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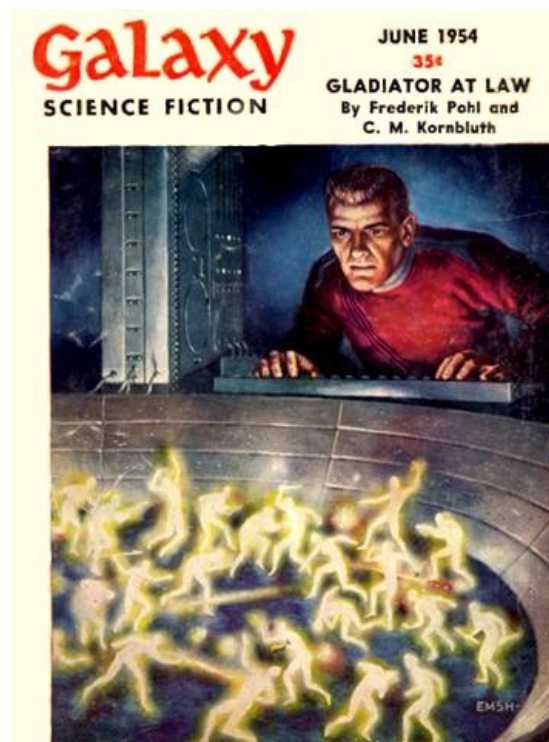
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HIGH MAN ***



HIGH MAN

By JAY CLARKE

Illustrated by KOSSIN

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London, W. 1
April 3

Roger Brisby
Hotel Massilon
New York, N. Y.

Roger dearest,

*Roger got his chance to
rise in the world ... and
wound up with his head
in the clouds!*

I haven't heard from you since you arrived in New York. Are you well?

All my love,
Anne

London, W. 1
April 11

Roger dear,

Really, Roger, you might have some consideration. After all, I *am* your fiancée. The very least you could do is drop me a postal card, even if you *are* on a business trip. I worry about you, Roger. It's been three weeks since I've heard from you.

Love,
Anne

London, W. 1
April 16

My dear Roger,

I won't stand for it. I simply *won't!* I know you too well! You're probably running around with those awful American women, and using *my* money to do it! Business trip, indeed! Don't think an ocean between us is going to stop me from finding out what you're doing! You write me this instant!

Anne

VIA WU CABLES LONDON APR 24
ROGER BRISBY
HOTEL MASSILON NY

FIVE WEEKS SINCE WORD FROM YOU STOP IF DONT HEAR FROM YOU TWENTY FOUR REPEAT TWENTY FOUR HOURS COMMA ENGAGEMENT BROKEN STOP ALSO WILL SUE FOR BREACH OF PROMISE COMMA DESERTION COMMA AND EXTORTION AND FRAUD FOR MONEY YOU HAVE BORROWED FROM ME STOP CABLE COLLECT STOP I STOPPED YOUR DRAW ON MY ACCOUNT AT BANK STOP ANNE

Hotel Massilon, N. Y.
April 25

My dearest Anne,

Please forgive the delay in replying to your letters and cable. The truth is that I was quite unable to write, anxious as I was to do so. It's a rather long story, but I would like to explain just how this came to be and so prove how unfounded your suspicions were.

You see, shortly after I arrived here, I ran into a Professor Phelps-Smythe Burdinghaugh, lately of England. Professor Burdinghaugh has been forced to resign from several universities in England because of the rather free manner in which he conducted his experiments. He admitted that no less than 16 physics laboratories have been demolished through his own miscalculations.

At any rate, finding the atmosphere in our country somewhat cool toward his continued researches, he came to New York, which, as you know, is inhabited wholly by wealthy eccentrics, tourists and boors. Such an environment was eminently suited to the Professor's needs and he settled here to work on an anti-gravity belt, his lifelong project.

You may wonder, reasonably enough, what Professor Burdinghaugh has to do with the delay in writing to you, but I assure you that, were it not for him, you would have heard from me much sooner. Much sooner indeed.

It all began with a Scotch-and-water. The Professor and I were each having one and inevitably we struck up a conversation. We chatted on a great number of topics and I remember that he was quite impressed when I told him you were indeed the *Chemicals* Anne Harrodsbury. Not long after this, the old boy (he is fiftyish and rather heavy) invited me in the flush of good comradeship (and good Scotch) to take part in his latest experiment with his anti-gravity unit. Feeling rather light-headed, I heartily acclaimed his suggestion and we repaired to his laboratory.

"My boy," he said to me later, as he strapped a bulky belt around my waist. "My boy, you are about to witness a milestone in history. Most assuredly, a milestone."

I nodded, basking in the old boy's magnificent confidence.

"We are about to enter a new era," he continued. "The Era of Space!"

His voice dropped to a low, comradely whisper. "And I have chosen you, my boy, to assist me in forging this trail to new suns, new worlds, new civilizations! The whole Galaxy lies before us!"

I could see only Professor Burdinghaugh's massive girth before me, but I assumed he could see things much more clearly than I.

The Professor filled our glasses from the bottle I had bought, then put his face close to mine. "Do you know why no one has ever invented an anti-gravity belt?" he confided. "I'll tell you—it takes research, and research takes money. And money is very hard to get. Especially," he added, gazing somberly at his highball, "in *my* field of research."

He shrugged, then busied himself with some adjustments on the belt he had wrapped around me. "There," he said finally, stepping back, "it's ready." We went outside to the garden behind his laboratory.

"All my life," he mused, "I've wanted to be the first to defy gravity, but—" here a suspicious wetness glistened in his eyes—"my fondness for good food and good drink has paid its price. I am far too heavy for the belt. That's why I am giving *you* this chance to roar to fame. You—*you* will have the glory, while I...." He choked, then quickly drained his glass.

"Enough! The stars are waiting! The experiment must begin!" He paused to refill his glass from the bottle he had brought out with him.

"When I say, '*Go!*' push this button on the belt," he explained. "Ready?"

I nodded.

"A toast first!" he cried. Soberly, he gazed at his glass. "To Man," he pronounced momentarily, "and the Stars." He took a sizable swallow, then fixed me with a feverish glare.

"*Go!*"

I confess that never, before or since, have I felt such a strange sensation as when I pushed the button on the belt. Suddenly, I felt like a leaf, or a feather, floating on a soft warm curl of cloud. It was as if all the troubles, all the cares of the world had been miraculously lifted from my shoulders. A glow of well-being seemed to pulse through my whole body.

The sound of Professor Burdinghaugh's voice brought an abrupt end to this strange lightness of mind. The Professor was pointing at me with an intensity I rarely before have seen, muttering, "It works—*it works!*" He seemed rather amazed.

I looked down and, with a feeling I can only describe as giddiness, saw that indeed it *was* working. I was rising slowly from the ground and was then about a foot in the air.

At this historical juncture, we looked at each other for a moment, then began to laugh as success rushed to our heads. The Professor even did a mad little jig while, for my part, I gyrated in the air unrestrained.

It was not until I was about ten feet off the ground that I began to feel uneasy. I was never one to stomach high altitudes, you might recall, and the sight of ten feet of emptiness beneath me was disquieting.

"Professor," I asked hesitantly, "how do I turn off the belt?"

Burdinghaugh's glass stopped an inch from his lips. "Turn it off?" he countered thickly.

"*Yes!*" I shouted, now fifteen feet in the air. "How do I turn it off? How do I get down?"

The Professor gazed up at me thoughtfully. "My boy," he said at last, "I never thought about getting down—been much too concerned with getting jolly well *up*."



"*Burdinghaugh!*" I screamed. "Get me *down!*" I was now twenty feet above the ground.

"I'm sorry, old boy, dreadfully sorry," he called to me. "I can't. But don't think your life will have been spent in vain. Indeed not! I'll see to it that you get proper credit as my assistant when the anti-gravity belt is perfected. You've been invaluable, dear boy, invaluable!" His voice faded.

"*Professor!*" I screamed futilely, but by then we were too far apart to make ourselves heard and, even as I wasted my breath, a gust of wind caught me and sent me soaring into the air, spinning like a top. But, just before I entered a cloud, I saw the Professor standing far below, his feet planted wide apart, his head thrown back while he watched my progress. I fancied that, as I disappeared into the mist, he waved a solemn good-by and drank my health.

You can't imagine the torture I went through as I sailed through the air. During those first few moments, I had felt light, carefree, buoyant. But, in these higher altitudes, I was buffeted by strong winds, pelted by rain in enormous quantities and subjected to sudden drops that had me gasping. How I managed to survive, I can't understand. Surely, I would have died if I had floated completely out of the atmosphere but, luckily, the belt's power to lift me leveled off at about 10,000 feet.

For days, I drifted at that altitude, blown willy-nilly by the contrary winds, starved and bitterly cold. Several times, I tried to steer myself—but to no avail. I was powerless to control my flight. My sense of direction left me and I had no idea where I was. Sometimes, I would look down through a rift in the clouds and see farmland, or perhaps cities. Once I glimpsed the sea—and shut my eyes.

It was not until the sixth day of my flight that I noticed a change. I was sinking. Slowly but steadily, I was losing altitude. I was at a loss to explain this phenomenon at first, but then I remembered that the Professor had said the belt was powered by batteries. Obviously, the batteries were weakening.

A few hours later, I landed gently, only a few blocks from where I had started my unwilling flight. During those six frightful days, I must have been blown around in circles. Weak, starved, shaken, sick, I was taken to a hospital, from which I have just been released. Needless to say, I immediately tried to locate Professor Burdinghaugh, but have been unable to find a trace of him. You might say he has disappeared into thin air.

You must be wondering, of course, what this singular adventure has to do with my not writing you earlier. However, I feel certain you understand now that writing was impossible under the circumstances.

All the ink in my fountain pen leaked out when I reached the altitude of 10,000 feet—I have the kind of pen that writes under water—and I had to put my pencil between my teeth to keep them from chattering and knocking out my inlays. During my stay at the hospital, of course, I couldn't write, as I was too weak even to flirt with the nurses—which, as you know, is very weak indeed.

So, please forgive my unfortunate lapse in correspondence. Truly, I would have written, had it been possible.

Devotedly,
Roger

P.S. I resent your implication that I am engaged to you only because of your money. The fact that you are extremely wealthy and that I have virtually nothing, as I have told you many times before, never has and never will have anything to do with my love for you. I'm particularly hurt by your suspicion that I'd spend your money on other women. Really, I'm shocked that such a thing could even occur to you. And, now that you know why I haven't written before, I trust you'll restore my draw on your account at the bank. My funds are rather low.

Roger

London, W. 1
May 1

Dear Roger,

I always sensed you were a despicable, smooth-talking gold-digger—but I didn't really convince myself of it until I read your letter. Do you really expect me to believe that story? An anti-gravity belt! What do you take me for—one of your silly impressionable American women?

Besides, I happen to have met your Professor Phelps-Smythe Burdinhaugh in London, only a few days ago, and he assured me that, while he *had* met you in New York, it was under very different circumstances from those you described. He said you were with two women and that all three of you were quite drunk. He also said he had never invented an anti-gravity belt and seemed rather amused at the idea.

Needless to say, he was surprised to learn that I was your fiancée. He was under the impression that you were engaged to some American girl, he said, but he couldn't tell *which* one. That was the last straw.

This is the end, Roger. Our engagement is broken. I bear you no ill will—indeed, I'm glad it's all over. The one thing I'm furious about is the way you maligned the Professor, trying to make me think *he* was responsible for your not writing. How perfectly ridiculous!

Really, Roger, you would do well to model yourself after the Professor. He is so charming, so cultured, so thoughtful! I'll never forgive you for trying to blame him for your own shortcomings.

Anne

P.S. For obvious reasons, I shan't restore your draw on my account at the bank. And that's another thing. I thought you were awfully vague about what "business" you had in New York, and now I know. The Professor said you told him you were on vacation. Business trip indeed! *Cad!*

Anne

London, W. 1
May 3

My dear boy,

Ever since I watched you disappear into that cloud, I have been trying to think of some way to make up to you the beastly suffering you must have experienced at my behest. At long last, I have discovered a way.

Immediately after the experiment, I found it necessary to return to London. While there, seeking funds to continue my researches, I happened to meet your fiancée. It was at this moment that I conceived the plan for which I know you will be eternally thankful.

I had been troubled by the fact that the world was being deprived of your obvious natural brilliance in applied science—who else would have thought of needing a button to *turn off* the anti-gravity belt?—because of your ties to more material things. Namely, your fiancée. I therefore resolved to free you from your bonds—and hers—and give the world the benefit of your genius.

Carrying out this plan was no easy task, however, and I am sure you will appreciate the problems involved. I first had to convince Anne that your story was pure rot, or else she would have hung on to you like a leech for the rest of your life. This I did by denying all particulars of your story—or, rather, by telling the truth about your activities in New York—and adding a few embellishments of my own.

Of course, this was only temporary relief. I knew something more permanent had to be done to keep her from ruining your bright future. It was clear there was only one solution—I had to woo her myself. I may add that she has found me not unattractive and so I have every reason to believe we shall be married within the fortnight.

Thus, I have rid you of all entanglements and freed you to use your vast talents to advance the cause of science. At the same time, if I may return to a more materialistic plane, I have provided

myself with sufficient funds to carry on my researches, since Anne will gladly supply same.

But please—do not feel in debt to me. I consider it a privilege to sacrifice myself to Anne for such a glorious cause. Then too, ladies of such obvious refinement—and means—always have appealed to me.

I hope that in this small way I have in part repaid you for your invaluable contribution to my work.

Sincerely,
Phelps-Smythe Burdinghaugh

P.S. Since, by marrying Anne, I shall become your creditor, I suggest you make arrangements with utmost despatch to repay the monies you borrowed from her. Shall we say thirty days, dear boy?

My researches are quite expensive. I do, you know, still have a quite genuine fondness for good food and drink.

PSB

Brisby Enterprises, Inc., N. Y.
June 5

My dear Burdinghaugh,

You win. Anne is yours, for which I am glad. I may have forgotten to tell you that nearly all of her funds are in untouchable trusts—not in bonds.

In regard to the monies due you, my cheque will be in the mails this week. Such trifling amounts now mean nothing to me.

As for your methods in usurping my relationship with Anne, I have only admiration—speaking as one professional to another, of course. Unfortunately, however, in your eagerness to get your hands on Anne's fortune, you quite overlooked one very important item—the key item, in fact—the anti-gravity belt.

It may be of interest to you that I have taken out a patent on the belt and am manufacturing small units for toy spaceships. The "gimmick," as these American subjects put it, is "hot" and the turnover is fantastic. The toy ships rise and rise into the sky and never come down and, as soon as they disappear, the junior rocketmen immediately start bawling for another one. It isn't quite the Era of Space, but it's considerably more profitable.

Pity you hadn't thought about patenting the belt—these Americans are so free with their dollars.

But then, you have Anne. What could be fairer?

Gratefully yours,
Roger

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