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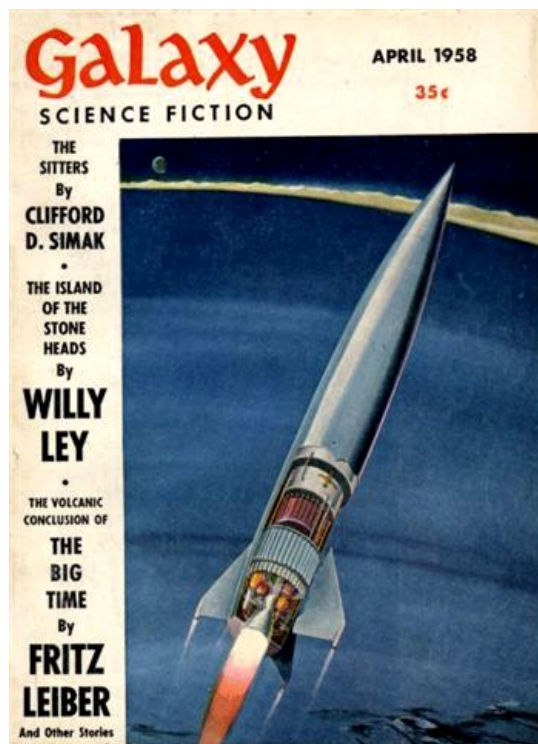
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FIRST MAN ***



FIRST MAN

By **CLYDE BROWN**

Illustrated by **WOOD**

[Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from Galaxy Science Fiction April 1958. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

To keep the record straight: Orville Close was first man on the Moon. Harold Ferguson was second. They never talk about it.

It started on that October morning when the piece came out in the Parkville News. Harold grumbled that they'd gotten the story all wrong, calling his ship a rocket ship, and treating him like a flagpole sitter or a man going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. His wife took their sad, thin little girl and went to live with her brother. The city police blocked off Elm

He obstinately wanted no part in achieving the goal of generations—but the goal with equal obstinacy wanted all of him!

Street, letting no one through except the residents. The neighbors were getting up a petition. But Orville refused to become excited.

What was going to happen?

Why, nothing.

Harold would probably crack up completely, but this evening that thing would still be standing there, solid as the Washington Monument.

Nevertheless, Orville's wife Polly was going to her sister's, across town. *She* wasn't going to stay there and be blown up! While she was getting ready, Orville picked up a package by the sink and carried it outside to the alley and dropped it in the garbage can. He wore his double-breasted fall suit. He strolled to the boundary fence and leaned against a post.

A reporter was taking angle shots of the spaceship. Flashbulbs were scattered over Harold's garden.

It really does catch the eye, Orville thought. Smarten the ship up a little, put some stripes running down from the nose, a few pieces of chrome around over the body....

Poor old Harold came off his back porch carrying a thermos jug and six loaves of bread.

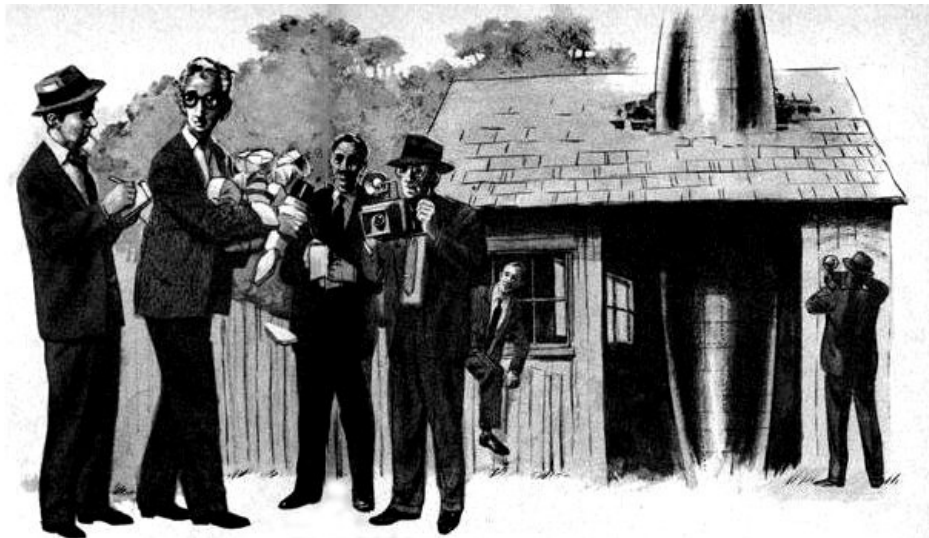
"Morning, Harold," said Orville.

"Oh—morning, Orville." Harold flinched. Another reporter had come out of the shed and taken their picture.

"What's your name, mister?" the reporter asked Orville.

"I'd rather you left me out of this," Orville said.

A loaf of bread had broken open and slices were falling out. Harold put down the thermos jug and picked up the slices and stuffed them back into the wrapper. The first reporter came over.



"It's got Vitamin D." Harold grinned wretchedly. "Costs two cents more a loaf, but I thought, what the heck—"

"How about a shot of you and the missus saying good-by?" the first reporter said.

"Why—she left me," Harold blurted. He tried to get away, but the reporters hemmed him in.

"Was she scared?" the second reporter asked.

"Look, boys!" Orville put his hands on the top rail of the fence and climbed across. He was getting his shoes wet in the weeds in Harold's garden, but he didn't care. "The man has work to do. Can't you leave him alone?"

He picked up the jug and took Harold by the elbow and led him into the shed.

There, resting on some concrete blocks on the dirt floor, was the base of the ship. In the semi-

darkness, it looked harmless enough: like a tank, six or eight feet across, reaching up through a jagged hole in the roof.

"Harold, you could make a good thing out of this," Orville said. "All this publicity."

Harold was climbing a rickety ladder to the roof. Orville followed.

"Mount this thing on a trailer. Take her around to fairs and carnivals."

Orville waited on the roof while Harold climbed another ladder to the small oval door in the side of the ship. Harold called down: "You never saw the inside. Want to look around?"

"Well..." Orville glanced into his back yard. Polly wasn't ready yet. He climbed up and handed the jug to Harold and stuck his head in.

"Huh!" There wasn't much to see. Just a small compartment with some pipes leading from below into the nose. "You got to fix this up," he said. "Some Rube Goldberg contraptions."

"The works are all up here." Harold climbed a ladder and disappeared through a hole overhead. "C'mon up, I'd like you to see this!"

Orville looked down again into his yard. "It'll take her forever! Polly, I mean. Okay, I guess I got time for a look." He stepped in and climbed until his waist was through the hole.

The nose of the ship was dark. Harold was shining an extension lamp around. There were parts of a junked car and some old plumbing fixtures and Orville recognized the wheels of a lawnmower he'd left by the alley for the trash men to pick up. This didn't look like the inside of a spaceship. It looked exactly like a corner in Harold's basement.

"Oh, Lord," Orville said.

"I call this my scope." Harold was shining the light on a shaving mirror, on a long arm that could be swung and tilted about. "How about that? Pretty neat, huh?"

Neat was hardly the word for it. "Look here, Harold! The neighbors are getting an injunction. Why don't you play it smart? Fight it out in the courts. There'll be a lot of publicity—"

"They are?" Harold was hurt. He was shining the lamp in Orville's eyes.

"Yeah. Now while you're fighting it out in the courts—"

"Do you call that neighborly?"

"They're scared. They're afraid you'll blow the whole neighborhood to pieces."

"Well, hell with them!"

"While we're on that subject, ain't that my trouble lamp you're holding?"

"Yeah. Guess it is. Need it right away?"

"Just want you to remember where it came from."

"Actually, it'll be no use on the trip. I got her fixed so when I take off, the cord down at the base will come unplugged and—"

"Well, Polly must be ready by now." Orville gave up. Polly was right. Harold was insane.

Orville tried to turn on the ladder so that he could climb back down. His foot slipped. He spread his arms to keep from falling through the hole and knocked over the pile of bread.

"Watch out!" Harold yelled.

"I'm all right." Orville felt a slight tingle.

"Yes, but you—" Harold's voice trailed off with dismay. The light in his hand had gone out, but Orville didn't think of what this meant at the time.

There was light coming through the door below and Orville climbed down. Darn! He pulled out his handkerchief and tried to brush the dust off his lapels. He'd have to change suits, and that meant changing his socks and tie, and he was supposed to meet those people about that deal on Maplehurst Extension at nine. Well, he'd be late. He leaned out of the door.

"Orville!" shouted Harold. "Come back! Don't step out there!"

A lot of fog was blowing down past the nose of the ship. Orville wondered where it came from. He stuck his foot out, reaching for the ladder. He heard Harold scrambling down from above and he wanted to get away from that madman. He reached farther. Harold grabbed his arm.

Then the fog cleared away and Orville swayed dizzily, gazing at where he had almost stepped.

They had been going through a cloud. Now he looked down at dazzling clouds in the bright October sun and between them he saw the streets of Parkville, very neat, just like the map hanging in the office.

He dropped back inside and lay weakly on the floor. He grabbed one of the pipes and shakily clung to it.

"What happened?" he stammered.

"Hit the main switch." Harold was reaching out for the door handle. He banged the door shut with a concussion that burst inside Orville's head. "We took off."

It was dark in there, at first; then Orville saw a dim violet light that filled the inside of the ship.

He followed Harold up the ladder into the nose of the ship and sank to the floor. Harold was twiddling with some knobs mounted on the dashboard of the junked car.

"Boy!" Orville pulled out his handkerchief again and swabbed his forehead. He tried to wipe the grime from his hands. "And I've never even been in an airplane!"

"Me either." Harold pounded on the dashboard. A meter didn't seem to be working. "There ... guess I can open her up a little."

"Hey, wait! Take me back!"

Harold moved a knob an eighth of a turn. He switched on the scope and waited for it to warm up. He took off his glasses and wiped them, squinting at Orville with that one bad eye.

"Turn it around and take me back!"

"But I can't, Orville." Harold put on the glasses and looked into the scope. "It's working!"

"I demand it! You've made me late for the office as it is!"

"Sure looks different from the map," Harold said. "Must be the East Coast. There's Florida sticking out there."

He snapped off the scope and sat opposite Orville. He opened the thermos and poured coffee into the cap.

"Been so busy, didn't have my breakfast." He held out the cap to Orville. "I take mine without sugar."

Orville shook his head. "Do I understand—"

"Ugh! It's hot!" Harold put down the coffee and rummaged in some brown paper bags. "Should be some glazed doughnuts.... Shoot! Bet I left them in the kitchen!"

Orville faced him firmly. "You've shown me it'll fly. I believe you. Now I give you one more chance—take me back!"

"But I can't!" Harold protested.

"There are laws about this sort of thing, my friend. This is abduction. Kidnapping. You know what the penalty is for that?"

"Well, gee, I didn't mean to take you along, Orville. You hit that switch—"

"It's criminal negligence, leaving a switch out there like that where it could be hit by accident!"

"Had to put it there so I could reach up from below and work it."

Orville balled his fists and stood squarely. Funny—it was no trouble at all, standing and walking around. If he hadn't seen those clouds, and the landscape sinking away, he'd swear the two of them were still in Harold's back yard.

"Do you take me back," he said, "or do I have to break every—"

"But I can't!" Harold grasped his wrist pleadingly. "I got her set up in a sequence. If I tried to change the sequence now, why—" He shuddered. "I haven't got any idea what might happen!"

Orville sat back down.

"I'm sorry." The weak way Harold said it made Orville feel worse than ever.

"Me! Trapped up here in this thing with you!" Orville said bitterly. "You can't even drive a car! You're just about the worst driver I know!"

"I know," Harold admitted. "But this is safer than a car. Besides, out where we're going, there'll be no traffic problem." He gave his inane giggle. "Far as I know, there's no one else at all!"

"And the neighborhood back there. Probably all blown to pieces. Polly. The house. My car! I got complete coverage on it, but who ever heard of a car wrecked by a spaceship? When we get back, if my insurance doesn't cover it, I'll sue you!"

"There's nothing hurt at all," Harold said. "Unless someone had his hand on the ship when we took off. I'd planned to have 'em stand back."

Orville closed his eyes. Something was crossing and crisscrossing inside him like two rings tossed back and forth by jugglers. It was not painful, but it was disturbing. Something must be going wrong. He didn't trust Harold's mechanical ability. In the past ten years, Harold had been fired from a couple of filling station jobs because of blunders, once for leaving the plug out of a crank case, and once for botching up a flat tire repair.

"Running kind of rough, isn't she?" Orville said. "What makes this little—" He circled his hands sickly in front of his stomach.

Harold closed his eyes and made similar circles. "Oh, that's this counter-grav of mine. You see, the gravitation of the Earth—"

"Can't you do anything about it?" Orville was in no mood to listen to one of Harold's lectures.

"I could move her over so we couldn't feel it, but it would be shaking the ship then. Might tear it apart."

"Won't it tear us apart?"

"I don't think so. We got more give to us than the ship has." Harold was able to drink the coffee now. "No, I don't think I've done a bad job on this. First time a machine is built, you're bound to run into a few bugs. But this is working, so far, even better than I expected."

"Yeah," Orville had to admit, "it ain't bad—for a guy with no mechanical ability whatever."

II

Harold had opened the ship up a little more, and according to him, they were now moving eighteen thousand miles per hour or so, approximately. Orville had tried to drink some water from a milk bottle, but the sight of the water, bouncing in rhythm to the invisible circles in his stomach, had given him nausea.

Harold knelt on the floor, smoothing out a soiled sheet of paper. In the center was a small circle, labeled in Harold's sloppy handwriting "Earth." An arrow showed the direction of the Earth's motion around the Sun. Outside this was a larger circle labeled "Orbit of Moon." A spiral reached out from the Earth to intersect the Moon's orbit.

"Had the darnedest time drawing this," Harold said. "Got it out of an astronomy book. *Let's Look at the Stars* by someone. Thirty-five cents. Let's see now."

He wet the point of the pencil and made a mark. He scratched his head and erased the mark and made another.

"Harold, another thing," said Orville. "I weigh around one ninety-five. Won't that take a lot of extra gas?"

"Nope. Doesn't matter if you weigh a ton. According to my counter-grav principle—"

"Won't it get stuffy in here with two of us?"

"Why, I have some oxygen. That welding place in back of the garage where I work—got a tank off them. Had to pay cash, but I can turn in the empty when we get back."

"You sure one tank'll be enough?"



"Well—" Harold flushed guiltily. "You won't say anything about this? I took along several extra tanks, just to make sure. I wasn't stealing. You see, I figure I might make some money out of this thing."

"Say!" Orville hadn't thought of this angle before. "You really could."

"And there should be plenty of food. Let me see now." He fished in his pocket and brought out a piece of brown wrapping paper. "I'll run over the list and make sure I didn't forget something." He glanced up sharply. "Relax! Make yourself to home. And the little boy's room is down there." He squinted at the paper. "Water. There's plenty. Six family-size cans pork and beans. Charged 'em." He ran through the list, mumbling, then looked up brightly. "Yep. Looks all right. Nope, there's one thing I forgot. Stickum plaster! Doggone. Never go anywhere without my first aid kit. Never know what's liable to happen."

"Y'know, Harold," Orville said, "I'm beginning to see some possibilities in this trip. First man on the Moon. Think of the fuss they made over Lindy and Wrong-way Corrigan. The guys who climbed Mount Everest. Why, that was nothing!"

"Course, I'm not doing this for fame. Or money, either."

"Then why are you doing it?"

Harold stared vaguely toward where the Moon would be if they could see it. "I guess ... because it's there."

"Huh! Well, don't forget I'm in on it, too."

Some time later, when the Moon first appeared on the scope, about the size of a basketball, Harold indulged in a mild spree. He opened some pineapple juice. Orville did not feel like drinking any. In fact, he felt ill.

"Space sickness," Harold said. "Lot of bread is good for that. Stuff yourself with it. Just think—back there on Earth, they're going about their business and no one knows that we're out here heading for the Moon. Just think—if I'd call them on the radio and report making first contact with the Moon—"

"Harold, one thing. How're you going to get her down?"

"Naval observatory would be the people to call, I guess. They'd notify the President and they'd interrupt the TV programs—I thought of putting a radio in here, but I'd already gone way over my budget."

"How do you plan to land her?"

"And wouldn't those guys at the Atomic Energy Commission have red faces! You know, I wrote them, asking to use some of their energy and—darn these government bureaus!—they never even had the courtesy to answer my letter!"

"Listen—"

"And the birds at the college! When I took that navigation chart to the astronomy department to see if they'd check it for me, they blew up! Acted like I had no business flying to the Moon. Acted like they owned the thing. Bunch of smart-alecs! With their double-talk! Knew less than I did when I went there."

He looked at his watch. "I'm going to have a snack and then I'll get some sleep. That's one good thing about having you along. Now I can sleep and not have to worry."

As Harold sawed at the top of a can of beans with the can-opener. Orville closed his eyes. Instantly, he saw the ship, heading for the Moon, and then there was a blinding flash. He opened his eyes. Harold was digging into the can with a spoon, munching away.

"Just brought one." Harold waved the spoon. "But I'm not poison. Better have some of these beans. They'll stick to your ribs."

Orville crawled to the door leading to the other compartment, flung it open and leaned there a while. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. Harold was wiping the spoon on a piece of brown paper.

"Last call!" Harold giggled and pushed the can to Orville. Orville pushed it away and closed his eyes and sat, holding his middle. When he opened them, Harold was sleeping.

Orville crawled over and shook him. "How soon do you want me to wake you up?"

Harold sat up. "Oh, my gosh! I forgot! Why, don't let me sleep more than four hours."

He went to sleep again. Orville sat back. He could see it. Harold, watching the Moon grow bigger and bigger on that scope, until they were right on it, then turning with a surprised look: Oh, my gosh! I forgot something! Then he'd give that giggle and there'd be that crash....

Orville's watch said two hours, but he wasn't sure. Maybe he'd slept and the hand had gone clear around. He kept seeing that flash. Some amateur astronomer, looking at the Moon right then, might see it. He'd be a bungler, like Harold, and it wouldn't be much of a telescope. He was always seeing flashes in the thing, from cars or lightning bugs or from the kitchen door, because his wife was there yelling at him, just like Rosie yelling at Harold. For they always married women like Rosie, or they made women turn that way. Polly, now, she nagged all the time, but that was different!

Orville drank some water and ate some bread, and when he swallowed, he felt that circular bump-bump grab the bread and chop away at it, just like Polly feeding stale bread into the meat chopper to make stuffing.

I have no business being out here, he moaned.

Here he was riding to the Moon with a tinkering idiot who couldn't fix a kitchen faucet or locate a blown fuse in the basement. Streams of moisture were trickling down the wall. The metal felt cold, like the window of the car on a day when you needed the heater and defroster. Was something going wrong?

Maybe they were out of oxygen. He listened to Harold snoring. Once Harold took a quick breath, and strangled, and turned his head restlessly. His glasses were slipping off.

Orville looked at his watch. He couldn't believe that just five minutes had gone by since he'd looked at it last. He could hear Harold's two-dollar watch ticking away, almost as loud as his own. His was gaining on Harold's and then they were ticking together so that the combined pounding sent echoes through the ship. He tried to crawl.

He couldn't move.

"Harold!" The ticking of the watches drowned out his voice. "We're in trouble! We're out of oxygen! Help!"

It was like a bad dream. Then something woke him: Harold, stumbling across his legs, turning on the scope and waiting, breathing hard, for it to come to life.

Harold saw that he was awake. "You went to sleep! You shoulda woke me. It's been six hours!"

Orville said nothing.

"We may be clear past the Moon by now," Harold grumbled.

Orville turned his face to the wall. He heard the hiss as Harold ran in fresh oxygen. "Shoot!

Better go down and hook up a new tank." Harold clanked around in the other end of the ship and came back.

"How far out are we?" asked Orville.

"Not far. I'm cutting down the speed some."

"Uh ... how do you plan to take her down?"

"That's an interesting point, now. Let's see...."

"Wouldn't it be better if we just flew up close, not too close, and then headed for home? Of course, there's that problem back there, too."

"Don't you want the beans? I'll eat 'em then."

"But I'd feel better crashing on the Earth, somehow, than on the Moon—"

"Who says we're going to crash? There are several ways to set her down. Head first, tail first, but I guess I'll lay her in sideways. It'll be easier to crawl outside."

"What?"

"Sure." Harold was munching beans. Then he rummaged in the supplies and brought out a jar of peaches. He drank off some of the juice. "Rosie never gets enough sugar in these to suit me." The peaches slid off the spoon. He dug in with his fingers and brought out a slice. "Point of the whole thing. Explore. Look around." He tilted the jar to his mouth and let slices fall into his mouth. "Pick up some samples of rocks and things."

"You can get rocks right around home."

"But these are different. These weigh only a quarter as much as the rocks on Earth. Or is it a sixth?"

"In that case—" Orville started gathering up empty bags and cans and putting them into a soup carton.

"What're you doing?"

"Cleaning the place up a little. We can get rid of some of this trash."

"Don't throw those out! I paid a deposit on them." Harold pulled out the empty milk bottles and put them back in the case.

III

Harold had said the landing would be as gentle as laying a baby in its cradle. It wasn't exactly.

He said: "There!"

"Are we down?"

Harold nodded. Orville let go of the railing he'd been hanging onto. Harold unplugged something.

The ship went dark and started rolling. It was a slow, drunken roll and as noisy as an oil drum going down the court house steps. There was a final hard blow; then the ship rocked and lay still.

Orville sat up. He could hear Harold scrambling about, and then a flashlight came on.

"What happened?"

"Must have landed on the side of a mountain. Rolled down when I turned off our counter-grav. Shoot!" Harold held up something. "Broke a lens in my glasses. There's another trip to the eye-doctor's."

Orville rescued a couple of bottles that were spilling water. Everything else seemed to be all right. The ship lay on its side now and Harold was crawling through the hole leading to the other compartment. When Orville got through, Harold was hauling something from the other end of the ship.

"What we waiting for?" Orville put his hand on the handle of the outer door. "Last one out is a—"

"Wait a minute! You gotta wear this thing." Harold was laying out a spacesuit. He explained how it worked. He didn't object a great deal when Orville volunteered to go out first.

"We can take turns." Harold helped Orville slide his feet into the thing and pull it on. It fitted Orville rather tightly in places, but it seemed to be all right.

"Be careful now." Harold squinted at him through the one lens of his glasses. "Don't tear her on a rock or anything. You'd pop like a kid's balloon."

"Wait a minute!"

Harold paused, holding the helmet.

"I can't go through with it," Orville said. "I was planning a mean trick on you. I was going to be the first man."

"What difference does that make? We're both in on it together." Harold clapped the helmet down on Orville's shoulders. He tightened some clamps and leaned close and said something which Orville could not hear. Then Orville saw that he wanted to shake hands, so Orville shook his hand.

Harold squirmed back through the hole into the nose, waved and shut the door.

Orville aimed the flashlight at the outer door. He turned the valve beside the door, feeling the suit puff out around him, and when the pressure in the compartment was gone, he reached toward the handle. His eyes were watering. He had to use all of his strength to move the handle; then the door popped open, swinging out and down, and he was looking out at the Moon.

There was glaring light and a kind of fog. He laid down the flashlight and, groping, found the soup carton in which he'd put the refuse accumulated during the trip, and flung the box into the fog.

He looked out again. There was nothing but the glaring white void. "Well, that settles that!" There was no use getting out. On the other hand, how about a souvenir?

He stuck a leg out through the opening, which was now about two feet high and four feet wide. By wriggling, he got the other leg out, but he couldn't touch the ground. He reached his left foot a little farther and touched something that rolled slightly, then was solid. That's far enough, he thought; to hell with the souvenir!

But the mittens were too clumsy. He couldn't pull himself back in. He lowered himself farther and stood. He shuffled among the loose, rolling stones and reached down and picked one of them up. Harold was right: they weighed a lot less than the rocks on Earth. He cradled the thing in one arm and stood there.



Here he was, standing on the Moon! The very first man! He hugged the souvenir to his body. They'd keep it on the coffee table, between those two awful ashtrays Polly had brought back from Niagara Falls, and when anyone asked him what was that funny rock lying there, he'd say—

Orville had been reaching, trying to touch the ship. His hand met nothing....

Now keep calm, he thought. Don't get turned around. And don't panic. It can't be far away. He reached out in another direction and took a step, but still his waving hand met nothing. Try this way then....

As he turned, his elbow struck the edge of the opening. Maybe he'd been waving his arm through the opening all the time!

He tossed in the souvenir. He wriggled in after it. Careful! What did Harold say about tearing the suit?

He closed the outer door. As he returned the pressure to the compartment, the suit became limp against him, and Orville was so weak that he sank to the floor. He was still lying there when

Harold took off the headpiece.

"It's a total flop," Orville told him. "It's been a waste of time. No use going out."

He told Harold about the narrow escape he'd had in the fog. *Fog on the Moon?* This didn't sound right to Harold. He was fooling with the helmet, scratching frost from the inside of the visor. "Couldn't you get the defroster working? This little button right here. I showed you."

Orville knew, to his shame and disgust, that he had been looking at his own breath all of that time.

Harold now insisted on going out. Orville shined the flashlight around. He was looking for the souvenir, and he found it, near their feet.

It was a package carefully wrapped in paper, some of the refuse which he had thrown outside.

That figures, he thought bitterly. Well, anyway, I was *first man*. They can't take that away from me!

Harold was gone a long time. The nose of the ship was becoming very cold and the only light came from the luminous dial of Orville's watch. What was Harold doing out there? Maybe he'd snagged his suit and blown up like a soap bubble. How long should Orville wait before giving up? He should have learned how to run the ship, in case of an emergency like this.

A distant clank startled him. The ship rolled slightly. Orville reached out a hand in the dark to steady himself and chilled when he realized what he'd put his hand on. It was the starting switch.

What was that idiot doing out there?

Then Harold was back, breathing hard, squinting through his one good lens. "Boy, what a sight! I'd give anything for a camera!"

"Never mind that! Let's go! I'm freezing!"

They were off without any trouble and the dim violet light returned and the ice on the compartment walls began to melt. When the ship was settled on course, Harold took off the rest of the spacesuit, pulled some paper from the glove compartment of the dashboard and began writing.

"It's the official report," Harold said presently. "Getting it all down while it's fresh in my mind."

"Let's see that!" Orville couldn't read Harold's handwriting. "What's it say?"

"You really want to hear it? Well..." Harold cleared his throat modestly and began to read. "'The *Discovery*'—decided to call her the *Discovery* on account of—the *Discovery* was lying on her side in the shade, but a blinding light was coming down from some peaks. It nearly blinded me! Boy, what a—" Harold squinted over a word—"sight!"

"Wait a minute! You giving me credit?"

"What for?"

"For being the first man."

"Oh, sure. I mention that in here some place."

"Just so there's no mistake!" Orville suddenly felt very drowsy. He curled up facing the wall and went to sleep.

When he awoke, he saw Harold leaning against the wall, his glasses sliding down, his head nodding. Orville reached over and jerked his foot.

"There now," he said. "Old neighbor. You go to sleep. I'll watch her for a while."

Orville felt fine now. While Harold slept, he opened a jar of Rosie's peaches, drank off the juice and dug in with the spoon. It wasn't really so bad, not shaving or taking a bath, roughing it out here in space!

He dug into his coat pocket, found a cigar, but it was crushed. Oh, well. He flung it into the trash. He folded his arms, leaned back his head.

They sat at the head of a banquet table, he and Harold. The mayor was there, and the college president, and way down the table was the boss, old Haverstrom, real proud to be in such important company. And the governor was there and—by gosh! Sitting right next to Orville was the President of the United States!

Someone was making a speech—they were awarding some kind of prize for *first man* and there was applause and they were waiting for Orville to get up. He stood, waited for applause to die

down.

"Thank you, friends ... all of you ... being no speechmaker ... but I do want to say right here and now ... no more idea of receiving this great honor tonight than of—flying to the Moon!"

That would get a laugh. Then he'd go on and give due credit to Harold, poor old Harold sleeping there, innocent as a baby about such things.

Why, the publicity angle alone could take up a man's full time. Guest appearances on TV. Getting signed up as technical adviser in Hollywood. But that was just the beginning.

Take the metal in this ship. Harold had made it out of junk from the city dump, melting it in a forge he'd fashioned out of an old oil drum. It had to be cheap and easy to make—but you could probably use it for almost anything. There was your whole metal industry shot to pieces!

This thing he called a scope now. With a big corporation behind it, Lord only knew what it would do to the communications setup.

But the big thing was this counter-grav business! *There* was where you got into the big leagues. If Harold could do this with it, think what General Motors could do! Orville could see TWA, B&O and steamship companies bidding against each other for it. And car manufacturers and freight handlers—and tugboat owners—and taxi fleets—and the armed forces—

Harold was waking up. He rubbed his skimpy whiskers, put on his broken glasses, creaked over to the scope and turned it on. Harold, old boy, Orville thought tenderly, you don't know it yet, but your troubles are all over!

"What do you see, Harold?"

"The Earth."

Orville went over. There was a dark green spot on the scope, bright against deep black. "You sure?"

"Almost positive. That's the only thing that size there is right around here."

"Well, fine! That calls for a celebration, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes. Forgot that. We can open the tuna."

IV

"It's about time," Orville said, "that we started figuring out a plan." He scraped the bottom of the can. The tuna tasted fine. He took a swig of pineapple juice and passed the can back to Harold.

"Yeah, I been thinking about that," said Harold.

"I've had more experience in that line than you, so maybe—"

"Do you think mankind is ready for my secret?"

"There, you see?" Orville laughed heartily. "Now don't you worry about such things."

"But look what they did with the atomic bomb. And if this ever got loose—"

"Harold!" Orville's laugh was less hearty. "Do you think you could keep this a secret? The minute we land, they'll be all over us. The government can impound this ship, you know."

"Won't do them any good. They can tear it all apart and never find out a thing."

Hours later, they were still arguing.

"If the government had it, they'd build a war machine and then the Russians would steal it—"

"Harold! That's Communist talk!"

"Shoot! I'm no Communist!"

"You're playing right into their hands...."

It went on and on. Then: "Harold—as your neighbor—won't you tell *me* what it is?"

"I'll try...."

Orville sat up, tingling. You take gravity, Harold said. What do we know about it? Was it like a lot of rubber bands, stretching back and forth between everything, or was it a flow, like water? Now if it was a flow, it would have to flow back some way, or else you'd run out, wouldn't you? Then if you hooked onto this counter-flow—

Orville nodded. This wasn't so hard to understand. He felt a little nervous. "Go on, Harold."

"I guess it's none of those things." Harold gave his inane giggle.

Orville felt cheated. "You call this neighborly? Remember when I drove clear out into the country with a gallon of gas that time when you got stuck?"

"I'm trying. You gotta think of it up to that point, then you gotta think the *other* way. But you

can't explain it. You just do it."

Harold picked up two of the rings from Rosie's fruit jars and moved them back and forth across one another. He tried with three rings, dropped them.

"It's no use."

"Try harder."

Harold shook his head. "I suppose if I wanted to bad enough.... But now that we been to the Moon, there's nothing else I want to do."

Orville reached for the rings and tried.

Suddenly, Harold sprang up. "Oh, my socks!"

He turned on the scope and swung it wildly back and forth. "You made me commit a boo-boo. I think we've shot right past the Earth!"

The scope was getting weak. They could not find the Earth until Harold had reversed course. Then Orville saw it, the edge filling part of the scope. Harold's eyes were watering. He wiped the good lens of his glasses and leaned close.

"Can you make out any land?" he asked Orville.

"This looks like Indian Lake. I've fished there lots of times."

"It would be something bigger. Say, Greenland or South America."

This was the first time Orville realized they might not land squarely in Harold's back yard. He began looking intently at the scope.

"What's this kidney-bean shape?"

Harold squinted. "Think that's Australia. Now we're getting somewhere."

"But it belongs down here."

"We're coming up on it the other way."

"Can't we get closer to home than that?"

"I'll not be too particular where it is, just so it's land. The Earth is mostly covered with water."

Harold began turning the knobs and muttering. "Let me see now ... gotta miss Mount Everest...." At last, he turned off the scope. "It's clear gone. I'm taking her down slow. Will you look outside, Orville?"

Orville gulped. But Harold said it was the only way, so he squeezed into the other compartment. There were now about six of the little circles going back and across inside of him. He stood a little to one side and struck the lever of the outer door sharply with the palm of his hand. The door gave a faint "swoosh" and was open about an inch. His ears crackled and there was a dull whispering in his head like the sound in a sea-shell.

He put his face to the door, but saw nothing except the blue sky.

"You sure we came to the right place?" he asked worriedly.

"Positive ... almost," Harold called back. "Are we over land or water?"

Orville looked up. There was a brown, black and white landscape. Trees hung down like icicles around a frozen lake.

"There's land, but it's upside down."

"Just a minute." Harold did something and the trees and land swirled around until they were underneath.

Not far away, as they came down gently, Orville saw a building with people outside. Or he thought they were people. Harold set the ship down on its side in the snow and Orville stepped out. Then Harold was out beside him, slapping him on the shoulder.

"Well, old buddy-buddy! How about that?"

"Yeah." Orville spoke with less enthusiasm. "How about that?"

He proposed that they get in and ride back to civilization, but Harold said there wasn't enough power left and it couldn't be done. They started walking toward the house Orville had seen.

Halfway there, they met four men wearing gray overcoats and furry hats. One carried a rifle, and

as Harold ran shouting up to him, the man lifted the rifle and struck Harold across the head, knocking him into the snow and breaking the other lens of his glasses. For a while, Orville wondered if it was the right planet after all. But, he decided, the men were Russian soldiers somewhere in Siberia.

Since the men were more interested in looting the ship than guarding the prisoners, it was not hard to slip away and get to a railroad that ran east and west. Even Harold knew which direction to take. Their journey out of Siberia, through Korea and Japan to San Francisco, though more difficult than their trip to the Moon, was not very interesting. Once, on a freighter in mid-Pacific, Harold tried to convince a fellow deckhand that they were on their way back from the Moon. He agreed not to talk of it again.

"Looks like Rosie's still gone," Harold said as they slunk up the alley behind Harold's shed. All the leaves had fallen and the place looked forlorn without the spaceship poking up through the roof.

"Wonder what they thought," Orville said, "when the ship disappeared, and us with it?"

"Nothing, I expect."

"If we'd disappeared with a couple of blondes now, the whole world would know about it."

They parted. The back door was locked. As Orville went around the house, he heard the TV going. Polly sat in the turquoise armchair, sewing on a dress. She put down the sewing and folded her arms.

The oration lasted five minutes. He could still hear her upstairs through the noise of the shower.

Then, after a visit to the barber's, he went to face old Haverstrom. This lecture was not quite as long, and through it the boss had a trace of a leer, and a certain respect, though he let Orville know these disappearances should not become a habit.

Harold did not do so well. His old job was gone and he was a whole week getting another. Rosie did not come back for still another week.

It was hard for Orville to believe that a moonstruck fellow like Harold could change his ways, but that was what happened. It was as though that one wild trip had satisfied something inside Harold, for he never fooled with things like that again. He even joined church.

As for Orville: some evenings, when he reads of artificial satellites or of trips to the Moon, he feels a sharp rise in blood pressure and he breathes fast. But a glance across the room at Polly in her turquoise chair sewing is enough to make him swallow and squirm back and keep his mouth shut.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FIRST MAN ***

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