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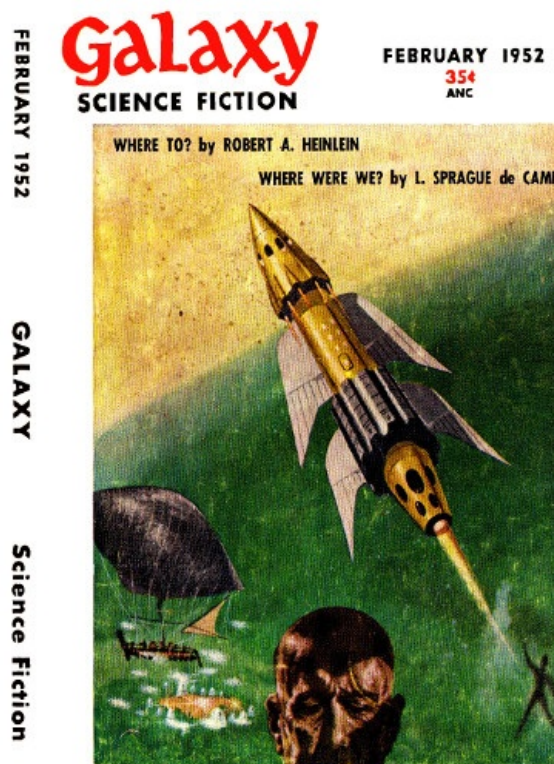
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DOUBLE STANDARD ***



DOUBLE STANDARD

By ALFRED COPPEL

Illustrated by MAC LELLAN

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***He did not have the qualifications to go
into space—so he had them manufactured!***

It was after oh-one-hundred when Kane arrived at my apartment. I checked the hall screen carefully before letting him in, too, though the hour almost precluded the possibility of any inquisitive passers-by.

He didn't say anything at all when he saw me, but his eyes went a bit wide. That was perfectly natural, after all. The illegal plasti-cosmetician had done his work better than well. I wasn't the same person I had been.

I led Kane into the living room and stood before him, letting him have a good look at me.

"Well," I asked, "will it work?"

Kane lit a cigarette thoughtfully, not taking his eyes off me.

"Maybe," he said. "Just maybe."

I thought about the spaceship standing proud and tall under the stars, ready to go. And I knew that it had to work. It *had* to.

Some men dream of money, others of power. All my life I had dreamed only of lands in the sky. The red sand hills of Mars, moldering in aged slumber under a cobalt-colored day; the icy moraines of Io and Callisto, where the yellow methane snow drifted in the faint light of the Sun; the barren, stark seas of the Moon, where razor-backed mountains limned themselves against the star fields—

"I don't know, Kim; you're asking a hell of a lot, you know," Kane said.

"It'll work," I assured him. "The examination is cursory after the application has been acted on." I grinned easily under the flesh mask. "And mine has."

"You mean Kim Hall's application has," he said.

I shrugged. "Well?"

Kane frowned at me and blew smoke into the still air of the room. "The Kim Hall on the application and you aren't exactly the same person. I don't have to tell you that."

"Look," I said. "I called you here tonight to check me over and because we've been friends for a good long time. This is important to me, Kane. It isn't just that I *want* to go. I *have* to. You can understand that, maybe."

"Yes, Kim," he said bitterly. "I can understand. Maybe if I had your build and mass, I'd be trying the same thing right now. My only chance was the Eugenics Board and they turned me down cold. Remember? Sex-linked predilection to carcinoma. Unsuitable for colonial breeding stock—"

I felt a wave of pity for Kane then. I was almost sorry I'd called him over. Within six hours I would be on board the spaceship, while he would be here. Earthbound for always. Unsuitable for breeding stock in the controlled colonies of Mars or Io and Callisto.

I thought about that, too. I knew I wouldn't be able to carry off my masquerade forever. I wouldn't want to. The stringent physical examination given on landing would pierce my disguise easily. But by that time it would be too late. I'd *be* there, out among the stars. And no Earthbound spaceship captain would carry my mass back instead of precious cargo. I'd stay. If they wanted me for a breeder then—okay. In spite of my slight build and lack of physical strength, I'd still be where I wanted to be. In the fey lands in the sky....

"I wish you all the luck in the world, Kim," my friend said. "I really do. I don't mean to throw cold water on your scheme. You know how few of *us* are permitted off-world. Every one who makes it is a—" he grinned ruefully—"a blow struck for equality." He savored the irony of it for a moment and then his face grew serious again. "It's just that the more I think of what you've done, the more convinced I am that you can't get away with it. Forged applications. Fake fingerprints and X-rays. And *this*—" He made a gesture that took in all of my appearance. Flesh, hair, clothes. Everything.

"What the hell," I said. "It's good, isn't it?"

"Very good. In fact, you make me uncomfortable, it's so good. But it's too damned insane."

"Insane enough to work," I said. "And it's the only chance. How do you think I'd stack up with the Eugenics Board? Not a chance. What they want out there is big muscle boys. Tough breeders. This is the only way for me."

"Well," Kane said. "You're big enough now, it seems to me."

"Had to be. Lots to cover up. Lots to add."

"And you're all set? Packed and ready?"

"Yes," I said. "All set."

"Then I guess this is it." He extended his hand. I took it. "Good luck, Kim. Always," he said huskily. "I'll hear if you make it. All of us will. And we'll be cheering and thinking that maybe, before we're all too old, we can make it, too. And if not, that maybe our sons will—without having to be prize bulls, either."

He turned in the doorway and forced a grin.

"Don't forget to write," he said.

The spacefield was streaked with the glare of floodlights, and the ship gleamed like a silvery spire against the desert night.

I joined the line of passengers at the checking desk, my half-kilo of baggage clutched nervously against my side. My heart was pounding with a mixture of fear and anticipation, my muscles twitching under the unaccustomed tension of the plastiflesh sheath that hid me.

All around me were the smells and sounds and sights of a spaceport, and above me were the stars, brilliant and close at hand in the dark sky.

The queue moved swiftly toward the checking desk, where a gray-haired officer with a seamed face sat.

The voice of the timekeeper came periodically from the loudspeakers around the perimeter of the field.

"Passengers for the Martian Queen, check in at desk five. It is now H minus forty-seven."

I stood now before the officer, tense and afraid. This was critical, the last check-point before I could actually set foot in the ship.

"It is now H minus forty-five," the timer's metallic voice said.

The officer looked up at me, and then at the faked photoprint on my papers.

"Kim Hall, age twenty-nine, vocation agri-technician and hydroponics expert, height 171 centimeters, weight 60 kilos. Right?"

I nodded soundlessly.

"Sums check within mass-limits. Physical condition index 3.69. Fertility index 3.66. Compatibility index 2.99." The officer turned to a trim-looking assistant. "All check?"

The uniformed girl nodded.

I began to breathe again.

"Next desk, please," the officer said shortly.

I moved on to the medics at the next stop. A gray-clad nurse checked my pulse and respiration. She smiled at me.

"Excited?" she asked. "Don't be." She indicated the section of the checking station where the breeders were being processed. "You should see how the bulls take it," she said with a laugh.

She picked up an electrified stamp. "Now don't worry. This won't hurt and it won't disfigure you permanently. But the ship's guards won't let you aboard without it. Government regulations, you know. We cannot load personal dossiers on the ships and this will tell the officers all they need to know about you. Weight limitations, you see."

I almost laughed in her face at that. If there was one thing all Earth could offer me that I wanted, it was that stamp on my forehead: a passport to the stars....

She set the stamp and pressed it against my forehead. I had a momentary fear about the durability of the flesh mask that covered my face, but it was unnecessary. The plastiskin took the temporary tattoo the way real flesh would have.

I felt the skin and read it in my mind. I knew exactly what it said. I'd dreamed of it so often and so long all my life. My ticket on the *Martian Queen*. My pass to those lands in the sky.

CERT SXF HALL, K. RS MART QUEEN SN1775690.

I walked across the ramp and into the lift beside the great tapering hull of the rocket. My heart was singing.

The timer said: "*It is H minus thirty-one.*"

And then I stepped through the outer valve, into the *Queen*. The air was brisk with the tang of hydrogenol. Space-fuel. The ship was alive and humming with a thousand relays and timers and whispering generators, readying herself for space.

I lay down in the acceleration hammock and listened to the ship.

This was everything I had wished for all my life. To be a free man among the stars. It was worth the chances I had taken, worth the lying and cheating and danger.

The conquest of space had split humanity in a manner that no one could have foreseen, though the reasons for the schism were obvious. They hinged on two factors—mass and durability. Thus it was that some remained forever Earthbound while others reached for the sky. And bureaucracy being what it was, the decision as to who stayed and who went was made along the easy, obvious line of demarcation.

I and half the human race were on the wrong side of the line.

From the ship's speakers came the voice of the timer.

"*It is H minus ten. Ready yourselves for the takeoff.*"

I thought of Kane and the men I had known and worked with for half of my twenty-nine years. They, too, were forbidden the sky. Tragic men, really, with their need and their dream written in the lines of pain and yearning on their faces.

The speaker suddenly snapped:

"*There is an illegal passenger on board! All persons will remain in their quarters until he is apprehended! Repeat: there is an illegal passenger on board! Remain in your quarters!*"

My heart seemed to stop beating. Somehow, my deception had been uncovered. How, it didn't matter, but it had. And the important thing now was simply to stay on board at all costs. A space ship departure could not be delayed. The orbit was computed. The blastaway timed to the millisecond....

I leaped to the deck and out of my cubicle. A spidery catwalk led upward, toward the nose of the ship. Below me I could hear the first sounds of the search.

I ran up the walk, my footsteps sounding hollowly in the steel shaft. A bulkhead blocked my progress ahead and I sought the next deck.

The timer said: "*It is H minus six.*"

It was a passenger deck. I could see frightened faces peering out of cubicles as I ran past. Behind me, the pursuit grew louder, nearer.

I slammed open a bulkhead and found another walk leading upward toward the astrogation blisters in the topmost point of the *Queen*.

Behind me, I caught a glimpse of a ship's officer running, armed with a stun-pistol. My breath rasped in my throat and the plastiskin sheath on my body shifted sickeningly.

"*You there! Halt!*" The voice was high-pitched and excited. I flung through another bulkhead hatch and out into the dorsal blister. I seemed to be suspended between Earth and sky. The stars glittered through the steelglass of the blister, and the desert lay below, streaked with searchlights and covered with tiny milling figures. The warning light on the control bunker turned from amber to red as I watched, chest heaving.

"*It is H minus three,*" the timer said. "*Rig ship for space.*"

I slammed the hatch shut and spun the wheel lock. I stood filled with a mixture of triumph and fear. They could never get me out of the ship in time now—but I would have to face blast away in the blister, unprotected. A shock that could kill....

Through the speaker, the captain's talker snapped orders: "*Abandon pursuit! Too late to dump*

him now. Pick him up after acceleration is completed." And then maliciously, knowing that I could hear: "*Scrape him off the deck when we're in space. That kind can't take much.*"

I felt a blaze of red fury. *That* kind. The Earthbound kind! I wanted to live, then, more than I had ever wanted to live before. To make a liar out of that sneering, superior voice. To prove that I was as good as all of them.

"*It is H minus one,*" said the timer.

Orders filtered through the speaker.

"*Outer valves closed. Inner valves closed.*"

"*Minus thirty seconds. Condition red.*"

"*Pressure in the ship. One-third atmosphere.*"

"*Twenty seconds.*"

"*Ship secure for space.*"

"*Ten, nine, eight—*"

I lay prone on the steel deck, braced myself and prayed.

"*Seven, six, five—*"

"*Gyros on. Course set.*"

"*Four, three, two—*"

The ship trembled. A great light flared beyond the curving transparency of the blister.

"*Up ship!*"

A hand smashed down on me, crushing me into the deck.

I thought: *I must live. I can't die. I won't die!*

I felt the spaceship rising. I felt her reaching for the stars. I was a part of her. I screamed with pain and exaltation. The hand pressed harder, choking the breath from me, stripping the plastiskin away in long, damp strips.

Darkness flickered before my eyes. I lay helpless and afraid and transfigured with a joy I had never known before.

Distorted, half-naked, I clung to life.

When I opened my eyes, they were all around me. They stood in a half-circle, trim, uniformed. Their smooth faces and cropped hair and softly molded bodies looked strange against the functional steel angularity of the astrogation blister.

I staggered to my feet, long strips of plastic flesh dangling from me.

The *Queen* was in space. I was in space, no longer Earthbound.

"Yes," I said, "I lived! Look at me!"

I stripped off the flesh mask, peeled away the red, full lips, the long transformation.

"I've done it. Others will do it, too. Not breeders—not brainless ornaments to a hyper-nymphoid phallus! Just ordinary men. Ordinary men with a dream. You can't keep the sky for yourselves. It belongs to all of us."

I stood with my back to the blazing stars and laughed at them.

"In the beginning it was right that you should be given priority over us. For centuries we kept you in subjection and when the Age of Space came, you found your place. Your stamina, your small stature, everything about you fitted you to be mistresses of the sky....

"But it's over. Over and done with. We can all be free—"

I peeled away the artificial breasts that dangled from my chest.

I stood swaying drunkenly, defiantly.

They came to me, then. They took me gently and carried me below, to the comfort of a white bunk. They soothed my hurts and nursed me. For in spite of it all, they were women and I was a man in pain.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DOUBLE STANDARD ***

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