

Rescue Squad

Thomas J. O'Hara



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RESCUE SQUAD ***

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When Mr. O'Hara won the prize story contest recently conducted by THE FANTASY WRITERS' WORKSHOP at the College of the City of New York, in conjunction with FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, it was the unanimous opinion of the judges that a second story by Mr. O'Hara, RESCUE SQUAD, deserved honorable mention. We think you'll agree with that decision when you've read this documentary-type science-fiction yarn, which so excitingly combines realistic characterization with the mystery, suspense and terror of the near future's exploration of space and a lone pilot's struggle to survive.

rescue

squad

by ... Thomas J. O'Hara

Stark disaster to a brave lad in space may—to the mind that loves—be a tragedy pridefully concealed.

THE MAIL SHIP, MR4, spun crazily through space a million miles off her trajectory. Her black-painted hull resembled a long thermonuclear weapon, and below her and only a scant twenty million miles away burned the hungry, flaming maw of the Sun.

The atomic-powered refrigeration units of the MR4 were working full blast—and still her internal and external temperatures were slowly and inexorably rising. Her atomic engines had been long since silenced—beaten by the inexhaustible, fiery strength of the invincible opponent waiting patiently a narrowing twenty million miles "below."

Hal Burnett twisted painfully on the narrow space-bunk, his tormented body thrusting desperately against the restraining bands of the safety straps that lashed him in against the dangers of non-gravity.

He moaned, and twisted sideways, while his half-asleep mind struggled on an almost instinctive level against a dimly-remembered, utterly intolerable reality.

It was a losing battle. He was suddenly wide awake, staring in horror at the vibrating bulkheads of the deserted little mail ship. For a moment his conscious barriers against reality were so completely down that he felt mortally terrified and overwhelmed by the vast emptiness about him. For a moment the mad idea swept into his mind that perhaps the universe was just another illusion, an echo of man's own inner loneliness.

Realizing his danger, Burnett quickly undid the restraining safety straps, sat up and propelled himself outward from the edge of his bunk. The sudden surge of physical action swept the cobwebs from his mind.

He thought of his father—and there was bitterness in his heart and frustration, and a rebellious, smouldering anger. The old man would never know how close he had come to cracking up.

For a moment he wondered fearfully if his father's cold and precise appraisal of his character and courage had been correct. Suppose he *was* unable to stand the rigid strains and pressures of a real emergency. Suppose— He tightened his lips in defiant self-justification. What did they expect of a twenty-year-old kid anyway? He was, after all, the youngest and probably the greenest mail pilot in the entire Universal Run.

Suddenly the defensive barriers his mind had thrown up against the grievous flaw in his character, which made him feel uncertain of himself when he should have felt strong and capable, crumbled away completely. He could no longer pretend, no longer deceive himself. He hated his father because the elder Burnett had never known a moment of profound self-distrust in his entire life.

He remembered his father's favorite line of reasoning with a sudden, overwhelming resentment. "Fear can and must be controlled. If you have your objective clearly in mind a new experience, no matter how hazardous, will quickly become merely a routine obstacle to be surmounted, a yardstick by which a man can measure his own maturity and strength of purpose. You'll find peace of mind in doing your work ably and well and by ignoring all danger to yourself."

It was so easy to say, so hard to live up to. How, for instance, could a twenty-year-old kid on his *first* mail run hope to completely outwit fatigue, or even forget, for a single moment, that it *was* his first run. Fatigue had caused his undoing, but had he been completely fearless he might have found a way to save himself, might have managed somehow to prevent the small, navigational errors from piling up until they had carried him past the point of no return.

A constant re-checking of every one of his instruments might have saved him. But he had been too terrified to think straight, and too ashamed of his "first-run" inexperience to send out a short wave message requesting emergency instructions and advice. Now he was hopelessly off his course and it was too late. Too late!

He could almost feel the steadily-growing pull of his mindless enemy in the distant sky. Floating and kicking his way over to the Tele-screen, he quickly switched the instrument on. Rotating the control dials, he brought the blinding

white image of the onrushing solar disk into perfect focus. Automatically he adjusted the two superimposed polaroid filters until the proper amount of light was transmitted to his viewing screen. They really built ships and filters these days, he reflected wryly. Now if they could only form a rescue squad just as easily—

Even through the viewing screen he could almost feel the hot blast of white light hit his face with the physical impact of a baseball bat. With what was almost a whimper of suppressed fear he rocked backward on his heels.

The Sun's ghastly prominences seemed to reach beckoning fingers toward him, as its flood of burning, radiant light seared through the incalculable cold of space, and its living corona of free electrons and energy particles appeared to swell and throb menacingly.

Fearfully he watched the flaming orb draw closer and closer, and as its pull grew more pronounced he wondered if it were not, in some nightmarishly fantastic fashion becoming malignantly aware of him. It resembled nothing so much as a great festering sore; an infection of the very warp-and-woof stuff of space.

He flipped off the power control on the Tele-screen and watched the image fade away with a depleted whine of dying energy. That incandescent inferno out there — Grimly he tried to recall the name of the man who had said that, philosophically, energy is not actually a real thing at all.

He knew better than to waste time trying the pilot controls again. They were hopelessly jammed by the great magnetic attraction of the Sun. They had been jammed for hours now. He forced his way back to his bunk, and securely lashed himself to it again. Sleep was his only hope now, his only real escape from the growing, screaming hysteria within him.

He flung an arm across his tired face. His thin features trembled as he remembered the continuous alterations in his trajectory that had brought him within range of the Sun's mighty pull. He remembered also every detail of the last and gravest of the series of miscalculations that had swept him from the established route of the regular Venus-Mercury mail run, and threatened him with a violent, flaming end.

Greatly off course, he had been approaching Mercury, a routine thirty-six million miles from the Sun. On this, the final leg of his long journey, he had deviated just far enough from the extreme limits of safety to find himself and his ship

gripped inexorably in the mighty magnetic fields of the Sun's passage....

He remembered a name— Josephine.

There would be no lover's meeting now on the green fields of Earth in the dusk of a summer evening. There would be no such meeting now. Not unless the prayers and dreams a boy and a girl had shared had followed him, plunging senselessly into the cold glacial heart of interstellar space.

His false bravado began to break and he began to weep quietly. He began to wish with all his heart that he had never left home.

The sudden crackling of the almost static-jammed ultra-wave radio snapped through to his mind. Quickly he began to free himself from the bunk.

"MR4, come in, MR4."

An eternity seemed to pass as he floated across the room, deliberately disregarding the strategically-placed hand-grips on the walls, floor, and ceiling. It seemed aeons before he reached the narrow little control compartment, and got the ultra-wave radio into action, nearly wrecking it in his clumsy-fingered haste.

"MR4 to Earth. Over."

He waited a few moments and then repeated the message as no acknowledgment came through. Then he abruptly remembered the nearby presence of the Sun and its interference with radio transmission and reception. He was white and shaken by the time his message was received and his report requested and given.

He gave the whole tragic picture in frantic short wave. The amount of atomic fuel left in the ship, the internal and external temperatures, the distance from the Sun, and the strength of the solar disk's magnetic field and his rate of drift toward it—along with a staggering list of other pertinent factors.

At last it was over and he stood by awaiting the decision from Earth headquarters.

It came at last.

"MR4." The growling voice was Donnelly's, the huge space-engineer in charge of the smaller mail-rocket units. "You're in a tough spot but we've got an expert here from the Government. He's worked on deals like this with me before and he's got an idea.

"Here's the substance of it. We're going to send out a space tug from Mercury to see if we can haul you in. It's a new, experimental tug and it's been kept under wraps until now. But it's been designed for jobs like this and we figure it can sure as hell do it.

"There's just one hitch, though, kid. It's a mighty powerful ship so there's going to be a terrific shock when it contacts you and the magnetic grapples set to work. In your medicine kit you'll find a small hypo in a red-sealed plastic box. Take the shot that's in it immediately and we'll have the tug out there as soon as we can. It will probably take about twelve hours."

Donnelly's voice broke and he hesitated strangely for a moment. "You'll be out fast," he went on. "So you won't feel a thing when the shock wave hits you. There's less chance of injuries, this way."

"It's a lousy thing to do," cried Donnelly as he snapped off the set. "A rotten, heartless way of giving the lad false hopes. But then you don't give a damn about anybody's feelings but your own, do you, Doc?"

"Take it easy, Joe—"

"Shut up, Williams. I'm talking to this little Government time-server over here, not to you."

The psychiatrist shrugged wearily. "I don't care what you think. I've worked with you both on cases similar to this before, though I'll admit that none of them were quite as hopeless. In any case, I'll do it my way, or not at all."

"Maybe you will, maybe you will," said Donnelly. "But if I had to wait thirty days in that thing and somebody told me it was only a matter of hours—"

"I know what I'm doing even if you think that I don't. The Government has developed a set approach in matters like this. Fortunately, there aren't many of them. Perhaps if there were—"

"Let me take over, Doc," broke in Donnelly. "I'm a space-engineer and that makes me far better qualified to handle this than you are. Why the hell they ever put a psychiatrist on this job in the first place is something I'll never know, if I live to be a hundred and ten. It's a job for an engineer, not a brain washer."

"There's a lot of things you'll never know, Donnelly," the gaunt, thin little man sighed wearily. He sat down at the long mahogany table in the Radio Room. With a careless wave of one arm, he swept a pile of papers and magazines to the floor.

"Try and get this through your head, Donnelly. There's not too much you can do by yourself for that boy up there. You just don't know how to cope with the psychological intangibles. That's why they have me here—so that we could work together as a team.

"Now the sooner you get on that radio and follow my instructions for the pilot the sooner we'll get this over with. Then maybe I can go home and spend a hundred years trying to forget about it. Until then please try and keep your personal opinions to yourself. Please."

Donnelly's face flushed a still deeper red. His fists clenched and, as a muscle started to twitch warningly in his cheek, he started to get up. He stopped for a moment—frozen in silence. Then he relaxed and pushed back his chair. With a heavy sigh, he maneuvered his huge bear of a body to its feet.

He rumbled something disgustedly in his throat and then spat casually on the floor. "Williams," he thundered. "Get the hell out of here and get us some coffee."

He waited a moment until the only witness had left the room and then, with grim determination, he turned to the little psychiatrist seated at the table.

"You, Doc," he said coldly and with deliberate malice, "are a dirty, unclean little —"

Williams, when he eased his slight body through the door a few minutes later, found a suspicious scene. The little doctor, his face flushed and rage-twisted, his effortless and almost contemptuous composure shaken for once, was on his feet. Speechless, he faced the grinning space-engineer who was waving a huge and warning finger in his face.

"Easy, Doc," Donnelly roared in a friendly voice. "I might take advantage of it if you keep on giving me a good excuse. Then where would all your psychiatry

and your fine overlording manners get you?"

"Joe," yelled Williams in explosive sudden fright. "Leave him alone. You're liable to have the Government Police down on us."

"Sure, Williams. The police and the newspapers too. They'd just love to have the taxpayers find out what they're doing to those kids out in deep space. What would they call it, Doc? Just an interesting psychological experiment? Is that what it's meant to be, eh, Doc?"

He chuckled suddenly as the little doctor flinched under his virulent attack. "I really hit the spot that time, didn't I, Doc? So that's what the Government's so scared and hush-hush about. They're really scared to hell and back, aren't they? I wonder what's really going on behind all this?"

He leaned forward, suddenly roaring and ferocious. "Why are Williams and I followed everywhere we go when we leave here? To see who we talk to? Is that the way of it? Why do quite a few of the ships you and I and Williams have rescued in the past few years never show up again? Just where are they? I don't see them reported missing in the newspapers, either."

He leaned back in exhausted satisfaction at the look on the little doctor's face. "Yeah, Doc, the only way to get anything out of you is to blast it out, isn't it?"

Pale and frightened, Williams hurried across the room to the table and, with shaky hands, took out three containers of coffee from the paper bag and passed them out.

Nobody bothered to thank him.

The hidden tension in the room had begun to mount steadily, so Donnelly helped it out a little.

"Is this the first time you've ever been on the defensive, Doc?" he asked.

Williams jumped in before the explosion. "When will the rocket get to the kid's ship, Doctor?" he asked.

"In about thirty days," the little man answered, coldly and deliberately.

Williams blinked in surprise. "Good Lord," he said. "I thought it was supposed to be in twelve hours or so?"

"That's the whole point," snapped Donnelly. "That's what I'm so fighting mad about. Think of it yourself, Williams. Suppose you had a son or a brother up there, how would you feel about this whole infernal, lying business?"

"I don't get it," he went on. "I just don't get the big central idea behind it. Don't all these tugs we send out ever get there? First they tell the kid he'll have his life saved in twelve hours or so. Then they get him to take a shot so his mind won't crack up while he's waiting.

"Now they know very well the shot won't last for thirty days. If it did he'd starve to death. So what have they accomplished? Nothing. As a matter of fact they've made things worse instead of better. What's going to happen to that poor kid when he wakes up in twelve hours and finds out he still has to wait for thirty more days? What's going to happen to him then, Doc? Don't you think that kid will really go off his rocker for sure?"

Donnelly and Williams both looked at the little psychiatrist. He sat again at his former place at the table, white and shaken. His face was once again buried in one hand.

"Come on, Doc," whispered Williams, quietly. "What's going on here, anyway?"

"That's enough," cried the doctor, suddenly. He sprang up and strode toward the door. "Leave me alone," he exclaimed, almost in tears. "By heaven, I've had enough of this. I've had all I can stand."

Donnelly moved to block the door and the psychiatrist came abruptly to a halt. "That ain't enough, Doc. You get out after you talk."

"For God's sake, Joe."

"Shut up, Williams, I'm warning you for the last time."

"Let me by. I warn you, Donnelly. Let me by."

Williams moved in, regaining a sudden spurt of assurance. "What about that kid up there, Doc? Nobody's letting him by, are they, Doc?"

A look of utter weariness swept across the doctor's face.

"All right," he said. "You may as well know the truth then. You won't like or understand it, but here it is anyway. You see, there isn't any tug up there, experimental or otherwise. There was only our need for a good excuse—in this

present case—to get him to take the drug. You're a space-engineer and a good one, Donnelly. That's why you were chosen for this job. If anybody could help those kids, you could."

Donnelly's face tightened warningly and the doctor hurried on. "You would have known about it if there had been any experimental models developed even if they had been secret. As a matter of fact, with your standing, you would probably have been working on them."

"Why all this, then, Doc? Why?"

"Because," the little doctor hesitated—and then shrugged. "I may as well tell you. It's not going to make any difference now, anyway. It was all done to put him out for several hours until—"

"Until what, Doc?" Donnelly's tone was harsh and uncompromising.

"You must understand that I'm under orders. I'm doing what is done in all these cases. Though heaven help me, I wish I didn't have to—"

"Doc," Donnelly roared. "You have been contradicting yourself all along and I intend to find out why."

"There isn't much more to find out.... Wait."

The doctor strode quickly over to the radio, and glanced at his wristwatch. His face haggard with strain, he turned to Williams. "Will you contact the MR4, please?"

He held up a silencing hand to Donnelly. "There's a reason behind all this. Just wait for a moment, please. Just wait and listen—"

It was a fumbling-fingered ten minutes later, after Donnelly had signed off, that Hal Burnett finally found the tiny red plastic box in the little emergency medical kit. Trembling he held it in his hand as he floated in free fall.

It was a little red key—a key to Earth, to life and to the chance to ram every cold, precise, contemptuous word down his father's over-analytical mouth.

He didn't really hate the old man but he knew that he feared him. He feared also

that his father might be right about him after all. Who in his own mind, he thought bitterly, should know a son better than that son's own father.

A quick surge of elation swept over him as he swam quickly to the Tele-screen and switched it on. It wasn't a bit like saying good-bye to an old friend, he thought, as he gazed at the flaming prominences not so far below him. After a while he switched the instrument off and swam triumphantly back to his bunk.

There were some tri-dimensional color slides in the ditty bag hanging by his bunk. He took them out and looked at them. None of them were of his father.

The girl was there, though. She was a small, cute girl with a rainbow of laughter wreathed about her. She hadn't been really important before, but she sure was important now that he was going to live. His old man had foretold that, too.

After a little while he put the slides back in the portable holder and broke open the plastic box. It contained a gleaming hypo filled with what looked like a small quantity of water. There was an odd peppermint-like odor about it.

There were no instructions. Just the needle and the little red box.

He wondered how many hours he would have to wait before help would come. But that didn't matter. He would be asleep, anyway.

The temperature had climbed. It was burning, roaring hot.

Gently he slid the needle into his arm and depressed the plunger....

The MR4 continued to spin even more lazily in space. Her sun-blackened hull, pitted by the glancing blows of by-passing meteor fragments, was slowly overheating. Her refrigeration units were gradually breaking down under their tremendous overload.

She was inching in ever-shortening circles always in the direction of the massive, molten globe not so far below....

Sometime later, Hal Burnett awakened slowly, as if from some distant and dimly-remembered dream. The haze of a deep and foggy sleep clung to the unfamiliar mass that was his mind.

A distant alarm bell had rung deep within the primitive, subcortical levels of his brain. It had rung—but not loudly nor insistently enough. It had failed to cut through the eddying fog that was rising slowly into his ebbing consciousness.

He did not remember undoing the straps with benumbed and aching fingers. He did not remember the befogged and stumbling "walk" into the Control Room. Dimly, as if viewing himself and the room from a distant world, he switched on the dying hum of the radio and tried futilely to transmit a message.

The faint crackle of the radio grew more distant. He slumped forward in the bucket seat, his head striking the controls in front of him—and, for him, the sounds of the muted radio died out completely.

The burning heat seared into the metal hull of the MR4. Its outer hull was almost at the boiling point. Inside, it was a burning, suffocating hell. Perhaps it was the heat that aroused Hal Burnett once again. Somehow he managed to stumble to the Tele-screen. With the last vestige of a waning strength, he managed to switch it on and hold himself erect.

The stupendous white blast of the Sun struck across his staring eyes, but he did not flinch. Unconscious, his hands clutched at the control knobs as his sagging legs let him drift weightlessly toward the floor. He was like a drowning swimmer, out of control and helplessly floating under water.

He seemed to become aware for a moment as a last flicker of consciousness crossed his mind. He mouthed something unintelligible—a last, forgotten word.

Anchored only by his grip on the control knobs, his weightless body floated aimlessly in the almost steaming cabin as the awful stillness re-echoed throughout the hollow vault of the ship.

Down below, with ever-growing closeness, the Sun waited patiently, like a bright and hovering vulture.

The MR4 swung and pivoted gently like a ship at sea straining at its anchor in the first, fresh breezes of a gathering storm. For a moment it seemed to hesitate like a coy maiden on the verge of some unknown threshold. Then, abruptly, she climaxed her voyage and plunged directly toward the waiting Sun some twenty million miles below, carrying with her only her dead cargo; her pilot—

The radio crackled noisily after Hal Burnett's last incoherent transmission. It crackled aimlessly for a few moments—and then was still.

"Something's wrong," said Williams, a thin thread of moisture shining down his face. "Something's gone wrong up there!"

"It sure has," said Donnelly, quietly. "And I know who I'm going to ask about it."

The little doctor said nothing. His face was an embittered parchment mask. "It's happened. God help me. It's happened. He's gone," he muttered, almost inaudibly.

Donnelly sighed heavily, a look almost of defeat sweeping momentarily across his features. "See here, Doc," he said exhaustedly. "Don't be so heartless about people. You've got a son of your own in space, so you ought to understand how other people feel. What kind of a father would do a thing like this to another man's son anyway?"

"Look, Donnelly," said the little man with bitter weariness. "Do me a favor will you? You fill out the reports tonight. Somehow or other I just don't feel up to it."

"Maybe it's your conscience," said Donnelly, sarcastically. "But I'll be damned if I'll do it for you. You don't like to do your own dirty work, do you, Doc? I thought you just loved to fill out Government reports."

"Donnelly, Donnelly," cried the doctor in sudden anguish. "Can't you understand yet. Even an undertaker's job is unpleasant but somebody's got to do it. Don't you see yet? *It has to be done!*"

With a muffled groan of disgust, Donnelly sprang to the radio once again, pushing Williams roughly aside. Futilely, and in desperation he strained at the controls for a moment and then, with a roar of fury, he turned back to the doctor.

"Now see here, Doc—" he thundered, and then stopped in amazement.

The door to the dim and ill-lighted outer hallway of the lab was standing open. And at the far end, the outer door was quietly closing behind the disappearing figure of the bent-shouldered little man.

Donnelly started to spring after him, and then abruptly stopped. His huge figure slumped in sudden despairing futility as he recognized the tragic hopelessness of the situation.

"Let him go," rasped Williams. "There's nothing we can do now anyway, Joe."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's write the report up ourselves. That's real important, you know. The Government needs it."

He sat down at the typewriter, his heavy features twisted in hopeless bitterness and anger. He started typing, and then stopped for a moment.

"What was this kid pilot's full name, Williams?"

Williams checked the Government order sheet. "Hell," he said. "Strangely, it's the same as the doctor's, Dr. Alfred Burnett. Only the kid's name is Harold Burnett."

Donnelly sat, suddenly transfixed, staring at his typewriter. A peculiar look flashed across his face. Then he shook his massive head in an unbelieving gesture of agonized understanding.

"Hell, no," he muttered to himself. "It couldn't be. It just couldn't be. It just isn't possible. Burnett! *Burnett!*"

Swiftly he was on his feet and moving through the door after the vanished figure of the little doctor, his face a mask of grim remorse.

"It was merciful," he muttered. "Yes, it *was* merciful. It was the only thing Doc Burnett could have done."

Williams stared after Donnelly's disappearing figure in frank and open-mouthed amazement.

"Hey, Joe," he yelled. "Where the hell are you going?"

The outer door slammed shut on the departing echo of his words. "Well, I'll be hung for an ugly son!" he muttered to himself. "Nobody makes sense around this place, any more."

He shrugged half to himself and then began to type out the rest of the report.

"I don't get it," he mumbled to himself. "I just don't get it at all. There's no logic in it."

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Fantastic Universe* September 1955. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note. Although *polaroid* appears as originally printed, given the lack of a capital letter, it may be a printer's error for *polarized*.

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