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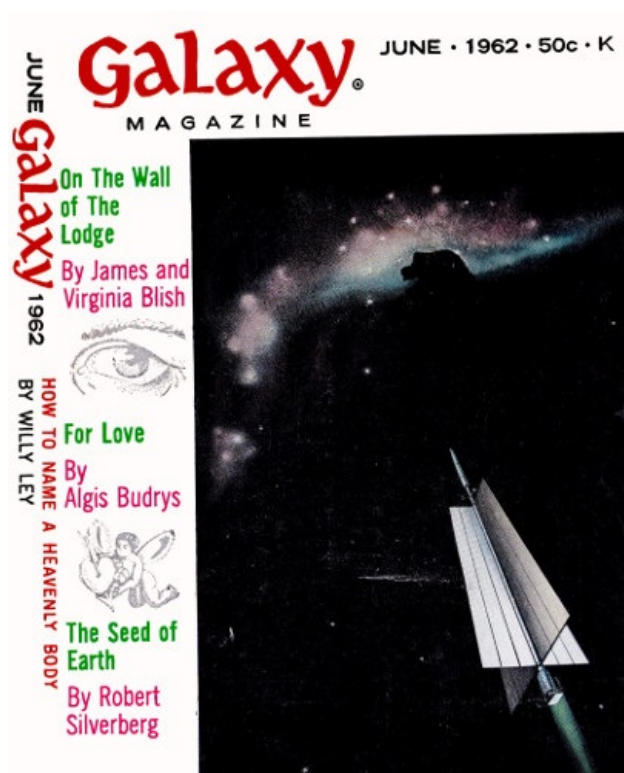
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAMPS OF THE ANGELS \*\*\*



# THE LAMPS OF THE ANGELS

By RICHARD SABIA

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

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***The golden guardians denied mankind  
the stars. They were irresistible in their  
might ... and they were something more!***

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"Why did you come creeping into the house last night like a thief?" Mrs. Sanchez asked her son.

Lithe, dark Roberto set down his breakfast coffee and smiled up at her. "Ah, Mama, you are the owl. I was certain I moved quiet as moonlight."

"I always hear the sounds of my children. Even the little one when he stirs in his grave. It is the way of a mother." She drew a cup of coffee and sat with them at the table in the small kitchen patio.

"The hour was late," Roberto said, "and I did not wish to disturb you with greetings that would keep until morning. You sleep little enough as it is. Though the hard days are gone, the sun still rises after you."

Roberto's father looked up from his newspaper. "She will always be full of the old ways," he said with fond gruffness. "For her there is no change. Our children have grown proud and fine and freed us from bondage to the soil. Yet she still behaves as a peon. To her we still toil in the fields of the patron, bent with exhaustion over the planting or harvesting consoles, struggling to control the many field machines. She bakes her own bread. The market vegetables do not please her so she chafes her hands with the buttons and switches of a garden. And a robot to scrub the floors she will not hear of. Perhaps she thinks it would be prettier than she and I might run off with it to Mexico City."

"Foolish old man," Mrs. Sanchez said with mock severity, "you have lost even the memory of what it is to run."

"Mama," Roberto said, "I have a present for you."

Something of an eager little girl looked out of the wise eyes.

"I have no need of a present," she said but her eyes searched the leafy little patio. "All I ask as a gift is for you to come out of the sky for a little while and marry."

Roberto smiled. "Have not my brothers and sisters given you grandchildren enough? And what woman will marry the captain of a space vessel? With my journeys to Jupiter and Saturn and outermost Nyx, I would forever be a stranger to my children and an occasional guest to my wife." From under his napkin he drew forth a small silvery box. "Mama, your present."

She gasped with delight when she opened it. In a black velvet womb nested a strange glittering jewel suspended on a delicate, spider-strand, silver chain. "Roberto!" she exclaimed with a feeble remonstrance.

"Like the others I have brought it is not expensive," Roberto said. "The stone is a common one on Nyx. But it is very beautiful and when I found it I thought of you."

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A bell-light flashed on the kitchen console. Mrs. Sanchez went to it as a shallow dish slid from the oven. She set it, sizzling softly, on the table. "And a present for you," she said. "Your favorite, quinquaños. Fresh from Venus yesterday, or so the vendor tells me." She shrugged dubiously. "In this sinful age even the machines lie."

"But, Mama, the money I send is not to be wasted on me! These are so expensive."

"And small," Mrs. Sanchez said. "Why is there not a garden manufactured that can be programmed for quinquaños so that I might grow my own?"

"Because five fortunes could not pay for it," Mr. Sanchez said. "Try as they might, such delicacies come only through the grace of God and not General Electric." He set aside his newspaper and accepted another coffee. "Does this not complete your collection?" he asked his wife. "Roberto has brought for you a stone from every planet he has touched. Even the moon and the grand asteroids."

"I know not how many worlds there are in the sun's family. But if it is done, then it is done." She tried to make her words unconcerned but there was a shadow of regret across them. "The stones are beautiful. But they are frivolous and the end to them is not to be mourned."

"Ha!" Mr. Sanchez snorted. "She pretends, the sly one, she does not care. But I know how she delights in them, these gifts from her son. I have seen her in a stolen moment open the box and gaze with pleasure upon them. And when we go to the opera in Mexico City it is one of your single-stoned necklaces which adorns her simple black dress. She will have no other ornament."

"I no longer have a husband in this house," Mrs. Sanchez said, "only an old woman whose mouth talks away the day."

"Old woman, eh?" Mr. Sanchez leered and playfully slapped his wife on her backside.

She pretended to be shocked. "In front of the child! But what can one expect from an evil old lecher?"

The three of them laughed and basked in the warmth of their blood bonds. Mr. Sanchez resumed his coffee. "Is it really done, Roberto? Have you taken cargoes from all twelve planets?"

"Yes."

"Even the one just beyond Pluto? Is it Oceanus or Atlas? I can never remember which it is ... but for a long while you were missing one of them."

"I have them all. I am still a young man and yet I have taken my ship to all the planets in many voyages. But of course that is not unusual," he lectured, for he knew that was what they wanted, "for in the thousand years since man first stepped forth on the moon the solar commerce has so increased that there are hardly enough suitable men for the ships that bridge the now familiar worlds. So familiar, I could fly to the rings of Saturn or to dark Nyx in my slumber."

"Then you also must also feel a sadness because there will be no more stones to pluck from a new planet," Mr. Sanchez said. "Perhaps there is a thirteenth yet to be found."

"No, Papa. It is certain. There are no more children of our sun. But I am not sad. The stones are *not* finished. Mama shall have other pretty baubles to be caged in fine silver or gold and hung about her neck."

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Mrs. Sanchez was programming a day of cooking and baking on the autochef. At her son's words her hands poised in mid-flight over the console. She did not quite comprehend but an intuitive wisp of alarm darkened her face.

She turned to her husband, as if for some reassurance that her dread was of no substance.

Mr. Sanchez said in perplexity, "I do not understand, Roberto. If there are no more planets—"

"In this system!" Roberto said.

Neither of his parents said a word. They stared at him and waited.

"In a few days it will be officially announced," Roberto said. "With the perfection of the new Korenyik propulsion, a starship will be built. A starship! And I have been selected to take it through the other space to Alpha Centauri."

Mr. Sanchez embraced his son. "Roberto, I am so proud." He turned to his wife. "Is it not a great —" He stopped at the look of her.

"This Alpha Centauri," she said, pronouncing it badly, "it is a planet?"

"It is a star, Mama. Like our sun. It may have a family of planets. It will be exciting to discover them."

"Why?" she asked with a mother's quiet challenge.

The word echoed in Roberto's mind—*why*? The very core of his being strained to shout out why. *Space* was why! Each blazing star was a compelling, beckoning finger. Every constellation a covenant with his heart. And somewhere out in the majestic, wheeling Galaxy his soul wandered, waiting for him to come.

"Mama, I will show you why," he replied as quietly. "As I promised Papa the last time, I have borrowed from the company a star projector. This time you must put aside the household and watch and listen and learn something about the universe out of which my life and my dreams are made. Of all your children I am the only stranger to you. And before I go out to the stars I want you to know something of that which fills my heart."

He went to his room and returned with a foot-square case which he set on a table in the living area. He pressed a stud. A transparent globe inflated over it to a four foot diameter. He dimmed the lights, manipulated the controls and a tiny sun burned in the center of the globe. Another adjustment brought into view the solar planets orbiting around it. The device was an educational tool; it projected as desired, within the envelope of gas, three-dimensional mockups of the solar system, star clusters and galaxies that moved almost as incandescently beautiful as the originals.

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Mrs. Sanchez was delighted with the views of the solar system and the surface scenes of the various planets. She had as much general knowledge of the planets as she had of India or France—which had all come to her through the distorting medium of television dramas. The moon had observatories and mad scientists; India had elephants and sinister maharajas; Mars had deserts and fragile ghost people; Venus had quinquañes and swamp dragons; and France was overflowing with sin.

Roberto did not utilize the projector narrative. He explained with his own intense words as he took his parents across the gulf to the constellations. He skipped about the Galaxy, astounding them with the sheer billions of stars. He insinuated the possibility of millions of inhabited planets and then he flung them across the abyss of space to view the Local Group of the Milky Way, its sister Andromeda and the satellite galaxies. Then he plunged them into infinity for a time-lost glimpse of the billion other galaxies thus far discovered.

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The globe deflated, the lights went on and Roberto leaned toward his mother. "Does not the thought of all this catch at your heart a little?"

There was an uncertainty in her voice that Roberto missed because he was so intent upon her answer. "All those stars," she said. "Something like that I saw once on the television—about strange people who lived on those stars. I did not like it very much. Perhaps because it is not true."

"Not true?" Roberto echoed. "Yesterday, yes. Today, not quite. Tomorrow ... your own son is going to the stars!"

"It is beyond my understanding why men cannot be content to remain where they were meant to be."

"But the stars *were* meant for us. They are our destiny!" Roberto realized he was speaking too loudly.

Mrs. Sanchez looked squarely at her son. Her words were measured and solemn like some solitary, tolling bell. "If God meant us to be on those stars he would have put us there. Roberto, take care. Listen to the word of your mother. I have not the cleverness of my children but I know things here." She touched her hand over her heart. "It may be as you say, all the millions of great stars. But they are God's high places and I tell you, my son, whoever dares violate them will be struck down."

"But, Mama! In ancient times, when man first took to the air, there were those who proclaimed man presumed too much and would be punished. And a thousand years ago there were people who spoke as you do when man first went into space. They too said God gave us the earth and to covet the moon and the planets was a grievous sin."

Mrs. Sanchez shrugged. "There are always the fanatics. Your mama is not one of them. God gave men the sun and the moon and the planets and set them apart from the stars for him to work out his salvation. It is natural and right."

"And he did not give us the stars also?"

"In the sky He put them as a testament to His glory. You have shaken my poor head with the measure of their distance. But it serves to show that they would not have been placed out of reach if they were intended for us to have."

"But Mama, soon they will no longer be out of reach. Your own son will go to the first one in a great new ship."

Mrs. Sanchez turned troubled eyes on her son. "I will pray for you." She averted her face and would no longer look directly at him.

Roberto angrily snatched up the star projector and went to his room.

His father followed. "You must understand," he said, "your mother is a simple woman. She would rather think of the stars as the lamps of the angels than the huge blazing spheres that they are."

"I do understand," Roberto said bitterly. "I have heard her words a thousand times from as many mouths. They have sounded through history and are chains meant to bind man to his few worlds. It is the eternal voice of the heavy, peasant mind which tries to shout down every soaring dream of mankind."

"Your words are too hard," his father said.

Roberto's lips curled to say something cruel but he refrained, not wanting to hurt this fine, little man whose blood was his own.

"Yes," Roberto said, softening, "for after all there are always the minds which struggle free and lift us up. They have carried us to the threshold of the stars. And the time will come, a thousand years perhaps, when we will be ready to try for our sister Galaxy, Andromeda." Roberto smiled. "Of course it is certain we will still have our simple folk who will warn us and tell us to beware; that it is not the will of the Almighty that we leave the Milky Way; that we presume too much and we will be struck down. And—" Roberto stopped in mild surprise. He saw in his father's expression the reflection of his mother's apprehension.

Roberto turned away sadly and began to pack away the star projector.

Someday, he thought, in spite of the little minds, we will have one of these that will show the other space as commonly as our own. And all their phantom angels and devils shall not bar man from the universe.

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Time passed.

The ship was launched.

Six long years, Roberto thought. Long years of preparation, testing and training. Hard, bone-wearying hours of familiarization and shakedown with nerve-straining, experimental jumps into the other space. Now at last they were in that other space—that strange, blazing white elsewhere that Korenyik had given to mankind as the trail to the stars—the Horsehead Nebula clear before them.

Six years of frantic activity ... and now he was launched and there was nothing to do in transit but wait. Six years since he had been to the little sun-faded stone house near Mexico City and felt the warm blood-tug of his parents. Papa now dead and Mama with her dark forebodings of angels and God.

He gazed at the dark screens in the starship and wondered what he might see if they were on.

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In the intense, brilliant region under the vault of heaven the two great creatures, their golden coruscating substance flung across the white space, sensed their coming. My-Ky-El limned the ship with a golden halo and knew the creatures within. He linked with Ra-Fa-El and they communed in soaring crystal carillions of thought.

—they are come from the Black Space Hell. The brood of Satan has broken its bonds and penetrated the barrier!

—how is it so? the Fallen were shrivelled of substance and energy; shorn of motion and thrust down into the Black Space with no memory of their origin....

—nevertheless they are here in a devious shape and White Space is once again threatened....

—they must be annulled NOW!

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!!!A-ROORRR-UH!!!A-ROORRR-UH!!!

The Klaxon howled out the alarm. The control board erupted into a swiftly spreading plague of red warning lights, indicating the Korenyik Matrix Units were being subjected to incredible strain.

Roberto punched a row of screen tabs. The normal-space view screens showed nothing. He punched in the E-screens. He gasped at the sight, struck with an awful dread. Great golden mists were clustering, bursting, swirling and spiralling in the blinding whiteness. They wreathed the ship, and the KM units sobbed as they strained against the rending golden energies. Roberto fought against odd, thick fear that tried to prostrate him on the deck and make him grovel in utter, abject terror. *This icy dread that freezes my blood is not of my making*, Roberto thought. With a desperate effort of will he hurled his leaden fingers at the keys and punched in the Omega beams. Eyes burning, he saw ashen whorls spin through the golden mists and crystal screams seemed to splinter in his mind.

For a fragment of time the KM units ceased their belabored sobbing and the fear drained from Roberto. In the instant he slammed the jump bar and they were in their own Black Space.

"We'll never get home this way," the navigator said. He was trembling with shock.

Roberto struggled to keep his own body from quivering. "I will take us home. We will dodge in and out of the two spaces. The danger seems unable to follow. Can you navigate such a course?"

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The navigator was trembling violently and he began to sob. "What were they? So magnificent ... and ... terrifying ... like great golden angels...."

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" Roberto screamed, his control shattering. He leaned to the limit of his pad straps and struck once and again at the navigator. Roberto pulled his hands back and crowded his anger and fear to the back of his mind. "Can you skip us home?" he again demanded of the navigator.

The man's voice was steadier. "I'll need three minutes in black each time to compute position and plot the next jump. But, yes, I can do it."

"I make you a gift of three hours right now." *And perhaps more we will need*, Roberto thought, *to recover the courage for venturing again into the White Space. And my navigator spoke of angels but where were the faces and wings? And why did I also think of angels almost as if I felt a nebulous ancient memory of them? And do the others feel as my navigator and I?*

They did! Roberto had gone around the ship carefully questioning his men. No matter how delicately he inquired, whenever he touched upon what they might have seen on the E-screen the fear would come into their eyes. Some spoke directly of heavenly creatures, others embarrassedly admitted such impressions and a few averted their eyes and denied such thoughts. But the words of them all were edged with terror and awe.

Roberto and his shaken crew were slowly regaining confidence. They had made a jump into the White Space and remained there for some hours before being frightened back into the Black by a vague alarm. Nothing more than a quivering needle and a lighter patch on an E-screen; but they had remained hidden in Black for many hours and now they were ready to make another jump.

Roberto pressed the jump bar, throwing them into White Space ... and the golden fury struck!!!! A-ROORRR-UH!!! A ROORRR-UH!!! The board blazed red. There were screams on the intercom. There was heat and savage bucking with a crashing and screeching tear of ultra-steel. The E-screens flared with a terrible molten dancing of golden fire. Roberto punched in the Omega beams in a shell pattern, cut them and snapped on the force shield in full crackling Power. It flared greenly against the golden furies. The reactive thrust slammed hard against the hull and the ship went hurtling end over end. Roberto slapped the jump bar but the ship remained trapped in the White Space. Blue energy licked along the heaving bulkheads and decks. There were more cries and an odor of scorched flesh, and the corpse of his first officer went spinning limply through the control cabin. Something wrenched loose and crunched heavily on Roberto's leg before bouncing away. *Too much red!* Roberto cried within, looking from his crimsoning leg to the carmine lights of the board. He pounded his fists on the unresponsive jump bar. "*Mama*," he whispered in agony, and suddenly something connected, and the tortured ship tumbled shudderingly into Black Space.

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Mrs. Sanchez sat in the twilight with the darkened house at her back and unmovingly faced the mountains. She heard the jet whine of the taxi helicopter but could not see it because it landed in front of the house. She listened as the whine faded. And in the silence she heard an odd step that she could not recognize.

"Mama."

The voice was different. There was no longer a smile under it. But it was Roberto's.

She did not answer, but as she stood the noise of her chair brought him limping toward her. She started to move to him but he stopped abruptly and she suddenly felt a new bitter distance between them that mere steps could never cross. In the dusk she stared at his twisted leg.

"Roberto," she whispered sadly.

"Call me Jacob," he said harshly. "I have wrestled with angels." He thrust out his crippled leg. "... and behold a *man* wrestled with him till morning. And when he saw that he could not overcome him he touched the sinew of his thigh and forthwith it shrank!"

With no triumph, but only a mother's distressed remonstrance, Mrs. Sanchez softly wailed, "O Roberto, Roberto, I warned you. I told you."

"Yes, Mama, you told me," he said. "But you did not tell me the thing most important. You did not tell me that we are devils!"

She stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Yes, my fine, good Mama! With all your thoughts of heaven, we are a world of devils. How or why or from whence I do not yet know. But I am going back to the White Space to seek and I only come now to see you once more and say good-by ... and...." Roberto faltered and leaned toward her as if straining to see her face in the evening gloom that had almost deepened into night. "... and ... ask your blessing." The words were hardly more than a whisper.

"Going back?" she said incredulously.

"I must."

Anger was in her voice as she pointed to his leg. "Even with the mark of wrath you carry? You dare make more sacrilege?"

She turned to go into the house. Roberto limped a few steps after her. "Mama, as you love me, your blessing! For your son."

She turned in the doorway, her face hard. "I can only pray for you."

Roberto watched her go inside. No light appeared and he knew she would be kneeling before the shelf of holy things in the small flickering light of the votive candle. He made his way to the front of the house to the waiting heli-taxi. He looked back at the house. *This is no longer my home*, he thought. And then, a moment later: *Was it ever?*

He looked up at the stars and thought of the pure brilliance of White Space and the magnificent golden creatures. *Why the sweet anguish in the depths of my being when I think of them and the white place? Why in spite of my fear am I drawn to it more than I am to this house which is my home? Home?*

Roberto climbed into the machine and it moved upward a little closer to the stars before turning south.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAMPS OF THE ANGELS \*\*\*

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