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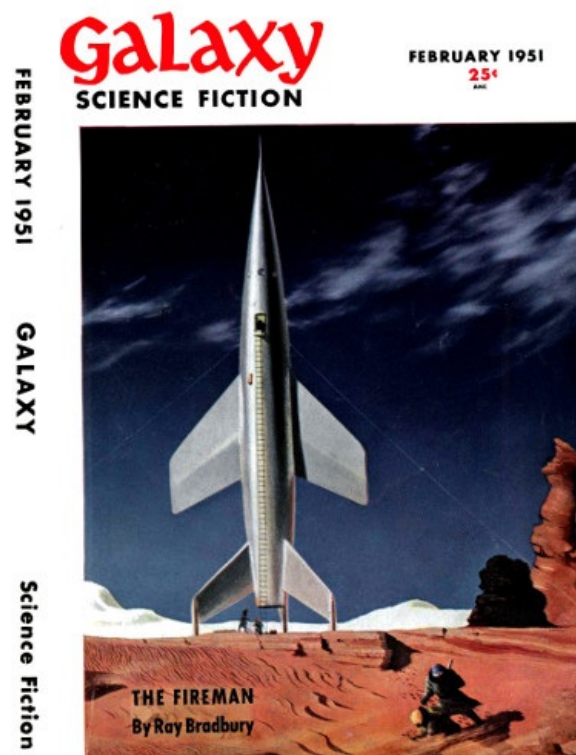
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TWO WEEKS IN AUGUST ***



Two Weeks in August

By FRANK M. ROBINSON

Illustrated by ELIZABETH MacINTYRE

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The humblest events sometimes result from the most grandiose beginnings. You'd never imagine space travel starting this way, for instance!

I suppose there's a guy like McCleary in every office.

Now I'm not a hard man to get along with and it usually takes quite a bit more than overly bright remarks from the office boy to bother me. But try as I might, I could never get along with McCleary. To be as disliked as he was, you have to work at it.

What kind of guy was he? Well, if you came down to the office one day proud as Punch because of something little Johnny or Josephine had said, it was a sure cinch that McCleary would horn in with something his little Louie had spouted off that morning. At any rate, when McCleary got through, you felt like taking Johnny to the doctor to find out what made him subnormal.

Or maybe you happened to buy a new Super-eight that week and were bragging about the mileage, the terrific pickup, and how quickly she responded to the wheel. Leave it to McCleary to give a quick run-down on his own car that would make you feel like selling yours for junk at the nearest scrap heap.

Well, you see what I mean.

But by far the worst of it was when vacation time rolled around. You could forgive a guy for topping you about how brainy his kids are, and you might even find it in your heart to forget the terrific bargain he drove to work in. But vacation time was when he'd really get on your nerves. *You* could pack the wife and kids in Old Reliable and roll out to the lake for your two weeks in August. You might even break the bank and spend the two weeks at a poor man's Sun Valley. But no matter where you went, when you came back, you'd have to sit in silence and listen to McCleary's account of his Vacation in the Adirondacks, or his Tramp in the Canadian Wilds, or maybe even the Old French Quarter.

The trouble was he always had the photographs, the ticket stubs, and the souvenirs to prove it. Where he got the money, I'll never know. Sometimes I'd tell the wife about it and she'd sniff and wonder what kind of shabby house they lived in that they could afford all the other things. I never looked him up myself. Tell you the truth, I was afraid I'd find the McClearys lived on Park Avenue.

Now you look forward to a vacation all year, but particularly during the latter part of July, when, what with the heat and the stuffy office, you begin to feel like a half-done hotdog at a barbecue. I was feeling even worse than usual as I was faced with spending my two weeks in my own backyard, most of my vacation dough having gone to pay the doctor. The only thing I minded was having McCleary find out about it and seeing that phony look of sympathy roll across his fat face while he rambled on about the vacation *he* was going to have.

It was lunch time and we had just finished talking about the latest on television and what was wrong with the Administration and who'd win the pennant when Bob Young brought up the subject of vacations. It turned out he was due for a trip to the Ozarks and Donley was going after wall-eye pike in northern Wisconsin. I could sense McCleary prick up his ears clear across the room.

"How about you, Bill?" Donley asked me. "Got any plans?"

I winked heavily and jerked a thumb warningly toward McCleary, making sure McCleary couldn't see the gesture.

"My vacation is really going to be out of the world this time," I said. "Me and the wife are going to Mars. Dry, you know. Even better than Arizona for her sinus."

Even with the wink they were caught off guard for a minute.

"Mars?" Donley said feebly, edging his chair away. "Yeah, sure. Great place. Never been there myself, though."

Young just gaped, then grinned as he caught on. "I understand it's a wonderful spot," he chipped in.

I casually peeled a hard-boiled egg the wife had packed in my lunch bucket and leaned back in my swivel chair. "It's really swell," I said dreamily, but loud enough so McCleary couldn't help but overhear. "Drifting down the Grand Canal at evening, the sun a faint golden disk behind the crystal towers of Marsport..." I let my voice drift into a long sigh and reached for Donley's sack of grapes.

About this time McCleary had gnawed his way through a big pastrami sandwich and waddled over. He stood there expectantly, but we carefully ignored him.

"Always wanted to go myself," Donley said in the same tone of voice he would have used to say he'd like to go to California someday. "Pretty expensive, though, isn't it?"

"Expensive?" I raised a studiously surprised eyebrow. "Oh, I suppose a little, but it's worth it. The wife and I got a roomette on the *Princess of Mars* for \$139.50. That's one way, of course."

"Mars!" Young sighed wistfully.

There was a moment of silence, with all three of us paying silent tribute to the ultimate in vacations. McCleary slowly masticated a leaf of lettuce, his initial look of suspicion giving way to half-belief.

"Let's hear some more about it," Young said enthusiastically, suddenly recovering from his reverie.

"Oh, there isn't much more," I said indifferently. "We plan to stay at the Redsands hotel in Marsport—American plan. Take in Marsport, with maybe a side trip to Crystallite. If we have time we might even take a waterway cruise to the North Pole...."

I broke off and dug Donley in the ribs.

"Man, you never fished until you have a Martian flying fish at the end of the line!" I grabbed a ruler off the desk and began using it as an imaginary rod and reel. "Talk about fight ... oh, sorry, Mac." My ruler had amputated part of a floppy lettuce leaf that hung from McCleary's sandwich.

I settled down in my chair again and started paying attention to my lunch. "Nothing like it," I added between mouthfuls of liverwurst.

"How about entertainment?" Young winked slyly.

"Well, you know—the wife will be along," I said. "But some of the places near the Grand Canal—and those Martian Mist Maidens! Brother, if I was unattached...."

"There ain't any life on Mars," McCleary said, suspicious again.

All three of us looked at him in shocked silence.

"He says there's no life on Mars!" Donley repeated.

"You ever been there, McCleary?" I asked sarcastically.

"No, but just the same...."

"All right," I cut in, "then you don't know whether there is or isn't. So kindly reserve your opinion until you know a little about the subject under discussion."

I turned back to Donley and Young.

"Really a wonderful place for your health. Dry, thin air, nice and cool at night. And beautiful! From Marsport you can see low-slung mountains in the distance, dunes of soft, red sand stretching out to them. If I were you, Bob, I'd forget all about the Ozarks and sign up on the rocket."

"There ain't any rockets going to Mars," McCleary said obstinately.

"Isn't," I corrected. "I mean, there is. Besides, McCleary, just because you never heard of something doesn't mean it doesn't exist."

"The government's still working on V-2," McCleary said flatly. "They haven't even reached the moon yet."

I sighed softly, acting disgusted at having to deal with somebody as stupid as McCleary. "Mac, that's the government and besides they're dealing with military rockets. And did you ever hear of the government perfecting something before private industry? Who perfected the telephone, the radio, television? The government? No, private industry, of course! Private industry has always been ahead of the government on everything, including rockets. Get on the stick, Mac."

McCleary started in on his lettuce leaf again, looking very shrewd.

"How come I never heard of it before now?" he asked, springing the clincher argument.

"Look, Mac, this is relatively new. The company's just starting, can't afford to take full-page ads and that sort of thing. Just give 'em time, that's all. Why, a couple of years from now you'll be spending your vacation on Venus or Jupiter or some place like that. From now on California and the Bahamas will be strictly old hat."

McCleary looked half-believing.

"Where'd you get your tickets?"

I waved vaguely in the direction of downtown. "Oh, there must be at least a couple of agencies downtown. Might even be able to find them in the phone book. Look under *Interplanetary Rocket Lines* or something like that. You might have a little difficulty, of course. Like I say, they're not too well advertised."

McCleary was about to say something more, but then the one o'clock bell rang and we went back to the office grind.

Well, McCleary didn't say anything more about it the next day, even though we'd throw in a chance comment about Mars every now and then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but Mac didn't rise to the bait. We gradually forgot about it.

The next couple of weeks came and went and then my two weeks in August. Like I said before, my vacation dough had gone to pay the doctor, so I stayed at home and watered the begonias.

The Monday morning after vacation, we were all back in the office, if anything looking more fagged than we had when we left. When lunch time rolled around, Donley and Young and I piled our lunches on Donley's desk—his desk was near a window on the north side of the building so we could get the breeze—and talked about what we had done during vacation.

McCleary ambled up and like it usually does after McCleary comes around, the conversation just naturally died down. After a two minute silence I finally took the hook.

"Okay, Mac," I said, "I know you're just dying to tell us. Where did you go?"

He almost looked surprised. "To Mars," he said, like he might have said Aunt Minnie's.

The three of us looked blank for a minute and then we caught on. It took us a while to recover from laughing and my sides were still aching when I saw McCleary's face. It definitely had a hurt look on it.

"You don't think I did," he accused us.

"Oh, come off it, McCleary," I said crossly. "A gag's a gag, but it can be carried too far. Where'd you go? California, Oregon, some place like that?"

"I said I went to Mars," McCleary repeated hotly, "and I can prove it!"

"Sure," I said. "Like I can prove the world's flat and it's supported by four elephants standing on a turtle's back like the old Greeks...."

I cut off. McCleary had thrown a couple of pasteboards on the desk and I picked them up. The printing on it was like you see on a Pullman ticket. It said something about a roomette, first-class passage on the *Martian Prince*, for \$154.75, and there was even a place where they had the tax figured. In two blanks at the top of the ticket, they had it filled out to *E. C. McCleary and wife*. The bottom half was torn off, just like they do with train tickets.



"Very clever," I said, "but you shouldn't have gone to all that trouble to have these printed up."

McCleary scowled and dropped a little bunch of kodachrome slides on the desk. I took one and held it up to the light. It showed Mac and his wife mounted on something that looked like a cross between a camel and a zebra. They were at the top of a sand dune and in the distance you could see the towers of a city. The funny thing was the towers looked a little—but not much—like minarets and the sand dunes were colored a beautiful pink.

I passed it on to Donley and Young and started leafing through the rest. They were beautiful slides. McCleary and spouse in front of various structures in a delicately tinted marble and

crystal city. McCleary in a pink-and-black boat on a canal that looked as wide as the Mississippi. McCleary standing on a strangely carved sandstone parapet, admiring a sunset caused by a sun looking half as big as ours. And everywhere were the dunes of pink sand.

"Pictures can be faked, Mac," I said.

He looked hurt and got some things out of his desk—a sateen pillow with scenes like those on his snapshots, an urn filled with pink sand, a tiny boat like a gondola, only different, a letter opener made out of peculiar bubbly pink glass. They were all stamped "Souvenir of Mars" and that kind of junk you don't have made up for a gag. I know mass-produced articles when I see them.

"We couldn't afford the first-class tour," McCleary said expansively, "but I figure we can cover that next year." He turned to me puzzledly. "I asked the passenger agent about the *Princess of Mars* and he said he had never heard of the ship. And it's Mars City, not Marsport. Couldn't understand how you made a mistake."

"It was easy," I said weakly. I pointed to the pasteboard ducats. "Where'd you get these, Mac?"

He waved generously in the direction of downtown. "Like you said, there's a couple of agencies downtown...."

You know, sometimes I think we misjudged McCleary. It takes a while to get to know a guy like Mac. Maybe his Louie *is* brighter than Johnny, and maybe his chugmobile *is* something terrific.

For the last few years, all on account of Mac, my two weeks in August have really been well spent Beautiful! Why, from Mars City you can see low-slung mountains in the distance and dunes of soft, red sand stretching out to them. And the sunsets when you're standing on the parapets of that delicate crystal city.... And, man, fishing in the Grand Canal....

How do you get to Mars? There's probably a couple of agencies in your own town. You can look them up in your phone book under "Vacation at the Planets of Pleasure" or something like that. They might be a little difficult to find, though.

You see, they're not very well advertised yet.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TWO WEEKS IN AUGUST ***

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