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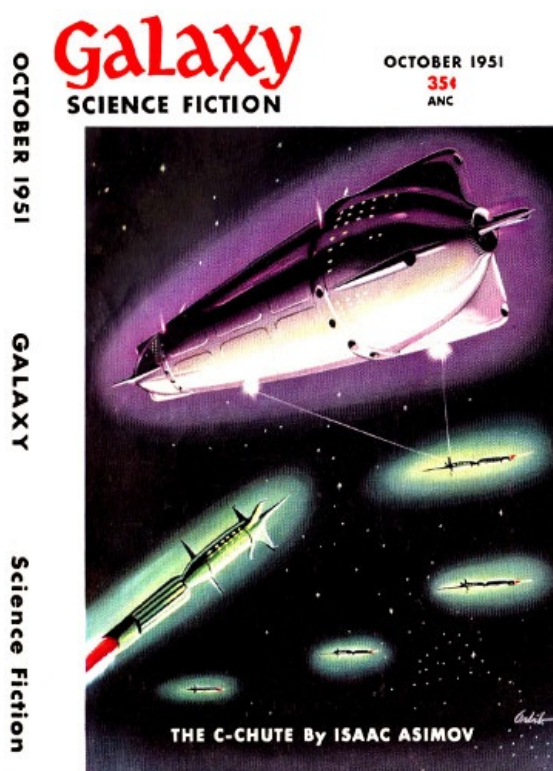
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AMBITION ***



AMBITION

By WILLIAM L. BADE

Illustrated by L. WOROMAY

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**To the men of the future, the scientific
goals of today were as incomprehensible
as the ancient quest for the Holy Grail!**

There was a thump. Maitland stirred, came half awake, and opened his eyes. The room was dark except where a broad shaft of moonlight from the open window fell on the foot of his bed. Outside, the residential section of the Reservation slept silently under the pale illumination of the full Moon. He guessed sleepily that it was about three o'clock.

What had he heard? He had a definite impression that the sound had come from within the room. It had sounded like someone stumbling into a chair, or—

Something moved in the darkness on the other side of the room. Maitland started to sit up and it was as though a thousand volts had shorted his brain....

This time, he awoke more normally. He opened his eyes, looked through the window at a section of azure sky, listened to the singing of birds somewhere outside. A beautiful day. In the middle of the process of stretching his rested muscles, arms extended back, legs tensed, he froze, looking up—for the first time really seeing the ceiling. He turned his head, then rolled off the bed, wide awake.

This wasn't his room!

The lawn outside wasn't part of the Reservation! Where the labs and the shops should have been, there was deep prairie grass, then a green ocean pushed into waves by the breeze stretching to the horizon. This wasn't the California desert! Down the hill, where the liquid oxygen plant ought to have been, a river wound across the scene, almost hidden beneath its leafy roof of huge ancient trees.

Shock contracted Maitland's diaphragm and spread through his body. His breathing quickened. *Now* he remembered what had happened during the night, the sound in the darkness, the dimly seen figure, and then—what? Blackout....

Where was he? Who had brought him here? For what purpose?

He thought he knew the answer to the last of those questions. As a member of the original atomic reaction-motor team, he possessed information that other military powers would very much like to obtain. It was absolutely incredible that anyone had managed to abduct him from the heavily guarded confines of the Reservation, yet someone had done it. How?

He pivoted to inspect the room. Even before his eyes could take in the details, he had the impression that there was something wrong about it. To begin with, the style was unfamiliar. There were no straight lines or sharp corners anywhere. The walls were paneled in featureless blue plastic and the doors were smooth surfaces of metal, half ellipses, without knobs. The flowing lines of the chair and table, built apparently from an aluminum alloy, somehow gave the impression of arrested motion. Even after allowances were made for the outlandish design, something about the room still was not right.

His eyes returned to the doors, and he moved over to study the nearer one. As he had noticed, there was no knob, but at the right of this one, at about waist level, a push-button projected out of the wall. He pressed it; the door slid aside and disappeared. Maitland glanced in at the disclosed bathroom, then went over to look at the other door.

There was no button beside this one, nor any other visible means of causing it to open.

Baffled, he turned again and looked at the large open window—and realized what it was that had made the room seem so queer.

It did not look like a jail cell. There were no bars....

Striding across the room, he lunged forward to peer out and violently banged his forehead. He staggered back, grimacing with pain, then reached forward cautious fingers and discovered a hard sheet of stuff so transparent that he had not even suspected its presence. Not glass! Glass was never this clear or strong. A plastic, no doubt, but one he hadn't heard of. Security sometimes had disadvantages.

He looked out at the peaceful vista of river and prairie. The character of the sunlight seemed to indicate that it was afternoon. He became aware that he was hungry.

Where the devil could this place be? And—muscles tightened about his empty stomach—what was in store for him here?

He stood trembling, acutely conscious that he was afraid and helpless, until a flicker of motion at the bottom of the hill near the river drew his attention. Pressing his nose against the window, he strained his eyes to see what it was.

A man and a woman were coming toward him up the hill. Evidently they had been swimming, for each had a towel; the man's was hung around his neck, and the woman was still drying her bobbed black hair.

Maitland speculated on the possibility that this might be Sweden; he didn't know of any other country where public bathing at this time of year was customary. However, that prairie certainly didn't look Scandinavian....

As they came closer, he saw that both of them had dark uniform suntans and showed striking muscular development, like persons who had trained for years with weights. They vanished below his field of view, presumably into the building.

He sat down on the edge of the cot and glared helplessly at the floor.

About half an hour later, the door he couldn't open slid aside into the wall. The man Maitland had seen outside, now clad in gray trunks and sandals, stood across the threshold looking in at him. Maitland stood up and stared back, conscious suddenly that in his rumpled pajamas he made an unimpressive figure.

The fellow looked about forty-five. The first details Maitland noticed were the forehead, which was quite broad, and the calm, clear eyes. The dark hair, white at the temples, was combed back, still damp from swimming. Below, there was a wide mouth and a firm, rounded chin.

This man was intelligent, Maitland decided, and extremely sure of himself.

Somehow, the face didn't go with the rest of him. The man had the head of a thinker, the body of a trained athlete—an unusual combination.

Impassively, the man said, "My name is Swarts. You want to know where you are. I am not going to tell you." He had an accent, European, but otherwise unidentifiable. Possibly German. Maitland opened his mouth to protest, but Swarts went on, "However, you're free to do all the guessing you want." Still there was no suggestion of a smile.

"Now, these are the rules. You'll be here for about a week. You'll have three meals a day, served in this room. You will not be allowed to leave it except when accompanied by myself. You will not be harmed in any way, provided you cooperate. And you can forget the silly idea that we want your childish secrets about rocket motors." Maitland's heart jumped. "My reason for bringing you here is altogether different. I want to give you some psychological tests...."

"Are you crazy?" Maitland asked quietly. "Do you realize that at this moment one of the greatest hunts in history must be going on? I'll admit I'm baffled as to where we are and how you got me here—but it seems to me that you could have found someone less conspicuous to give your tests to."

Briefly, then, Swarts did smile. "They won't find you," he said. "Now, come with me."

After that outlandish cell, Swarts' laboratory looked rather commonplace. There was something like a surgical cot in the center, and a bench along one wall supported several electronics cabinets. A couple of them had cathode ray tube screens, and they all presented a normal complement of meters, pilot lights, and switches. Cables from them ran across the ceiling and came to a focus above the high flat cot in the center of the room.

"Lie down," Swarts said. When Maitland hesitated, Swarts added, "Understand one thing—the more you cooperate, the easier things will be for you. If necessary, I will use coercion. I can get all my results against your will, if I must. I would prefer not to. Please don't make me."

"What's the idea?" Maitland asked. "What is all this?"

Swarts hesitated, though not, Maitland astonishedly felt, to evade an answer, but to find the proper words. "You can think of it as a lie detector. These instruments will record your reactions to the tests I give you. That is as much as you need to know. Now lie down."

Maitland stood there for a moment, deliberately relaxing his tensed muscles. "Make me."

If Swarts was irritated, he didn't show it. "That was the first test," he said. "Let me put it another way. I would appreciate it a lot if you'd lie down on this cot. I would like to test my apparatus."

Maitland shook his head stubbornly.

"I see," Swarts said. "You want to find out what you're up against."

He moved so fast that Maitland couldn't block the blow. It was to the solar plexus, just hard enough to double him up, fighting for breath. He felt an arm under his back, another behind his knees. Then he was on the cot. When he was able to breathe again, there were straps across his chest, hips, knees, ankles, and arms, and Swarts was tightening a clamp that held his head immovable.



Presently, a number of tiny electrodes were adhering to his temples and to other portions of his body, and a minute microphone was clinging to the skin over his heart. These devices terminated in cables that hung from the ceiling. A sphygmomanometer sleeve was wrapped tightly around his left upper arm, its rubber tube trailing to a small black box clamped to the frame of the cot. Another cable left the box and joined the others.

So—Maitland thought—Swarts could record changes in his skin potential, heartbeat, and blood pressure: the involuntary responses of the body to stimuli.

The question was, what were the stimuli to be?

"Your name," said Swarts, "is Robert Lee Maitland. You are thirty-four years old. You are an engineer, specialty heat transfer, particularly as applied to rocket motors.... No, Mr. Maitland, I'm not going to question you about your work; just forget about it. Your home town is Madison, Wisconsin...."

"You seem to know everything about me," Maitland said defiantly, looking up into the hanging forest of cabling. "Why this recital?"

"I do not know everything about you—yet. And I'm testing the equipment, calibrating it to your reactions." He went on, "Your favorite recreations are chess and reading what you term science fiction. Maitland, *how would you like to go to the Moon?*"

Something eager leaped in Maitland's breast at the abrupt question, and he tried to turn his head. Then he forced himself to relax. "What do you mean?"

Swarts was chuckling. "I really hit a semantic push-button there, didn't I? Maitland, I brought you here because you're a man who wants to go to the Moon. I'm interested in finding out *why*."

In the evening a girl brought Maitland his meal. As the door slid aside, he automatically stood up, and they stared at each other for several seconds.

She had the high cheekbones and almond eyes of an Oriental, skin that glowed like gold in the evening light, yet thick coiled braids of blonde hair that glittered like polished brass. Shorts and a sleeveless blouse of some thick, reddish, metallic-looking fabric clung to her body, and over that she was wearing a light, ankle-length cloak of what seemed to be white wool.

She was looking at him with palpable curiosity and something like expectancy. Maitland sighed and said, "Hello," then glanced down self-consciously at his wrinkled green pajamas.



She smiled, put the tray of food on the table, and swept out, her cloak billowing behind her. Maitland remained standing, staring at the closed door for a minute after she was gone.

Later, when he had finished the steak and corn on the cob and shredded carrots, and a feeling of warm well-being was diffusing from his stomach to his extremities, he sat down on the bed to watch the sunset and to think.

There were three questions for which he required answers before he could formulate any plan or policy.

Where was he?

Who was Swarts?

What was the purpose of the "tests" he was being given?

It was possible, of course, that this was all an elaborate scheme for getting military secrets, despite Swarts' protestations to the contrary. Maitland frowned. This place certainly didn't have the appearance of a military establishment, and so far there had been nothing to suggest the kind of interrogation to be expected from foreign intelligence officers.

It might be better to tackle the first question first. He looked at the Sun, a red spheroid already half below the horizon, and tried to think of a region that had this kind of terrain. That prairie out there was unique. Almost anywhere in the world, land like that would be cultivated, not allowed to go to grass.

This might be somewhere in Africa....

He shook his head, puzzled. The Sun disappeared and its blood-hued glow began to fade from the sky. Maitland sat there, trying to get hold of the problem from an angle where it wouldn't just slip away. After a while the western sky became a screen of clear luminous blue, a backdrop for a pure white brilliant star. As always at that sight, Maitland felt his worry drain away, leaving an almost mystical sense of peace and an undefinable longing.

Venus, the most beautiful of the planets.

Maitland kept track of them all in their majestic paths through the constellations, but Venus was his favorite. Time and time again he had watched its steady climb higher and higher in the western sky, its transient rule there as evening star, its progression toward the horizon, and loved it equally in its *alter ego* of morning star. Venus was an old friend. An old friend....

Something icy settled on the back of his neck, ran down his spine, and diffused into his body. He stared at the planet unbelievably, fists clenched, forgetting to breathe.

Last night Venus hadn't been there.

Venus was a morning star just now....

Just now!

He realized the truth in that moment.

Later, when that jewel of a planet had set and the stars were out, he lay on the bed, still warm with excitement and relief. He didn't have to worry any more about military secrets, or who Swarts was. Those questions were irrelevant now. And now he could accept the psychological tests at their face value; most likely, they were what they purported to be.

Only one question of importance remained:

What year was this?

He grimaced in the darkness, an involuntary muscular expression of jubilation and excitement. The *future*! Here was the opportunity for the greatest adventure imaginable to 20th Century man.

Somewhere, out there under the stars, there must be grand glittering cities and busy spaceports, roaring gateways to the planets. Somewhere, out there in the night, there must be men who had walked beside the Martian canals and pierced the shining cloud mantle of Venus—somewhere, perhaps, men who had visited the distant luring stars and returned. Surely, a civilization that had developed time travel could reach the stars!

And *he* had a chance to become a part of all that! He could spend his life among the planets, a citizen of deep space, a voyager of the challenging spaceways between the solar worlds.

"I'm adaptable," he told himself gleefully. "I can learn fast. There'll be a job for me out there...."

If—

Suddenly sobered, he rolled over and put his feet on the floor, sat in the darkness thinking. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would have to find a way of breaking down Swarts' reticence. He would have to make the man realize that secrecy wasn't necessary in this case. And if Swarts still wouldn't talk, he would have to find a way of forcing the issue. The fellow had said that he didn't need cooperation to get his results, but—

After a while Maitland smiled to himself and went back to bed.

He woke in the morning with someone gently shaking his shoulder. He rolled over and looked up at the girl who had brought him his meal the evening before. There was a tray on the table and he sniffed the smell of bacon. The girl smiled at him. She was dressed as before, except that she had discarded the white cloak.

As he swung his legs to the floor, she started toward the door, carrying the tray with the dirty dishes from yesterday. He stopped her with the word, "Miss!"

She turned, and he thought there was something eager in her face.

"Miss, do you speak my language?"

"Yes," hesitantly. She lingered too long on the hiss of the last consonant.

"Miss," he asked, watching her face intently, "what year is this?"

Startlingly, she laughed, a mellow peal of mirth that had nothing forced about it. She turned toward the door again and said over her shoulder, "You will have to ask Swarts about that. I cannot tell you."

"Wait! You mean you don't know?"

She shook her head. "I cannot tell you."

"All right; we'll let it go at that."

She grinned at him again as the door slid shut.

Swarts came half an hour later, and Maitland began his planned offensive.

"What year is this?"

Swarts' steely eyes locked with his. "You know what the date is," he stated.

"No, I don't. Not since yesterday."

"Come on," Swarts said patiently, "let's get going. We have a lot to get through this morning."

"I *know* this isn't 1950. It's probably not even the 20th Century. Venus was a morning star before you brought me here. Now it's an evening star."

"Never mind that. Come."

Wordlessly, Maitland climbed to his feet, preceded Swarts to the laboratory, lay down and allowed him to fasten the straps and attach the instruments, making no resistance at all. When Swarts started saying a list of words—doubtlessly some sort of semantic reaction test—Maitland began the job of integrating " $\csc^3x \, dx$ " in his head. It was a calculation which required great concentration and frequent tracing back of steps. After several minutes, he noticed that Swarts had stopped calling words. He opened his eyes to find the other man standing over him, looking somewhat exasperated and a little baffled.

"What year is this?" Maitland asked in a conversational tone.

"We'll try another series of tests."

It took Swarts nearly twenty minutes to set up the new apparatus. He lowered a bulky affair with two cylindrical tubes like the twin stacks of a binocular microscope over Maitland's head, so that the lenses at the ends of the tubes were about half an inch from the engineer's eyes. He attached tiny clamps to Maitland's eyelashes.

"These will keep you from holding your eyes shut," he said. "You can blink, but the springs are too strong for you to hold your eyelids down against the tension."

He inserted button earphones into Maitland's ears—

And then the show began.

He was looking at a door in a partly darkened room, and there were footsteps outside, a peremptory knocking. The door flew open, and outlined against the light of the hall, he saw a man with a twelve-gauge shotgun. The man shouted, "Now I've got you, you wife-stealer!" He swung the shotgun around and pulled the trigger. There was a terrible blast of sound and the flash of smokeless powder—then blackness.

With a deliberate effort, Maitland unclenched his fists and tried to slow his breathing. Some kind of emotional reaction test—what was the countermove? He closed his eyes, but shortly the muscles around them declared excruciatingly that they couldn't keep that up.

Now he was looking at a girl. She....

Maitland gritted his teeth and fought to use his brain; then he had it.

He thought of a fat slob of a bully who had beaten him up one day after school. He remembered a talk he had heard by a politician who had all the intelligent social responsibility of a rogue gorilla, but no more. He brooded over the damnable stupidity and short-sightedness of Swarts in standing by his silly rules and not telling him about this new world.

Within a minute, he was in an ungovernable rage. His muscles tightened against the restraining straps. He panted, sweat came out on his forehead, and he began to curse. Swarts! How he hated....

The scene was suddenly a flock of sheep spread over a green hillside. There was blood hammering in Maitland's temples. His face felt hot and swollen and he writhed against the restraint of the straps.

The scene disappeared, the lenses of the projector retreated from his eyes and Swarts was standing over him, white-lipped. Maitland swore at him for a few seconds, then relaxed and smiled weakly. His head was starting to ache from the effort of blinking.

"What year is this?" he asked.

"All right," Swarts said. "A.D. 2634."

Maitland's smile became a grin.

"I really haven't the time to waste talking irrelevancies," Swarts said a while later. "Honestly. Maitland, I'm working against a time limit. If you'll cooperate, I'll tell Ching to answer your questions."

"Ching?"

"Ingrid Ching is the girl who has been bringing you your meals."

Maitland considered a moment, then nodded. Swarts lowered the projector to his eyes again, and this time the engineer did not resist.

That evening, he could hardly wait for her to come. Too excited to sit and watch the sunset, he paced interminably about the room, sometimes whistling nervously, snapping his fingers, sitting down and jittering one leg. After a while he noticed that he was whistling the same theme over and over: a minute's thought identified it as that exuberant mounting phrase which recurs in the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

He forgot about it and went on whistling. He was picturing himself aboard a ship dropping in toward Mars, making planetfall at Syrtis Major; he was seeing visions of Venus and the awesome beauty of Saturn. In his mind, he circled the Moon, and viewed the Earth as a huge bright globe against the constellations....

Finally the door slid aside and she appeared, carrying the usual tray of food. She smiled at him, making dimples in her golden skin and revealing a perfect set of teeth, and put the tray on the table.

"I think you are wonderful," she laughed. "You get everything you want, even from Swarts, and I have not been able to get even a little of what I want from him. I want to travel in time, go back to your 20th Century. And I wanted to talk with you, and he would not let me." She laughed again, hands on her rounded hips. "I have never seen him so irritated as he was this noon."

Maitland urged her into the chair and sat down on the edge of the bed. Eagerly he asked, "Why the devil do you want to go to the 20th Century? Believe me, I've been there, and what I've seen

of this world looks a lot better."

She shrugged. "Swarts says that I want to go back to the Dark Age of Technology because I have not adapted well to modern culture. Myself, I think I have just a romantic nature. Far times and places look more exciting...."

"How do you mean—" Maitland wrinkled his brow—"adapt to modern culture? Don't tell me *you're* from another time!"

"Oh, no! But my home is Aresund, a little fishing village at the head of a fiord in what you would call Norway. So far north, we are much behind the times. We live in the old way, from the sea, speak the old tongue."

He looked at her golden features, such a felicitous blend of Oriental and European characteristics, and hesitantly asked, "Maybe I shouldn't.... This is a little personal, but ... you don't look altogether like the Norwegians of my time."

His fear that she would be offended proved to be completely unjustified. She merely laughed and said, "There has been much history since 1950. Five hundred years ago, Europe was overrun by Pan-Orientals. Today you could not find anywhere a 'pure' European or Asiatic." She giggled. "Swarts' ancestors from your time must be cursing in their graves. His family is Afrikander all the way back, but one of his great-grandfathers was pure-blooded Bantu. His full name is Lassisi Swarts."

Maitland wrinkled his brow. "Afrikander?"

"The South Africans." Something strange came into her eyes. It might have been awe, or even hatred; he could not tell. "The Pan-Orientals eventually conquered all the world, except for North America—the last remnant of the American World Empire—and southern Africa. The Afrikanders had been partly isolated for several centuries then, and they had developed technology while the rest of the world lost it. They had a tradition of white supremacy, and in addition they were terrified of being encircled." She sighed. "They ruled the next world empire and it was founded on the slaughter of one and a half billion human beings. That went into the history books as the War of Annihilation."

"So many? How?"

"They were clever with machines, the Afrikanders. They made armies of them. Armies of invincible killing-machines, produced in robot factories from robot-mined ores.... Very clever." She gave a little shudder.

"And yet they founded modern civilization," she added. "The grandsons of the technicians who built the Machine Army set up our robot production system, and today no human being has to dirty his hands raising food or manufacturing things. It could never have been done, either, before the population was—reduced to three hundred million."

"Then the Afrikanders are still on top? Still the masters?"

She shook her head. "There are no more Afrikanders."

"Rebellion?"

"No. Intermarriage. Racial blending. There was a psychology of guilt behind it. So huge a crime eventually required a proportionate expiation. Afrikaans is still the world language, but there is only one race now. No more masters or slaves."

They were both silent for a moment, and then she sighed. "Let us not talk about them any more."

"Robot factories and farms," Maitland mused. "What else? What means of transportation? Do you have interstellar flight yet?"

"Inter-what?"

"Have men visited the stars?"

She shook her head, bewildered.

"I always thought that would be a tough problem to crack," he agreed. "But tell me about what men are doing in the Solar System. How is life on Mars and Venus, and how long does it take to get to those places?"

He waited, expectantly silent, but she only looked puzzled. "I don't understand. Mars? What are Mars?"

After several seconds, Maitland swallowed. Something seemed to be the matter with his throat, making it difficult for him to speak. "Surely you have space travel?"

She frowned and shook her head. "What does that mean—space travel?"

He was gripping the edge of the bed now, glaring at her. "A civilization that could discover time travel and build robot factories wouldn't find it hard to send a ship to Mars!"

"A *ship*? Oh, you mean something like a *vliegvlotter*. Why, no, I don't suppose it would be hard.

But why would anyone want to do a thing like that?"

He was on his feet towering over her, fists clenched. She raised her arms as if to shield her face if he should hit her. "Let's get this perfectly clear," he said, more harshly than he realized. "So far as you know, no one has ever visited the planets, and no one wants to. Is that right?"

She nodded apprehensively. "I have never heard of it being done."

He sank down on the bed and put his face in his hands. After a while he looked up and said bitterly, "You're looking at a man who would give his life to get to Mars. I thought I would in my time. I was positive I would when I knew I was in your time. And now I know I never will."

The cot creaked beside him and he felt a soft arm about his shoulders and fingers delicately stroking his brow. Presently he opened his eyes and looked at her. "I just don't understand," he said. "It seemed obvious to me that whenever men were able to reach the planets, they'd do it."

Her pitying eyes were on his face. He hitched himself around so that he was facing her. "I've got to understand. I've got to know *why*. What happened? Why don't men want the planets any more?"

"Honestly," she said, "I did not know they ever had." She hesitated. "Maybe you are asking the wrong question."

He furrowed his brow, bewildered now by her.

"I mean," she explained, "maybe you should ask why people in the 20th Century *did* want to go to worlds men are not suited to inhabit."

Maitland felt his face become hot. "Men can go anywhere, if they want to bad enough."

"But *why*?"

Despite his sudden irrational anger toward her, Maitland tried to stick to logic. "Living space, for one thing. The only permanent solution to the population problem...."

"We have no population problem. A hundred years ago, we realized that the key to social stability is a limited population. Our economic system was built to take care of three hundred million people, and we have held the number at that."

"Birth control," Maitland scoffed. "How do you make it work—secret police?"

"No. Education. Each of us has the right to two children, and we cherish that right so much that we make every effort to see that those two are the best children we could possibly produce...."

She broke off, looking a little self-conscious. "You understand, what I have been saying applies to *most* of the world. In some places like Aresund, things are different. Backward. I still do not feel that I belong here, although the people of the town have accepted me as one of them."

"Even," he said, "granting that you have solved the population problem, there's still the adventure of the thing. Surely, somewhere, there must be men who still feel that.... Ingrid, doesn't it fire something in your blood, the idea of going to Mars—just to go there and see what's there and walk under a new sky and a smaller Sun? Aren't you interested in finding out what the canals are? Or what's under the clouds of Venus? Wouldn't you like to see the rings of Saturn from, a distance of only two hundred thousand miles?" His hands were trembling as he stopped.

She shrugged her shapely shoulders. "Go into the past—yes! But go out there? I still cannot see why."

"Has the spirit of adventure *evaporated* from the human race, or *what*?"

She smiled. "In a room downstairs there is the head of a lion. Swarts killed the beast when he was a young man. He used a spear. And time traveling is the greatest adventure there is. At least, that is the way I feel. Listen, Bob." She laid a hand on his arm. "You grew up in the Age of Technology. Everybody was terribly excited about what could be done with machines—machines to blow up a city all at once, or fly around the world, or take a man to Mars. We have had our fill of—what is the word?—gadgets. Our machines serve us, and so long as they function right, we are satisfied to forget about them."

"Because this is the Age of *Man*. We are terribly interested in what can be done with people. Our scientists, like Swarts, are studying human rather than nuclear reactions. We are much more fascinated by the life and death of cultures than by the expansion or contraction of the Universe. With us, it is the people that are important, not gadgets."

Maitland stared at her, his face blank. His mind had just manufactured a discouraging analogy. His present position was like that of an earnest 12th Century crusader, deposited by some freak of nature into the year 1950, trying to find a way of reanimating the anti-Mohammedan movement. What chance would he have? The unfortunate knight would argue in vain that the atomic bomb offered a means of finally destroying the infidel....

Maitland looked up at the girl, who was regarding him silently with troubled eyes. "I think I'd like to be alone for a while," he said.

In the morning, Maitland was tired, though not particularly depressed. He hadn't slept much, but he had come to a decision. When Ingrid woke him, he gave her a cavalier smile and a cheery "Good morning" and sat down to the eggs and ham she had brought. Then, before she could leave, he asked, "Last night when we were talking about spaceships, you mentioned some kind of vessel or vehicle. What was it?"

She thought. "*Vliegvlotter*? Was that it?"

He nodded emphatically. "Tell me about them."

"Well, they are—cars, you might say, with wheels that go into the body when you take off. They can do, oh, 5,000 miles an hour in the ionosphere, 50 miles up."

"Fifty miles," Maitland mused. "Then they're sealed tight, so the air doesn't leak out?" Ingrid nodded. "How do they work? Rocket drive?"

"No." She plucked at her lower lip. "I do not understand it very well. You could picture something that hooks into a gravity field, and pulls. A long way from the Earth it would not work very well, because the field is so thin there.... I guess I just cannot explain it very well to you."

"That's all I need." Maitland licked his lips and frowned. "On that point, anyway. Another thing—Swarts told me I'd be here for about a week. Is there any set procedure involved in that? Have other persons been brought to this period from the past?"

She laughed. "Thousands. Swarts has published nearly a hundred case studies himself, and spent time adding up to years in the 19th and 20th centuries."

Maitland interrupted incredulously. "How on Earth could he ever manage to keep that many disappearances quiet? Some of those people would be bound to talk."

She shook her head definitely. "The technique was designed to avoid just that. There is a method of 'fading' the memories people have of their stay here. The episode is always accepted as a period of amnesia, in the absence of a better explanation."

"Still, in thousands of cases...."

"Spread out over centuries in a total population of billions."

He laughed. "You're right. But will that be done to me?"

"I suppose so. I can't imagine Swarts letting you take your memories back with you."

Maitland looked out the window at the green horizon. "We'll see," he said.

Maitland removed his three-day beard with an effective depilatory cream he discovered in the bathroom, and settled down to wait. When Swarts arrived, the engineer said quietly, "Sit down, please. I have to talk with you."

Swarts gave him the look of a man with a piece of equipment that just won't function right, and remained standing. "What is it now?"

"Look," Maitland said, "Ingrid has told me that men never reached the planets. *You* ought to know how I feel about space flight. It's my whole life. Knowing that my work on rockets is going to pay off only in the delivery of bombs, I don't want to go back to the 20th Century. I want to stay here."

Swarts said slowly, "That's impossible."

"Now, look, if you want me to cooperate...."

The big man made an impatient gesture. "Not impossible because of me. Physically impossible. Impossible because of the way time travel works."

Maitland stared at him suspiciously.

"To displace a mass from its proper time takes energy," Swarts explained, "and it's one of the oldest general physical principles that higher energy states are unstable with respect to lower ones. Are you familiar with elementary quantum theory? As an analogy, you might regard yourself, displaced from your proper time, as an atom in an excited state. The system is bound to drop back to ground state. In the atomic case, the time which elapses before that transition occurs is a matter of probabilities. In the case of time travel, it just depends on the amount of mass and the number of years the mass is displaced."

"In short, the laws of nature will insist on your returning to 1950 in just a few days."

Maitland looked at the floor for a while, and his shoulders sagged. "Your memories of this will be faded," Swarts said. "You'll forget about what Ingrid has told you—forget you were ever here, and take up your life where you left off. You were happy working on rockets, weren't you?"

"But—" Maitland shook his head despairingly. Then he had an idea. "Will you let me do one thing, before I go back? I realize now that our time is limited, and you have a lot of tests to give me, but I'm willing to help speed things up. I want to see the stars, just once, from deep space. I know you'll make me forget it ever happened, but once in my life.... You have vessels—*vliegvlotter*, Ingrid called them—that can go into space. If you'd give me just a couple days to go out there, maybe circle the Moon...?" There was a pleading note in his voice, but he didn't care.

Swarts regarded him dispassionately for a moment, then nodded. "Sure," he said. "Now let's get to work."

"The Earth doesn't change much," Maitland mused. Sitting on the cot, his arm around Ingrid's yielding waist, he was wearing the new blue trunks she had given him to replace his rumpled pajamas. The room was full of evening sunlight, and in that illumination she was more beautiful than any other woman he could remember. This had been the last day of tests; tomorrow, Swarts had promised, he would begin his heart-breakingly brief argosy to the Moon, with Ingrid as pilot.

Over the past four days, he had been with the girl a lot. In the beginning, he realized, she had been drawn to him as a symbol of an era she longed, but was unable, to visit. Now she understood him better, knew more about him—and Maitland felt that now she liked him for himself.

She had told him of her childhood in backward Aresund and of loneliness here at the school in Nebraska. "Here," she had said, "parents spend most of their time raising their children; at home, they just let us grow. Every time one of these people looks at me I feel inferior."

She had confided her dream of visiting far times and places, then had finished, "I doubt that Swarts will ever let me go back. He thinks I am too irresponsible. Probably he is right. But it is terribly discouraging. Sometimes I think the best thing for me would be to go home to the fiord...."

Now, sitting in the sunset glow, Maitland was in a philosophic mood. "The color of grass, the twilight, the seasons, the stars—those things haven't changed." He gestured out the window at the slumbering evening prairie. "That scene, save for unessentials, could just as well be 1950—or 950. It's only human institutions that change rapidly...."

"I'll be awfully sorry when you go back," she sighed. "You're the first person I've met here that I can talk to."

"Talk to," he repeated, dissatisfied. "You're just about the finest girl I've ever met."

He kissed her, playfully, but when they separated there was nothing playful left about it. Her face was flushed and he was breathing faster than he had been. Savagely, he bit the inside of his cheek. "Two days! A lifetime here wouldn't be long enough!"

"Bob." She touched his arm and her lips were trembling. "Bob, do you have to go—out there? We could get a couple of horses tomorrow, and we would have two days."

He leaned back and shook his head. "Can't you see, Ingrid? This is my only chance. If I don't go tomorrow, I'll never get to the Moon. And then my whole life won't mean anything...."

He woke with Ingrid shaking him. "Bob! Bob!" Her voice was an urgent whisper. "You've got to wake up quick! Bob!"

He sat up and brushed the hair out of his eyes. "What's the matter?"

"I didn't really believe that Swarts would let you go into space. It wasn't like him. Bob, he fooled you. *Today* is when your time runs out!"

Maitland swallowed hard, and his chest muscles tightened convulsively. "You mean it was all a trick?"

She nodded. "He told me just now, while he was putting something in your milk to make you sleep." Her face was bitter and resentful. "He said, 'This is a lesson for you, Ching, if you ever do any work with individuals like this. You have to humor them, tell them anything they want to believe, in order to get your data.'"

Maitland put his feet on the floor, stood up. His face was white and he was breathing fast.

She grasped his arm. "What are you going to do?"

He shook her hand off. "I may not get to the Moon, but I'm going to teach one superman the advantage of honesty!"

"Wait! That won't get you anywhere."

"He may be bigger than I am," Maitland gritted, "but—"

She squeezed his arm violently. "You don't understand. He would not fight you. He'd use a gun."

"If I could catch him by surprise...."

She took hold of his shoulders firmly. "Now, listen, Bob Maitland. I love you. And I think it's the most important thing in the world that you get to see the stars. Swarts will never let me time travel, anyway."

"What are you thinking?"

"I'll go down to the village and get a *vliegvlotter*. It won't take twenty minutes. I'll come back, see that Swarts is out of the way, let you out of here, and take you—" she hesitated, but her eyes were steady—"wherever you want to go."

He was trembling. "Your career. I can't let you...."

She made as if to spit, then grinned. "My career! It's time I went home to the fiord, anyway. Now you wait here!"

The *vliegvlotter* was about 50 feet long, an ellipsoid of revolution. Maitland and Ingrid ran hand in hand across the lawn and she pushed him up through the door, then slammed it shut and screwed the pressure locks tight.

They were strapping themselves into the seats, bathed in sunlight that flooded down through the thick plastic canopy, when she stopped, pale with consternation.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Oh, Bob, I forgot! We can't do this!"

"We're going to," he said grimly.

"Bob, *sometime this morning you're going to snap back to 1950*. If that happens while we're up there...."

His jaw went slack as the implication soaked in. Then he reached over and finished fastening the buckle on her wide seat belt.

"Bob, I can't. I would be killing you just as surely as...."

"Never mind that. You can tell me how to run this thing and then get out, if you want to."

She reached slowly forward and threw a switch, took hold of the wheel. Seconds later they were plummeting into the blue dome of the sky.

The blue became darker, purplish, and stars appeared in daylight. Maitland gripped the edge of the seat; somewhere inside him it seemed that a chorus of angels was singing the finale of Beethoven's Ninth.

There was a *ping* and Ingrid automatically flicked a switch. A screen lit up and the image of Swarts was looking at them. His eyes betrayed some unfamiliar emotion, awe or fear. "Ching! Come back here at once. Don't you realize that—"

"Sorry, Swarts." Maitland's voice resonated with triumph. "You'll just have to humor me once more."

"Maitland! Don't you know that you're going to snap back to the 20th Century in half an hour? You'll be in space with no protection. You'll explode!"

"I know," Maitland said. He looked up through the viewport. "Right now, I'm seeing the stars as I've never seen them before. Sorry to make you lose a case, Swarts, but this is better than dying of pneumonia or an atomic bomb."

He reached forward and snapped the image off.

Twenty minutes later, Maitland had Ingrid cut the drive and turn the ship, so that he could see the Earth. It was there, a huge shining globe against the constellations, 10,000 miles distant, 100 times the size of familiar Luna. North America was directly below, part of Canada covered with a dazzling area of clouds. The polar ice-cap was visible in its entirety, along with the northern portions of the Eurasian land mass. The line of darkness cut off part of Alaska and bisected the Pacific Ocean, and the Sun's reflection in the Atlantic was blinding.

And there was Venus, a brilliant, white jewel against the starry blackness of interstellar space, and now he could see the Sun's corona....

The ship was rotating slowly, and presently the Moon, at first quarter, came into view, not perceptibly larger than seen from Earth. Maitland heaved a sigh of regret. If only this could have been but the beginning of a voyage....

Ingrid touched his arm. "Bob."

He turned to look at her golden beauty.

"Bob, give me one more kiss."

He loosened his seat strap and put his arms around her. For a moment he felt her soft lips on his....

Then she was gone, and the ship had vanished. For perhaps as long as a second, alone in space, he was looking with naked, unprotected, ambition-sated eyes at the distant stars.

The luring white blaze of Venus was the last image he took with him into the night without stars.

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