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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STOWAWAY ***

The Stowaway

By Alvin Heiner

*He stole a ride to the Moon in
search of glory, but found a far
different destiny.*

HIS EYES were a little feverish—as they had been of late—and his voice held a continuous intensity—as though he were imparting a secret. "I've got to get on that ship! I've got to, I tell you! And I'm going to make it!"

Different members of the group regarded him variously, some with amusement, some with contempt, others with frank curiosity.

"You're plain nuts, Joe. What do you want to go to the Moon for?"

"Sure, why you wanna go? What they got on the Moon we ain't got right here?"

There was general laughter from the dozen or so who sat eating their lunch in the shade of Building B. They all thought that was a pretty good one. Good enough to repeat. "Sure, what they got on the Moon we ain't got here?"

But Joe Spain wasn't in the mood for jokes. He burned with even greater conviction and stood up as though to harangue the workers. "You wanta know why I got to go to the Moon? Why I've got to get on that ship? Then I'll tell you. It's 'cause I'm a little guy—that's why! Joe Spain—working stiff—one of the great inarticulate masses."

More laughter. "Where'd you get those big words, Joey? Out of a book? Come on—talk English!"

Joe Spain pointed to the huge, tubelike Building A, off across the desert; the building you had to have two different passes and a written permit to enter. The mystery building where even newspaper reporters were barred. "It's only the big shots they let in there ain't it? Only them that's got a drag or went to college or something. Us little guys they tell go to blow—ain't that right?"

"Who the hell cares? Maybe it's a damn good place to stay away from. Maybe it'll explode or something. Who wants to die and collect his insurance?"

"I got to get on that ship when it blasts off because they can't push the masses around! We got a right to be represented even if we got to sneak in!"

"Me—I'll stay on the ground."

"And besides there's the glory! You guys are too stupid to see that but it's there. The glory of being on the first rocket ship to the Moon. The name of Joe Spain written down in the history books and said over by people and school kids for thousands of years! Immortality! That's the word!"

"Well, just forget about it, Joe, 'cause you ain't going."

Joe Spain's eyes burned brighter. "Joe Spain, coming down the ramp with the big shots when it's all over. News cameras snapping! People asking for interviews!"

"But you ain't going 'cause—"

Joe shouted the man down. "And another thing. Us little people are entitled to a representative aboard that ship. We got a right to know what's going on. How come there's nothing about it in the papers? Only the big shots knowing about it and whispering among themselves? It's because they're trying to snag it all and freeze us out!"

"You're crazy. It's for security reasons. It's all hush-hush so it won't leak out like the atom bomb did. The big boys are being smart this time."

"And you ain't getting on," the interrupted man repeated doggedly, "because there ain't a way in God's world to *get* on. With triple security all around the building, just tell me a way to get in. Just tell me one."

"I'm going to get on that ship," Joe Spain said. Then he clammed up suddenly. Joe Spain wasn't stupid. He was a talker, but he knew when to stop sounding off.

The men went back to work shifting the big aluminum barrels from trucks into Building B. Carrying the wooden crates and the paper-wrapped parcels up the ramps and to the side of the building facing the big secret structure labeled A. They worked until five o'clock. Then they filed out and got into the waiting trucks and were hauled back to town; the boom town that had mushroomed up in the desert overnight and would die with the same swiftness when the project was completed.

JOE WENT straight to his rooming house, washed up, put on his good clothes, and found a stool in a nearby restaurant. He ate a leisurely supper, glancing now and again at the clock. When the clock read eight, he went out into the neon-stained darkness and walked three blocks to the Black Cat, one of the three night clubs the desert town boasted. He went to the bar and ordered a drink. He downed it slowly, carefully, after the manner of a man who wanted to stay sober.

A half-hour passed before a thin, nervous individual elbowed to the bar and stood beside him. Joe said, "Hello, Nick. You been thinking it over?"

"I need a drink."

"Sure, Nick. Then we'll go some place and talk." But Nick got rid of five drinks while Joe protected his own glass from the barkeep. After a while, Joe said, "I'm willing to up the price, Nick. Two thousand—cash. All I got."

"Le's get out o' here," Nick mumbled.

They walked out of the town and into the desert, Nick stumbling now and again, to be supported by the tense, sober Joe. "Two thousand, Nick. You need the dough."

"Sure. Need the dough. But it wouldn't work. Couldn't get you into one o' them barrels."

"You wouldn't have to. All I ask is that you come along in the morning and seal me up in one. All you'll have to do is lock on the lid."

"How you know the barrels are going on the ship?"

"Never mind about that. I just know. I paid to find out."

"Okay—suppose you do get on the ship in a barrel. Maybe it'll be stored in a hold somewhere. Maybe they wouldn't open it very soon. You'd die."

"I got a way to get out. One of them special torches. The little ones. Aluminum isn't very strong. I can cut it like butter."

"It'd be hot. You'd burn yourself."

"Let me worry about that," Joe said fiercely. "You want the two grand or not?"

Nick wanted the two thousand and he was against the wall for excuses. Then he had a happy thought. "Barrels is air-tight. You'd smother. Thing's im—impracac'l. We'll forget it."

"I won't smother. I'm taking my own oxygen. Enough to last me clear to the Moon if it has to. Come on. Break down!"

"Okay. For two grand. Got to have the dough now though."

His heart singing, Joe Spain counted out two thousand in cash. When he'd finished he had exactly nine dollars left. He was a pauper. But the happiest pauper who ever bought with his whole fortune the thing he craved most.

"You won't double-cross me now, will you? If you've got any ideas like that—"

"I'll do like we said. Nick Sparks never went back on his word—never. But how you going to stay hid when it's time to leave work?"

"Leave that to me. It'll be easy. They don't check Building B too close. No double check 'cause it's over a mile from Building A—outside the safety perimeter. I'll stay in tomorrow night and I'll put a little chalk-mark on the barrel I'm in—right near the top rim. First thing you do when you come to work the next morning is seal it and line it up with the filled ones."

"Okay, but I gotta go home now. I got a head. I gotta get some sleep."

"**W**HAT'S in the duffel bag?"

"Clean overalls—towel." Joe pulled the zipper down halfway. The guard fingered the blue denim but didn't dig deeper to find the towel. He checked Joe's badge number, made a note on his pad, and motioned to the next worker. Joe let tight breath slowly out of his lungs as he walked toward Building B. Getting past the guard was a load off his mind. He'd expected to get by, but it was one of the calculated risks that could have stopped him cold.

Once inside the building, he put the bag into his locker and went to work. He labored briskly and carried more than his share of the load. But now and again he stopped to look over at the outline of Building A, limned hard against hot blazing sky. And each time it was with a sense of heady exhilaration that he thought of his destiny—his hard-earned, dearly bought destiny. To be among that select group who would first set foot upon the surface of the Moon!

He had no worries about not being allowed to do so. Once he showed himself—with the ship far out in space—they'd have to accept him. Not graciously of course, but they'd have to admire his courage and tenacity. They could not, in all humanity, deny him a share of the victory.

The day wore on and as quitting time approached, he became more tense—more alert. Five minutes before the whistle, he faded back into the building and hurried to the lavatory. He went into the booth furthest from the entrance and locked the door. Now there was nothing to do but wait. Another of the calculated risks.

The whistle blew. Almost immediately, the sound of footsteps broke the silence and the lavatory was filled with hurrying men. Their stay in the room was short, however, as Joe had known it would be. Men leaving for home do not dawdle on the premises.

The lavatory was empty again. A period of silence while Joe raised his feet from the floor and braced them on the toilet seat. The entrance door opened. A guard making the departure checkup.

Joe held his breath. If the guard came down the line and tried the door, he was finished. But Joe had banked upon human nature. The guard stopped. For a long moment there was no sound and Joe knew the man was bending over to run his eyes down the line of toilets close to the floor. In this manner he could see the floor of every booth. The guard straightened, turned, walked out. The door closed. Silence. Joe's heart swelled with gratitude. He grinned, looking forward with joy to the long night ahead.

He found a spot over behind the barrels where the night watchman would have to climb over a lot of equipment in order to find him. He made himself comfortable, practically certain the guard would not do this. He stretched out on the hard floor and recorded the passing of the hours by the number of times the watchman went through.

And he was surprised at how fast the time passed. Finally, checking his count carefully, he left his hiding place and tiptoed to the line of lockers. He took the oxygen equipment from the duffel bag after which he hid the bag and the clothing therein behind a wall flange in a far corner. Then he climbed into the barrel at the front end of the packing line. He checked the barrel with a small X, and jockeyed the lid into place.

TIME PASSED. Nothing happened. He wondered, if he'd missed on the time element. The men should certainly have come to work now. More than once he was tempted to push the barrel lid aside and check the situation. When footsteps sounded, close by, and the lid snapped firmly into place, he was glad he hadn't done so. Good old Nick! When he got back from the Moon, he'd see to it that Nick got credit for his courageous act.

Soon the barrel began to move. Joe felt it rise into the air and settle with a thump. Then the motor of a truck roared and Joe knew where he was going. Straight toward Building A and the Moon rocket. There was more movement until finally the barrel was set down for what appeared to be the last time. Joe put the nose-piece of the oxygen tube into place and visualized himself safe and snug in a storage room of the rocket.

He closed his eyes and went peacefully to sleep.

He slept a long time, to be awakened by a crushing—a wrenching—that all but drove his head down into his spine. The pain brought him sharply alert. He knew instantly what had happened.

Blast-off.

He braced himself against the sides of the barrel, and gritted his teeth.

Soon it was better. Then no pressure at all. Only the fierce happiness on his heart. He'd set a course and won through! He was on the way to the Moon!

Joe let plenty of time elapse. He knew it was well over an hour later when he unlimbered the torch to cut an escape-hole in the barrel. This, he knew, would be tricky. He could easily burn himself. The heat would be intense.

But it wasn't too bad. The aluminum cut quickly, and in a matter of minutes he was standing beside his barrel. As he'd suspected, it was a storage hold. The pitch-darkness did not bother him. He'd come prepared with a small pencil flash that threw an adequate beam.

He found the door, opened it and went out into a long passageway....

NOW HE'D covered the length and breadth of the ship. He'd found a lot of rooms—all in pitch-darkness. No observation ports.

And no living thing.


He stood frozen in one of the rooms while the beam of his flash picked out a code stenciled on a steel plate over some piece of machinery. X59-306MY—Experimental—Explosion Rocket—Moon.

The flash dropped from Joe Spain's fingers. He stood in the pitch-darkness while the jets vibrated through the rocket.

But there was no fear in him. Only the great pain of futility. Only his tears, and his whispered words:

"They'll never know. Nobody won't ever know!"

THE END

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