said. "To repopulate elsewhere. We chose the planet Mars, and we were determined to make it our home before your world claimed it. Our scientists and technicians have worked on nothing else but this flight since the beginning of the last century. This building—this vessel—was the culmination of our plans. In another few years, we would have been ready. The dream would have been realized."

Tom walked to the window of the office, and looked out at a bank of swift-moving clouds drifting past the spire of the Homelovers Building.

"I'm afraid that's the saddest part," he said. "The atomic engines in the basement have been examined, Mr. Andrusco. The best opinions say that they're pitifully inadequate. The men who studied them say that you would never have made the journey in safety."

"That can't be true! In time—"

"In time, perhaps. But since your landing here, your scientists have forgotten a great deal about space flight. I'm afraid you would have never reached that Promised Land ..."

Andrusco said: "Then we must die ..."

"No!" Tom said.

Livia looked at him.

"I said no!" he repeated. "The Antamundans can live. Don't you see that?"

"No," Andrusco said, shaking his head. "On Earth, we shall die. If Mars is closed to us ..."

"Can't you see? If Mars can be opened for Earth, then it can be opened for you, too. For all Antamundans! Your people can make the journey, too, once space has been cleared for Earth ships. You can still have your new home!"

"Perhaps," Livia said dreamily. "Perhaps that is the only way. But by then, Tom, it will be already too late. There has been no living child born to us in the last ten years. By the time the Earth people reach Mars and establish regular passageway—we will be too old to keep the race alive."

"Then let's speed it up!" he said. "Let's make *sure* that the space lanes open! Let's do everything to make Space the most important project on Earth!"

"But how?" Andrusco said, bewildered.

Tom went to the visiphone.

"Get me the Lunt Theatre!" he snapped.

Homer Bradshaw's face appeared.

"Mr. Bradshaw?"

"Hi, Tom! How's the boy?"

"Great, Homer, great. Only listen. I got a new angle for you. We're gonna doctor up that show of yours before the opening. Don't worry about the dough—Homelovers will take care of it with pleasure."

"Sure, Tom! Anything you say!"

"Then take this down. The first thing we're changing is the title. From now on it's *Mars Or Bust ...*"

THE END

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