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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MOON GLOW ***



MOON GLOW

By G. L. VANDENBURG

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That first trip to the moon has been the subject of many stories. Mr. Vandenburg has come up with as novel a twist as we've ever read.

And it could happen.

The Ajax XX was the first American space craft to make a successful landing on the moon. She had orbited the Earth's natural satellite for a day and a half before making history. The reason for orbiting was important. The Russians had been boasting for a number of years that they would be first. Captain Junius Robb, U.S.A.F., had orders to investigate before and after landing.

The moon's dark side was explored, due to the unknown hazards involved, during the orbiting process. More thorough investigation was possible on the moon's familiar side. The results seemed to be incontrovertible. Captain Junius Robb and his crew of four were the first humans to tread the ashes of the long dead heavenly body. The Russians, for all their boasts, had never come near the place.

The Ajax XX stood tall and gaunt and mighty, framed against the forbidding blackness of space. Captain Robb had maneuvered her down to the middle of an immense crater, which the crew came to nickname "the coliseum without seats."

Robb had orders not to leave the ship. Consequently, the crew of four scrupulously chosen, well-integrated men split into two groups of two. For three days they labored at gathering specimens, conducting countless tests and piling up as much data as time and weight would allow. Captain Robb kept them well reminded of the weight problem attached to the return trip.

Near the end of the third day Captain Robb contacted his far flung crew members over helmet intercom. He ordered them back to the Ajax XX for a briefing session.

Soon the men entered the ship. They were hot, uncomfortable and exhausted. Once back on Earth they could testify that there was nothing romantic about a thirty-five-pound pressure suit.

Hamston, the rocket expert, summed it up: "With that damn bulb over his skull a man is helpless to remove a single bead of perspiration. He could easily develop into a raving maniac."

Robb held his meeting in the control room. "You have eight hours to finish your work, gentlemen. We're blasting off at 0900."

"I beg your pardon, Captain," said Kingsley, the young man in charge of radio operation, "but what about Washington? They haven't made contact yet and I thought—"

"I talked with Washington an hour ago!"

A modest cheer of approval went up from the crew members.

"Well, why didn't you say so before!" said Anderson, the first officer.

Robb explained. "It seems *their* equipment has been haywire for two days, they haven't been able to get through."

"How do you like that!" cracked Farnsworth, the astrogator. "We're two hundred and forty thousand miles off the Earth and our equipment works fine. They have all the comforts of Earth down at headquarters and they can't repair radio transmission for two days!"

The men laughed.

"Gentlemen," Robb continued, "every radio and TV network in the country was hooked up to the chief's office in Washington. I not only talked to General Lovett, I spoke to the whole damn country."

The men could not contain their excitement. The captain received a verbal pelting of stored-up questions.

"Did you get word to my family, Captain?" asked Kingsley.

"I hope you told them we're physically sound, Captain," said Farnsworth. "I have a fiancée that'll never forgive me if anything happens to me—"

"What's the reaction like around the country—"

"Have the Russians had anything to say yet—"

"Ha! I'll bet they're sore as hell—"

"Do you think the army would mind if I hand in my resignation?" Kingsley's remark brought vigorous applause from the others.

Captain Robb held up his hand for silence. "Hold on! Hold on! First of all, General Lovett has personally contacted relatives and told them we're all physically and mentally sound. Secondly, you'd better get set to receive the biggest damn welcome in history. The general says half the nation has invaded Florida for the occasion."

"Tell them we're not coming back," snapped Kingsley, "until the Florida Tourist Bureau gives us a cut."

"Kingsley, the President has declared a national holiday. We'll all be able to write our own ticket."

"Yes," Anderson put in, "to hell with the Florida Tourist Bureau!"

Captain Robb said, "We'll be so sick of parades we'll wish we'd stayed in this God forsaken place."

"Not me," boasted Farnsworth. "I'm ready for a parade in my honor any old time. The sooner the

better."

"Oh, and about the Russians," said Captain Robb, smiling. "There's been nothing but a steady stream of 'no comment' out of the Kremlin since we landed here."

"Right now," said Hamston, "it's probably high noon for every scientist behind the iron curtain."

"I wonder how they plan to talk their way out of this one?" asked Farnsworth.

"Gentlemen, I'd like to go on talking about the welcome we're going to receive, but I think we'd better take first things first. Before there can be a welcome we have to get back. And we still have work to do before we start."

"What about souvenirs, Captain?" asked Farnsworth.

Robb pursed his lips thoughtfully, "Yes, I guess there is a matter of souvenirs, isn't there."

The others detected a note of disturbance in the way the captain spoke.

Kingsley asked, "Is anything wrong, Captain?"

Robb laughed with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. "Nothing is wrong, Kingsley. The fact is we've taken on enough additional weight here to give us some concern on the return trip." He paused to study the faces of his men. They were disappointed. "But," he added emphatically, "I seem to remember promising something about souvenirs—and I guess a man can't travel five hundred thousand miles without something to show for it. I'll get together with Hamston and work out something. But remember that weight problem. First trouble we encounter on the return trip and a souvenir will be our number one expendable."

The crew was more than happy with Robb's compromise. Robb went into a huddle with Hamston, the rocket expert. When he emerged he informed the crew that each man would be permitted one souvenir which must not exceed two pounds. He allowed them four hours to find whatever they wanted. The men got back into their pressure suits and left the ship.

Captain Junius Robb stood outside the Ajax XX. His eyes scanned the great circular plain that stretched for fifty miles in all directions. The distant jagged rises of the crater's rim resembled the lower half of a gigantic bear trap.

The moon in all its splendor—wasn't there a song that went something like that?—the moon in all its splendor, or lack of it was Robb's mute opinion. The scientists, as usual, were right about the place. To all intents and purposes the moon was as dead as The Roman Empire. True they had found scattered vegetation; there were even two or three volcanoes spewing carbonic acid, but they spewed it as though it were life's last breath.

Nothing more. The fires of the moon had given way to soft lifeless ashes.

Robb was glad he had allowed the men to look for souvenirs. After all, it wasn't a hell of a lot to ask for. A man could cut press clippings and collect medals and frame citations; and probably these things would impress grandchildren someday. But it seemed that nothing would be quite as effective as for a man to be able to produce something tangible, an authentic piece of the moon itself.

Captain Robb had always tried to be a humble man. He recalled an interview held by the three wire services a week before take-off. One of the reporters had asked the obvious question, "Why do you want to go to the moon?" He could have given all of the high sounding, aesthetic reasons, but instead his answer was indirect, given with a modest smile. "To get to the other side, I guess," he had told them.

Like the chicken crossing the road, that was how simple and uncomplicated Robb's life had been. But now he stood, his feet spread apart, beside his mighty ship, a quarter of a million miles away from home. He was the first! And he could not fight back the feeling of pride and accomplishment that welled in him. The word "first" in this instance conjured up names like Balboa, Columbus, Peary, Magellan—and Junius Robb.

The crew members deserved the hero's welcome they would receive. They could have the banquets, parades and honorary degrees. But it was Junius Robb who had commanded the flight. It would be Junius Robb's name for the history books.

He wouldn't be needing any souvenirs.

Kingsley and Anderson were the first to return. They both carried small leather bags. Inside the ship they revealed the contents to Robb. He examined them carefully.

Kingsley had found an uncommonly large patch of brownish vegetation. He had torn away a sizeable chunk and placed it in the bag. "Who knows?" he shrugged. "I might be able to cultivate it."

"Or let it play the lead in a science fiction movie," snapped Anderson.

The first officer's bag contained a piece of one of the smaller craters. It had no immediately discernable value. It was Anderson's intention to polish it up and put some kind of a metal plaque on it.

Four more hours went by and there was no sign of Farnsworth or Hamston. Robb began to worry. He'd never forgive himself if anything happened to either of the two men. He waited another half hour, then ordered Kingsley and Anderson to put on their pressure suits and go look for the two missing crew members.

The search was avoided as Farnsworth entered the ship dragging Hamston behind him.

"What happened!" yelled Robb.

Farnsworth began the job of getting out of his pressure suit. "I don't know. Hamston's sick as a dog. I checked every inch of his suit and couldn't find anything out of order."

Robb bent over the prone rocket expert. Hamston looked up at him with half-opened eyes and an insipid grin on his face. He mumbled something about "a fine state of affairs."

They removed Hamston's suit and placed his limp frame on a bunk. Robb examined him for forty minutes.

He reached the curious conclusion that Hamston was as fit as a fiddle.

The rocket expert fell asleep. Robb and the rest of the crew prepared to blast off.

The Ajax XX thrust itself through space, halfway back to its home planet.

The excitement of her crew members grew with every passing second. In his concern over Hamston, Farnsworth had forgotten about his souvenir. He now opened his bag and displayed it before the others.

"What is it?" asked Kingsley.

"Dust!" was Farnsworth's proud reply.

"What the hell you going to do with dust?"

"Maybe you don't know it but this is going to be the most valuable dust on the face of the Earth! Do you realize what I can get for an ounce of this stuff?"

"What's anybody want to buy dust for?"

"Souvenirs, man, souvenirs!"

Farnsworth asked to see what Kingsley and Anderson had picked up. The two men obliged. For the next hour the three men and Robb discussed the mementoes and their possible uses on Earth.

Then Anderson said, "I sure wouldn't turn down about a gallon of good Kentucky whiskey right now!"

Robb laughed. "We did enough sweating on the way. You wouldn't want to sweat out the trip back on a belly full of booze."

"That may be a better idea than you think it is, Captain."

The four men turned to find Hamston sitting up on his bunk.

"Hamston!" Robb exclaimed, "how do you feel?"

"Terrible."

"What happened to you?" asked Kingsley.

Hamston stared at each man individually. He took a deep breath and his cheeks puffed up as he let it out slowly. "Well, I guess you'd better know now."

Robb frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Farnsworth and I separated after we got about four miles from the ship. I thought I saw something that looked like a cave. I figured I might find something interesting there to take back with me. So I told Farnsworth I'd keep radio contact with him and off I went."

"Did you find a cave?" Robb wanted to know.

"No, it was just a big indentation in the wall of the crater. I threw some light on it and found it to be ten or fifteen feet deep." He paused as though not sure of what to say next.

"So?"

"So that's where I found my souvenir."

"Well, let's see it!" said Anderson.

Hamston opened his leather bag. The object he removed rendered the crew weak in the knees. He said, "We can have that drink, Anderson, but I don't think we'll enjoy it."

He poured them each a shot from a half-filled bottle of Vodka.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MOON GLOW ***

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