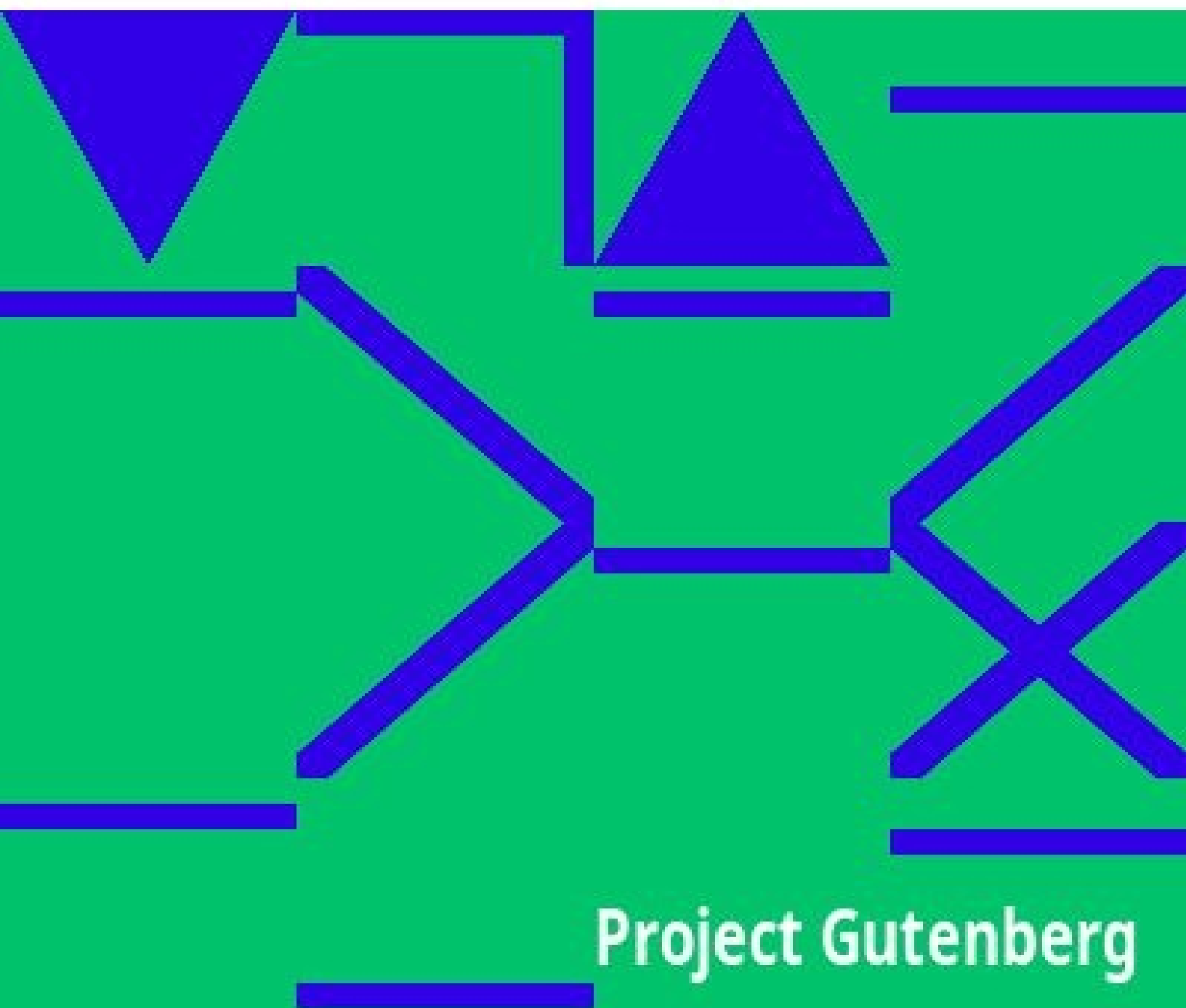


Spacemen Never Die!

Morris Hershman



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Henry knew his wife had been married once before; now he expected her to start a new life with him—but to her the past was alive, and—

SPACEMEN NEVER DIE!

By Morris Hershman

HENRY WELLER stood facing a huge three-dimensional picture on the wall of his dining room.

"Can't we get rid of it?" he asked, turning to his wife. "I mean, with all due respect, of course."

No man enjoys coming into his dining room and having to sit at meals and look at a full-sized picture of his wife's first husband arriving on Venus. Fair's fair, but such a set-up is ridiculous.

"No," Phoebe shook her blonde head. "Don Manton loved me and he was famous. I like to be reminded of the days when my picture was in all the telepapers and my face on so many telescreens."

She might just as well have called him a tattered nonentity, though Henry was doing pretty well as a foreman in the local humandroid factory. He was stopped from reminding her by Phoebe's saying that she'd leave for a bit of shopping. She left abruptly.

Henry watched her takeoff from the roof of their two-story fibroid house and went back to the dining room. Now, even his warmest admirers would give in that he had a streak of stubbornness in him a mile wide and six miles deep. Henry took the three-dimensional monstrosity off the wall, holding it hard by thumb and forefinger on its luminex frame, and prepared to say good-bye to the picture of Don Manton.

A foreman at one of the humandroid shops has to be able to consider

alternatives and Henry had done this. If he only hid the picture there'd be a domestic crisis and the picture would sooner or later be back on the wall; if he destroyed it there'd also be a crisis, but one that would eventually blow over.

Unluckily for him, these three-dimensional wall pictures were made out of glaseine, and when he tried setting fire to it he nearly burned down the house. Upon feeding it to the old-fashioned fireplace nothing grew hot except his temper. Ripping the picture to shreds would have been the next step, but you can't rip glaseine.

For maybe the six millionth time he cursed out Don Manton, the well-known explorer in the realm of outer space. Henry understood in a general way that Don Manton had been among the first to chart the cities of Mars and Venus, and had accidentally died on a planet named Immel; but Henry had no intention of living in Don Manton's shadow.

The picture, which showed the late explorer talking with three Venusians, had been hung up again when Phoebe came through the ceiling door along the extension stairway which flicked up to meet her.

"You've been trying to get rid of Don's picture!"

He'd hung it crookedly, and a diagonal slash of white wallpaper had given him away.

"Just this one. You've got cans of telefilm in the cellar, but them I don't mind. This," he flicked it with a thumbnail, "I do mind."

"As long as I stay," Phoebe said quietly, "my darling Don's picture stays."

"But what about your darling Henry? Am I just a humandroid who looks and behaves and talks like a human being? Haven't I got feelings?" Henry strode around the room, hitting the fibroid floor like

a prehistoric monster on a sandpaper bridge. "Either that picture goes," he said finally, definitely, "or I go!"

Phoebe shook out her blonde hair, letting it fall about her shoulders. "Too bad."

INSIDE of an hour he had packed his suitcases. Phoebe cried bitterly, but wouldn't budge about the picture. Henry took the plane. He put up at his club, went to the bar, and was gobbling down something called pressurized scotch, when he heard a noise back of him.

"Get away from me!" said Henry, who was quite a few over the traditional eight by this time. "I've had enough of Don Manton, let alone his helpers."

Speed Roggs, who had taken a couple of trips with Manton, was tall and thin as the barstool, and with a spaceman's ability to think fast when he had to. Loudly he ordered a Venuswiz, explaining to a disgusted Henry, "After the barkeep mixes the drink he melts the swizzle stick and pours that in, too." He gulped the stuff down gratefully, then said, "Tell me your troubles, Hank."

Henry did. Speed Roggs looked disgusted. "Are you serious?" he asked, and when Henry swore to cut Speed's throat on asking that again, went on, "Women are space-mad!"

As Henry agreed, Roggs said, "The one thing you don't understand about Don Manton is that he was maladjusted. He couldn't stay still, he always wanted what he couldn't have. That goes for his feelings for women, too."

Henry looked up with bloodshot eyes nearly popping out of his head.

Roggs kept going. "Don and Phoebe never got along once they were married. It was Manton's fault. Like all explorers he was unhappy over his lot and looked beyond the rainbow. In fact, he told me once that the only reason he went in for exploring space was to get away from his wife."

Henry Weller suddenly rocked with laughter. He got to his feet, took Roggs, and went to his room, still laughing. He lay on the bed for half an hour. At the end of that time he sat up.

"Tell the manager I won't be here for supper," he said to Speed. "I've got a little trip to make."

"Where are you going?"

"Home, to give the good tidings to my wife."

Henry's fibroid house looked about the same. He parked the plane and let himself in by the roof door and down the extension staircase. He found Phoebe in the kitchen bent over a pot, and at sound of him she turned. A near-smile flickered in her blue eyes.

"Phoebe ..."

"Henry ..."

They laughed together. Henry wanted to tell her what he knew as bitterly and maliciously as possible, but he simply opened his mouth a few times. He couldn't say it. Everyone is entitled to an illusion and this was Phoebe, his blonde wench, his wife, his woman. He looked a bit sick.

She smiled. "Come into the dining room."

The three-dimensional picture had been rolled up into the corner.

Henry promised to put it away in the cellar and clean up the cellar as soon as he could. Phoebe said that her first husband had never liked to stay home, he'd always been afraid to live normally.

"I was wrong about the picture," she told him, "and I didn't know till I saw you leave the house."

It goes without saying that Henry and his Phoebe lived happily ever after, but it is perhaps not so well known that Phoebe was left with a little disposal problem, too. She had a rough time finding a buyer (in secret, of course) for her brand-new humandroid, who looked and behaved and talked so exactly like that well-known flyer, Speed Roggs....

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