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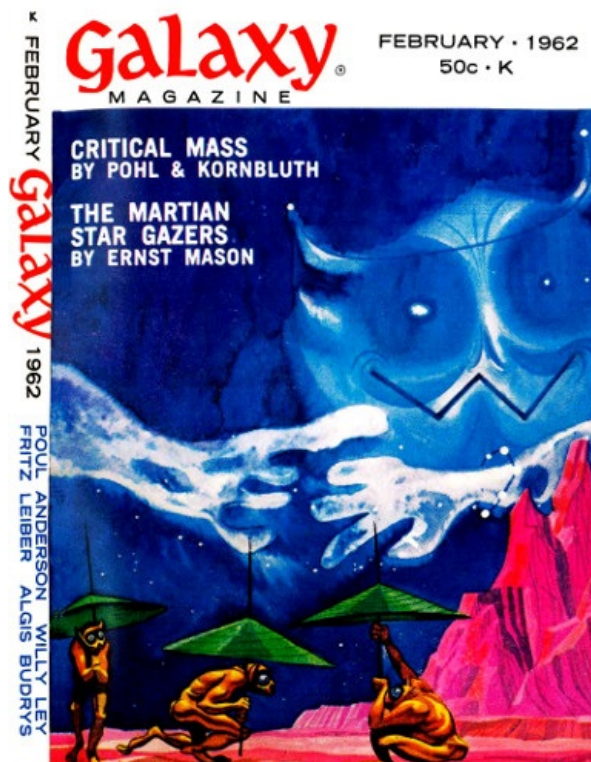
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SHATTER THE WALL \*\*\*



# SHATTER THE WALL

By SYDNEY VAN SCYOC

Illustrated by WEST

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***They were a charming family and everybody  
loved them to death—especially Amanda!***

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There he stood, Bass McDowall, life-size on the Wall. She made herself look at the hateful broad-shouldered image with the deliberately penetrating black eyes. She made herself watch his boy-image bend over Kippie's slender girl-image, made herself listen to his mellow voice gasp, "Kippie, sweetie-bug."

Savagely she thrust upward on the ebony lever. Bass McDowall, Wall idol, and Kippie lurched and disappeared. Lights glowed from fixtures recessed into the ceiling, illuminating the long, windowless Wall room.

Kathryn, whose hair was a snug, dark Kippie-cap, leaped from the Wall seat. "Don't turn it off now! Couldn't you even tell, Mother? He's going to kiss her! Turn it back on this minute!"

Amanda stationed herself before the lever, shaking her head. "Not until I've spoken to you," she said. "Kathryn, I don't think you realize yet what it means, but you're the youngest person, the very youngest, living in this city."

"Quit calling me that! Everyone has to call me Kippie." She cocked her dark head, Kippie-like. The red mark caused by the constant prodding of her index finger against her cheek glared. "Bass loves Kippie. He called her sweetie-bug."

"I refuse to call you Kippie." She folded her arms. "I don't want to discuss your name again, Kathryn."

"It will be Kippie." She squirmed into a Kippie-like position. "Soon as I'm twenty-one, I'll change it. You wait!"

"Perhaps you will, Kathryn. But I'll never call you Kippie."

"Oh, quit being silly and turn it on. He might kiss her again." She focused her blue eyes upon the Wall. "Turn it on."

"Kathryn, I want to talk to you, and I intend to do so without Bass McDowall staring over my shoulder." She sat down beside her daughter. "Now, Kathryn, you're nineteen years old, and you're certainly attractive by any—"

"I don't have dimples like Kippie does." Remembering, she poked her finger back into her cheek.

"I'm not talking about Kippie." She stared at the finger sunk into her daughter's cheek, wondering how many times she had explained that it wouldn't cause a dimple. "I want you to get married, Kathryn."

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"I've told you a million times, I won't. You're always after me!" she wailed. "Bass won't ever marry anyone, not even Kippie, and she's got dimples. Bass says—"

"Bass McDowall is not a real person. He's only an actor."

"He's the realest thing in the world. But he won't marry me, so you'd better forget it." She stepped to turn the Wall on again.

Instantly the ash tray was in Amanda's hand, the massive glass tray Dell had given her. She hurled it at the Wall, which shattered with a brittle explosive splintering.

Kathryn jumped back, wailing. "I hate you!" Frantically she manipulated the lever and twisted the ebony dials. "Bass, come back. Bass!"

Amanda patted the Wall seat. "Sit down, Kathryn."

Finally the girl sat down, sullenly rubbing her eyes with her fists.

"Kathryn, have you noticed that we never see infants on the Wall? We never see small children, either, because, Kathryn, you're the youngest person in this city. The week after you were born, the city hospital's obstetrical ward closed permanently."

Kathryn sobbed convulsively. "Who needs babies? I want Bass!"

"The human race needs babies! Kathryn, you sit so complacently in front of your Wall and pretend there isn't a world! There won't be unless you wake up."

"Don't be silly!"

"I'm not. Kathryn, you may be the youngest person in the world, for all I know. Forty or fifty years from now this planet will be cluttered with blank Walls. There'll be no one to watch them."

"Well, there's nothing I can do about it. I'm not different, like you."

"Kathryn, marry. Have children. Persuade your friends at the office—"

She laughed shrilly, rocking back against the Wall seat. "Friends! They hate me, every one of them, and I hate them. Even if Bass did marry me, they'd only take him away."

Amanda clutched her fists. "I don't want you to marry Bass. You must find some nice boy your own age."

"Oh, Mother! You want me to marry some stupid, ugly boy! You can't make me!"

"Kathryn, he needn't be dull. There are hundreds of boys, each interesting in—"

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Hearing a sound, she looked up to see Dell, thin and red-headed, standing in the doorway staring at the shattered Wall.

Kathryn jumped up. "Mother broke it. She threw that big green ash tray and broke it all to pieces."

Dell looked questioningly at Amanda. "Honey, why'd you do that?"

"She's jealous of Bass!"

"Now isn't Bass pretty young for you, honey?" He stooped to remove the ash tray from inside the shattered Wall. "Now, how can I watch Alice this evening? She promised me a special dance in that red dress she was showing me last night."

"Showing you?" She sprang up. "She showed it to every man in the country, Dell."

He frowned. "Well, I'll call Replacements. They'll have a new Wall in before Alice comes."

"And I'll smash it too. I'll smash every replacement you can buy!"

"Now, Amanda." He regarded her mildly. "You're not jealous of Alice! Honey, if you'd watch Lester, you wouldn't care about Alice and me."

She took the intact ash tray from him. "I'm not jealous of Alice, and I haven't been for twenty years. But Dell, do you realize Kathryn was the last child born in this city?"

The girl's voice was harsh. "She wants me to marry some stupid, ugly boy. And I won't do it! I love Bass."

Dell's pale eyes were rebuking. "Amanda, how can you expect Kippie to do that?"

She stepped back. "Kippie?" she said harshly. "Dell, that girl standing there is Kathryn, our daughter—not Kippie."

"Don't let such little things upset you, baby. I'll go call Replacements, and we'll all sit down together when Alice and Lester come." He turned.

She seized his arm. "I will *not* watch Lester," she said. "I will not sit and stare at that big, gray-haired ape and pretend I'm in love with him."

Dell frowned. "You don't really think he looks like an ape, do you, baby? I was—well, thinking of changing my name to Lester."

Kathryn leaped to hug him. "Oh Daddy! It'll be so wonderful. Lester, Lester, Lester! If we had an Alice and a Bass, we'd be almost like a real family."

She stared at them. "I'd hoped to put you in a favorable frame of mind for this, Kathryn," she said. "You'll remember that three years ago the Watsons, next door, had Wall failure and couldn't get service until morning. I invited them to watch our Wall."

Dell nodded. "Haven't seen them since, now that I think of it."

"You haven't. But tonight Mrs. Watson is lending me her son Gerald. He's coming at seven."

"Mother!" Kathryn cried, releasing Dell. "How terrible! Gerald! What a stupid name. I love Bass, and you can't take him away from me."

"That wasn't very nice, was it, Amanda?"

"It's done," she said. "He's twenty-two, and I want you to talk to him, Kathryn."

Kathryn scowled.

"And I've arranged for you to go over to their house to watch Alice, if you must, Dell."

Dell forgot he was indignant. "Well, Kippie, maybe this one time you can do as your mother wants," he said. "Surely Bass won't mind if you miss him this once. He's an understanding sort of chap."

Kathryn thought for a moment, scowling. "All right, I'll do it—if you'll call me Kippie, Mother."

Amanda studied her. "All right—Kippie," she said finally.

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After agreeing reluctantly not to call Replacements until Gerald had come and gone, Kippie wriggled into a Kippie-like position and poked her finger deep into her cheek again.

Gerald, who arrived promptly at seven, wore his light hair combed into a Bass-like curl low over

his forehead. He speared Amanda with a penetrating stare, making her shiver as she led him to the Wall room.

Kippie sulked angrily on the Wall seat.

Amanda introduced them, and they looked at each other, their glances revealing no interest.

"You're trying to comb your hair like Bass," Kippie accused.

Gerald grinned. "Sure thing, sweetie-bug."

"Then you should dye it. It's the wrong color. Bass doesn't have blond hair. And why is your name still Gerald? Don't you ever want to be Bass?"

Gerald looked slapped. "I tried. Honest, I really did. But you know there's a limit, and the man at the bureau said there were too many Bases already." His face brightened. "But my parents call me Bass all the time."

"Oh."

Gerald shuffled his feet. Gingerly he sat down.

"Uh, did you see them last night?" he asked.

"Of course. I always see them, except when my mother does something stupid."

Quickly Amanda excused herself and went to the Food Center. She leaned against the counter, trying to overhear their conversation.

They spoke in broken murmurs momentarily, then were silent.

Kippie cleared her throat irritably.

"Uh, nice weather," Gerald said loudly.

"I haven't been out."

They were silent again. She tried to make her fingers stop picking at a spot on the counter surface.

Suddenly Kippie emerged hurriedly from the Wall room, looking put upon.

"Where are you going?" Amanda demanded.

"He can't talk like Bass, even when he tries. And his hair is the wrong color, and he has blue eyes."

"But Kathryn—Kippie, those are external characteristics! You can't judge a person by the color of his hair and his eyes. You must get acquainted with him."

"I won't do it. I don't love him. I love Bass!" She cocked her head, Kippie-like. "And besides, he loves the real Kippie. And I'll never have dimples. I'm going to call Replacements."

Amanda seized her arm. "Call them, and I'll break the new Wall too. I'll break every Wall you bring into this house. Don't you understand what's happening?"

"Quit being stupid."

"I'll break every Wall you have installed."

"And every time you do it, I'll order a new one." She broke loose and ran to the communicator.

---

She had to do something. She wondered briefly, must I do something? It could only be the survival instinct driving her. Perhaps, she thought wryly, she was the only person who still possessed that particular instinct.

She could never break every Wall in the world, no matter how she tried.

She picked up the magazine Kippie had thrown down that morning. Running her finger over the cover, she poked it through Bass's penetrating eye. She poked Kippie in the nose.

She flipped the magazine open and went through it, mutilating the pages. "There's a hole in your head, Lester...."

"One less eye for you, Alice...."

"Poor little Kippie, I tore your chin. Right through the dimple. Will Bass love you now, Kippie?"

"Goodby, Bass." She crumpled him into a ball and threw him at the sink.

On the next page was a print of a restaurant. She read the caption.

"For two hours each evening, while filmed sequences are shown to the home audience, the stars retire to Antola's for sandwiches, drinks and shop talk."

She tried to stop her thoughts as they went to the sleeping alcove and the old gun in the top shelf of the built-ins. Dell hadn't bothered to unload it since he'd cleaned it last.

She dropped the magazine and went to the top shelf of the built-ins. The gun was there.

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It didn't take her long to drive downtown. There were no other cars on the streets, and the current to the traffic lights had been cut three years before. She passed only a prowling squad car, and the two police stared at her curiously.

She parked a block from Antola's. Leaving the car, she slung her purse, heavy with the gun, over her arm. Briskly she walked down the deserted street.

Antola, standing behind the bar, was tall, thin and red-headed. He stared at her incredulously, wiping his hands repeatedly on his long white apron.

She went past the bar to a small table.

Antola continued to wipe his hands, as if they would not quite come dry. "You want something?"

"Yes, bring me a bacon and tomato sandwich and milk."

"Don't have bacon and tomato. Kippie, she likes tuna. Bass hamburger. Lester and Alice, they both take grilled cheese. Which do you want?"

"Bring me tuna and milk."

"Kippie, she says milk don't go with tuna. Makes a big blob inside."

"I said tuna and milk."

"Okay, if you want a blob inside. Kippie don't." He ambled away.

Not knowing how long she might have to wait, she nibbled at her sandwich.

Soon she heard voices approaching the restaurant. She snaked her hand toward the purse, opened it and clutched the gun.

Alice entered first, her hair a disciplined halo of red-gold, her eyes vivid green. She was quarreling with Bass, who cheerfully ignored her, his penetrating eyes staring greedily at the bottles behind the bar.

Small, precocious-seeming Kippie followed, her dark hair ruffled by the wind. She stared lovingly up into Lester's eyes.

When the door had closed behind them, Amanda stood and raised the gun. They hadn't noticed her, they'd been too anxious to mount the bar stools. Ducks in a shooting gallery, she thought.

Alice was sitting nearer her, combing her hair with her fingers. Holding the gun out before her with both hands, Amanda aimed it at Alice's hair. She pulled the trigger.

At the sound, they all tried to duck, except Alice, who folded quietly to the floor. Amanda aimed again, and this time Lester crumpled.

Ducks in a shooting gallery, she thought. See if you can make that big drake, Bass, fall off his stool.

Bass fell. Kippie screamed, banishing her dimples, and fell beside him.

Antola had disappeared. It didn't matter. She returned the gun to her purse. She hadn't decided what to do next. Suddenly feeling hungry, she sat down to finish her sandwich.

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When she was through, she rose, slung her purse over her arm again and stepped past the four bodies. They hardly seemed real, lying in their separate pools of crimson.

The two policemen came in, staring at her again.

"Catch her!" Antola cried from beneath the bar. "She done it! She killed them all! Poor little Kippie!"

The florid policeman locked his hand about her wrist, while the other cried for Antola to come out.

Her wrists were quickly handcuffed, and the florid policeman escorted her to the police car. He shoved her into the back seat.

She didn't move, didn't think. The world seemed frozen.

It didn't begin to thaw again until the second squad car and the ambulances arrived. They came slowly, without sirens or flashing lights. She wondered why they came so casually.

The florid policeman returned to the car. "All dead," he said. "Even poor little Kippie."

Silently they drove the deserted streets. She looked out at the buildings, knowing the people inside them soon would be shocked by the news of the stars' deaths.

When they reached police headquarters, she had to run to keep up with the florid policeman as he pulled her up the stone steps. They walked endless corridors, gray and gloomy, until they emerged into a small, dim room.

A man in a tweed coat, who smoked a pipe and spoke suavely, stepped from the group of men in street clothes.

"Did you kill them?" he asked. "Don't be afraid to tell me. I only want to know if you killed them."

She nodded. "Certainly I did it."

He took her purse from the uniformed policeman and removed the gun. "But why, tell me. Were you jealous of Alice, perhaps?" His pipe jumped as he smiled confidentially.

"Certainly not!" she said. "I did it to save the human race from suicide."

The men smiled, amused.

"Lock her up until we decide," the man in tweed instructed the florid policeman. He gave her the purse, minus the gun.

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A bony, disapproving matron led her to a cell and locked her into it. Amanda requested pencil and paper.

The matron frowned but brought them. Placing the paper against her purse, she began composing a statement to the press, making clear her motives.

The filmed sequence still played on the small Wall opposite her cell. She glanced up occasionally at the faces and smiled.

She had almost completed the statement when the filmed sequence ended. The small, oily emcee appeared upon the Wall. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said.

She waited expectantly for the death announcement.

"Our stars!" He flung out his arms dramatically.

And the four stars pranced, smiling, across the Wall. Kippie, Bass, Alice and Lester.

Amanda jumped to the bars. It was not a film.

"Matron!" she screamed. "Matron!" Frantically she stared at the four actors whom she had murdered and who were alive and smiling.



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"Matron!"

The bony matron unlocked the cell. "Come with me."

"Matron, I killed them. I shot them!"

"Come with me."

The matron led her into a small, dim room.

The tweedy man smiled confidentially around his pipe. "Are you ready to go home, Mrs. Davis?"

"But I murdered them. You have to keep me here!" She tried to catch the lapels of his suit.

He smiled again. "Who did you murder, Mrs. Davis?"

"All of them. You know I did it. I shot them, and they were all dead. He said so—the policeman."

Her hands shook.

"Look over there." He pointed to a small Wall. "They're alive and performing, aren't they, Mrs. Davis?"

She looked at the Wall. Alice and Lester were planting a small rose bush together.

"You see, occasionally women do suffer from delusions like yours," he said. "But now that you've recovered, I'll drive you home. After a quiet night you'll forget all this."

"They aren't delusions," she insisted. "I did it, with my husband's gun. I waited until they closed the door, then I aimed—I know I did it."

"Yes, certainly," he said, leading her to the door. "Now come along home, Mrs. Davis."

She continued to protest, but he pulled her through the corridors and down the steps to a waiting car. He nudged her into the front seat.

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They passed darkened buildings. She saw the neon sign atop the *Herald* offices ahead. If no one knew she'd killed them, no one would awaken. No one would live again. The world would end after all.

She opened the door and jumped from the moving car. Stumbling, she ran toward the *Herald* offices.

She stumbled into the building and began seeking through its bright corridors. Stopping to stare at each office door, she finally found the one labeled "Editorial. Mr. Gray." She pushed into the office.

The little man behind the desk wore horn-rim glasses and smoked a pipe that was a copy of Lester's. He smiled paternally. "Yes, dear?"

"I killed them! They're all dead!"

Realizing excitement did nothing to make her words more believable, she forced herself to be calm.

Editor Gray wore his gray hair combed straight back, Lester-like. He stood, putting one hand into his trouser pocket, as Lester always did.

"Who did you kill?" he asked quietly. "Calm down, dear. Tell me who you killed."

"Lester and all the rest. You have to print it. I shot them—they're dead. Print it in your paper."

He crossed the room to his Wall. Bass and Kippie were rolling pie dough together, one on either end of the rolling pin.

"I'm afraid you're imagining these things, my dear." He sucked his pipe, looking lovingly at Kippie. "I could love that child, but of course Alice would be jealous."

She backed away from him into the arms of the tweedy man, who had come into the office.

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir," he said. "This poor woman is suffering from delusions. I was driving her home when she escaped me."

"That's all right," Editor Gray said mildly. "Perhaps she needs professional help. Have you considered that, my dear?"

But Amanda was staring at Bass. She stared at his penetrating eyes, his broad shoulders, at the curl of hair combed low over his forehead. The curl was swirled left, not right.

The tweedy man took her arm, guided her from the building and nudged her into the car.

Do they curl a dead actor's hair differently, she wondered. She had killed them. Why weren't they dead?

---

When they reached her house, it was completely dark. Either Dell and Kippie had gone to bed or the Wall had been replaced and was playing.

"I'm sorry I had to bring you away so abruptly," the tweedy man said. "We can't afford to have the press print unfavorable reports about the force, you understand." He fingered his pipe. "Now, Mrs. Davis, get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow you'll realize it was all a bad dream. You wouldn't kill the stars."

Woodenly she walked up the front walk. Hearing Bass's mellow voice from the Wall room, she knew Kippie and Dell were up.

She entered the room. Kippie sat curled on the Wall seat.

Amanda stared at the handsome face on the Wall. Bass McDowall, Wall idol. Why wasn't he dead?

His curl was still curled wrong. She looked more closely at his face as he leaned toward Kippie, gasping, "Sweetie-bug."

There was a small scar beneath his left eye. The tiniest, most insignificant scar, but it had never been there before.



"Poor Bass, he looks so tired," the Kippie on the Wall seat said. "See how his face looks thinner when he's tired? I wonder if she notices it."

Dell said, "After all, Bass has worked hard today, Kippie."

Bass's face was indeed thinner. Thinner face, small scar that hadn't been there before, curl that curled wrong—what did it mean?

Suddenly she realized the image on the Wall wasn't Bass. She corrected herself. He was a different Bass. He wasn't the one she had shot, but his almost identical double.

She stared at her daughter, who looked more like Kippie each time she assumed another of her characteristics or poses. There were hundreds of young people wanting to be Bass or Kippie, hundreds of young men combing their hair the way Bass did, smiling as he did, learning to use their eyes as he did. And if the time should come when a new Bass was needed, there he was, hundreds of him.

She frowned. Undoubtedly they had several doubles waiting conveniently nearby to perform if something should happen to one of the stars.

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She felt a choking in her throat. It would be as impossible to kill all the Besses and Kippies as it would be to break every Wall in the world. There was no way to get rid of them, no way to make people listen to what was happening. No way to prevent humanity from watching itself to extinction.

As they grew older, she guessed, the actors would grow older too. Gradually Bass would be thirty, then thirty-five, and Lester and the others would age too. But no one would notice; everyone would be aging at the same rate.

But some day someone would notice. Some day all the Lesters would die, and there would be no more Lester to smile at Alice and look thoughtful. And people would look around and see that her daughter, Kathryn, was the youngest person in the world.

But by then even Kathryn would be past the child-bearing age.

Stunned, she sat down beside Dell. He squeezed her hand. She looked up at the Wall, into Bass's penetrating dark eyes. His eyes were so deep, she thought. His hands were strong, and his face was intelligent. How could she ever have hated him?

"Where've you been, baby?" Dell asked.

She shook her head irritably. "Be quiet," she said. "Can't you see he's going to kiss her?"

Perhaps she should change her name to Alice. Then they'd have Kippie, Alice and Lester. All they needed was a Bass, and they would be almost like a real family.

It would be so easy to forget this way, looking deep into Bass's dark eyes.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SHATTER THE WALL \*\*\*

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