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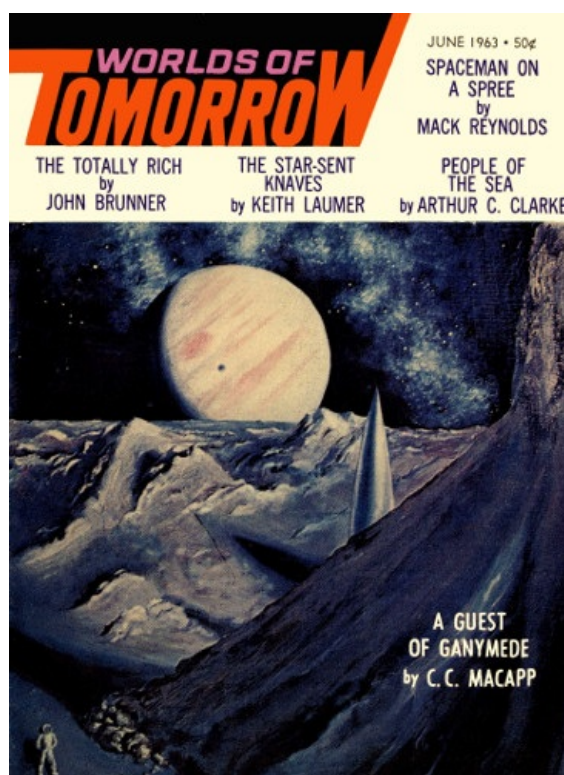
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SPACEMAN ON A SPREE \*\*\*



# **SPACEMAN ON A SPREE**

**BY MACK REYNOLDS**

**Illustrated by Nodel**

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## What's more important—Man's conquest of space, or one spaceman's life?

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### I

They gave him a gold watch. It was meant to be symbolical, of course. In the old tradition. It was in the way of an antique, being one of the timepieces made generations past in the Alpine area of Eur-Asia. Its quaintness lay in the fact that it was wound, not electronically by power-radio, but by the actual physical movements of the bearer, a free swinging rotor keeping the mainspring at a constant tension.

They also had a banquet for him, complete with speeches by such bigwigs of the Department of Space Exploration as Academician Lofting Gubelin and Doctor Hans Girard-Perregaux. There was also somebody from the government who spoke, but he was one of those who were pseudo-elected and didn't know much about the field of space travel nor the significance of Seymour Pond's retirement. Si didn't bother to remember his name. He only wondered vaguely why the cloddy had turned up at all.

In common with recipients of gold watches of a score of generations before him, Si Pond would have preferred something a bit more tangible in the way of reward, such as a few shares of Variable Basic to add to his portfolio. But that, he supposed, was asking too much.

The fact of the matter was, Si knew that his retiring had set them back. They hadn't figured he had enough shares of Basic to see him through decently. Well, possibly he didn't, given their standards. But Space Pilot Seymour Pond didn't have their standards. He'd had plenty of time to think it over. It was better to retire on a limited crediting, on a confoundedly limited crediting, than to take the two or three more trips in hopes of attaining a higher standard.

He'd had plenty of time to figure it out, there alone in space on the Moon run, there on the Venus or Mars runs. There on the long, long haul to the Jupiter satellites, fearfully checking the symptoms of space cafard, the madness compounded of claustrophobia, monotony, boredom and free fall. Plenty of time. Time to decide that a one room mini-auto-apartment, complete with an autochair and built-in autobar, and with one wall a teevee screen, was all he needed to find contentment for a mighty long time. Possibly somebody like Doc Girard-Perregaux might be horrified at the idea of living in a mini-auto-apartment ... not realizing that to a pilot it was roomy beyond belief compared to the conning tower of a space craft.

No. Even as Si listened to their speeches, accepted the watch and made a halting little talk of his own, he was grinning inwardly. There wasn't anything they could do. He had them now. He had enough Basic to keep him comfortably, by his standards, for the rest of his life. He was never going to subject himself to space cafard again. Just thinking about it, now, set the tic to going at the side of his mouth.

They could count down and blast off, for all he gave a damn.

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The gold watch idea had been that of Lofting Gubelin, which was typical, he being in the way of a living anachronism himself. In fact, Academician Gubelin was possibly the only living man on North America who still wore spectacles. His explanation was that a phobia against having his eyes touched prohibited either surgery to remould his eyeballs and cure his myopia, or contact lenses.

That was only an alibi so far as his closest associate, Hans Girard-Perregaux, was concerned. Doctor Girard-Perregaux was convinced Gubelin would have even worn facial hair, had he but a touch more courage. Gubelin longed for yesteryear, a seldom found phenomenon under the Ultrawelfare State.

Slumped in an autochair in the escape room of his Floridian home, Lofting Gubelin scowled at his friend. He said, acidly, "Any more bright schemes, Hans? I presume you now acknowledge that appealing to the cloddy's patriotism, sentiment and desire for public acclaim have miserably failed."

Girard-Perregaux said easily, "I wouldn't call Seymour Pond a cloddy. In his position, I am afraid I would do the same thing he has."

"That's nonsense, Hans. Zoroaster! Either you or I would gladly take Pond's place were we capable of performing the duties for which he has been trained. There aren't two men on North America—there aren't two men in the world!—who better realize the urgency of continuing our delving into space." Gubelin snapped his fingers. "Like that, either of us would give our lives to prevent man from completely abandoning the road to his destiny."

His friend said drily, "Either of us could have volunteered for pilot training forty years ago, Lofting. We didn't."

"At that time there wasn't such a blistering percentage of funkies throughout this whole blistering Ultrawelfare State! Who could foresee that eventually our whole program would face ending due to lack of courageous young men willing to take chances, willing to face adventure, willing to react to the stimulus of danger in the manner our ancestors did?"

Girard-Perregaux grunted his sarcasm and dialed a glass of iced tea and tequila. He said, "Nevertheless, both you and I conform with the present generation in finding it far more pleasant to follow one's way of life in the comfort of one's home than to be confronted with the unpleasantness of facing nature's dangers in more adventurous pastimes."

Gubelin, half angry at his friend's argument, leaned forward to snap rebuttal, but the other was wagging a finger at him negatively. "Face reality, Lofting. Don't require or expect from Seymour Pond more than is to be found there. He is an average young man. Born in our Ultrawelfare State, he was guaranteed his fundamental womb-to-tomb security by being issued that minimum number of Basic shares in our society that allows him an income sufficient to secure the food, clothing, shelter, medical care and education to sustain a low level of subsistence. Percentages were against his ever being drafted into industry. Automation being what it is, only a fraction of the population is ever called up. But Pond was. His industrial aptitude dossier revealed him a possible candidate for space pilot, and it was you yourself who talked him into taking the training ... pointing out the more pragmatic advantages such as complete retirement after but six trips, added shares of Basic so that he could enjoy a more comfortable life than most and the fame that would accrue to him as one of the very few who still participate in travel to the planets. Very well. He was sold. Took his training, which, of course, required long years of drudgery to him. Then, performing his duties quite competently, he made his six trips. He is now legally eligible for retirement. He was drafted into the working force reserves, served his time, and is now free from toil for the balance of his life. Why should he listen to our pleas for a few more trips?"

"But has he no spirit of adventure? Has he no feeling for...."

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Girard-Perregaux was wagging his finger again, a gesture that, seemingly mild though it was, had an astonishing ability to break off the conversation of one who debated with the easy-seeming, quiet spoken man.

He said, "No, he hasn't. Few there are who have, nowadays. Man has always paid lip service to adventure, hardships and excitement, but in actuality his instincts, like those of any other animal, lead him to the least dangerous path. Today we've reached the point where no one need face danger—ever. There are few who don't take advantage of the fact. Including you and me, Lofting, and including Seymour Pond."

His friend and colleague changed subjects abruptly, impatiently. "Let's leave this blistering jabber about Pond's motivation and get to the point. The man is the only trained space pilot in the world. It will take months, possibly more than a year, to bring another novice pilot to the point where he can safely be trusted to take our next explorer craft out. Appropriations for our expeditions have been increasingly hard to come by—even though in *our* minds, Hans, we are near important breakthroughs, breakthroughs which might possibly so spark the race that a new dream to push man out to the stars will take hold of us. If it is admitted that our organization has degenerated to the point that we haven't a single pilot, then it might well be that the Economic Planning Board, and especially those cloddies on Appropriations, will terminate the whole Department of Space Exploration."

"So...." Girard-Perregaux said gently.

"So some way we've got to bring Seymour Pond out of his retirement!"

"Now we are getting to matters." Girard-Perregaux nodded his agreement. Looking over the rim of his glass, his eyes narrowed in thought as his face took on an expression of Machiavellianism. "And do not the ends justify the means?"

Gubelin blinked at him.

The other chuckled. "The trouble with you, Lofting, is that you have failed to bring history to bear on our problem. Haven't you ever read of the sailor and his way of life?"

"Sailor? What in the name of the living Zoroaster has the sailor got to do with it?"

"You must realize, my dear Lofting, that our Si Pond is nothing more than a latter-day sailor, with many of the problems and view-points, tendencies and weaknesses of the voyager of the past. Have you never heard of the seaman who dreamed of returning to the village of his birth and buying a chicken farm or some such? All the long months at sea—and sometimes the tramp freighters or whaling craft would be out for years at a stretch before returning to home port—he would talk of his retirement and his dream. And then? Then in port, it would be one short drink with the boys, before taking his accumulated pay and heading home. The one short drink would lead to another. And morning would find him, drunk, rolled, tattooed and possibly sleeping it off in jail. So back to sea he'd have to go."

Gubelin grunted bitterly. "Unfortunately, our present-day sailor can't be separated from his money quite so easily. If he could, I'd personally be willing to lure him down some dark alley, knock him over the head and roll him myself. Just to bring him back to his job again."

He brought his wallet from his pocket, and flicked it open to his universal credit card. "The

ultimate means of exchange," he grunted. "Nobody can spend your money, but you, yourself. Nobody can steal it, nobody can, ah, *con* you out of it. Just how do you expect to sever our present-day sailor and his accumulated nest egg?"

The other chuckled again. "It is simply a matter of finding more modern methods, my dear chap."

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## II

Si Pond was a great believer in the institution of the spree. Any excuse would do. Back when he had finished basic education at the age of twenty-five and was registered for the labor draft, there hadn't been a chance in a hundred that he'd have the bad luck to have his name pulled. But when it had been, Si had celebrated.

When he had been informed that his physical and mental qualifications were such that he was eligible for the most dangerous occupation in the Ultrawelfare State and had been pressured into taking training for space pilot, he had celebrated once again. Twenty-two others had taken the training with him, and only he and Rod Cameroon had passed the finals. On this occasion, he and Rod had celebrated together. It had been quite a party. Two weeks later, Rod had burned on a faulty take-off on what should have been a routine Moon run.

Each time Si returned from one of his own runs, he celebrated. A spree, a bust, a bat, a wing-ding, a night on the town. A commemoration of dangers met and passed.

Now it was all over. At the age of thirty he was retired. Law prevented him from ever being called up for contributing to the country's labor needs again. And he most certainly wasn't going to volunteer.

He had taken his schooling much as had his contemporaries. There wasn't any particular reason for trying to excell. You didn't want to get the reputation for being a wise guy, or a cloddy either. Just one of the fellas. You could do the same in life whether you really studied or not. You had your Inalienable Basic stock, didn't you? What else did you need?

It had come as a surprise when he'd been drafted for the labor force.

In the early days of the Ultrawelfare State, they had made a mistake in adapting to the automation of the second industrial revolution. They had attempted to give everyone work by reducing the number of working hours in the day, and the number of working days in the week. It finally became ludicrous when employees of industry were working but two days a week, two hours a day. In fact, it got chaotic. It became obvious that it was more practical to have one worker putting in thirty-five hours a week and getting to know his job well, than it was to have a score of employees, each working a few hours a week and none of them ever really becoming efficient.

The only fair thing was to let the technologically unemployed remain unemployed, with their Inalienable Basic stock as the equivalent of unemployment insurance, while the few workers still needed put in a reasonable number of hours a day, a reasonable number of weeks a year and a reasonable number of years in a life time. When new employees were needed, a draft lottery was held.

All persons registered in the labor force participated. If you were drawn, you must need serve. The dissatisfaction those chosen might feel at their poor luck was offset by the fact that they were granted additional Variable Basic shares, according to the tasks they fulfilled. Such shares could be added to their portfolios, the dividends becoming part of their current credit balance, or could be sold for a lump sum on the market.

Yes, but now it was all over. He had his own little place, his own vacuum-tube vehicle and twice the amount of shares of Basic that most of his fellow citizens could boast. Si Pond had it made. A spree was obviously called for.

He was going to do this one right. This was the big one. He'd accumulated a lot of dollars these past few months and he intended to blow them, or at least a sizeable number of them. His credit card was burning a hole in his pocket, as the expression went. However, he wasn't going to rush into things. This had to be done correctly.

Too many a spree was played by ear. You started off with a few drinks, fell in with some second rate mopsy and usually wound up in a third rate groggery where you spent just as much as though you'd been in the classiest joint in town. Came morning and you had nothing to show for all the dollars that had been spent but a rum-head.

Thus, Si was vaguely aware, it had always been down through the centuries since the Phoenecian sailor, back from his year-long trip to the tin mines of Cornwall, blew his hard earned share of the voyage's profits in a matter of days in the wine shops of Tyre. Nobody gets quite so little for his money as that loneliest of all workers, he who must leave his home for distant lands, returning only periodically and usually with the salary of lengthy, weary periods of time to be spent hurriedly in an attempt to achieve the pleasure and happiness so long denied him.

Si was going to do it differently this time.

Nothing but the best. Wine, women, song, food, entertainment. The works. But nothing but the best.

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To start off, he dressed with great care in the honorable retirement-rank suit he had so recently purchased. His space pin he attached carefully to the lapel. That was a good beginning, he decided. A bit of prestige didn't hurt you when you went out on the town. In the Ultrawelfare State hardly one person in a hundred actually ever performed anything of value to society. The efforts of most weren't needed. Those few who did contribute were awarded honors, decorations, titles.

Attired satisfactorily, Si double-checked to see that his credit card was in his pocket. As an after-thought, he went over to the auto-apartment's teevee-phone, flicked it on, held the card to the screen and said, "Balance check, please."

In a moment, the teevee-phone's robot voice reported, "Ten shares of Inalienable Basic. Twelve shares of Variable Basic, current value, four thousand, two hundred and thirty-three dollars and sixty-two cents apiece. Current cash credit, one thousand and eighty-four dollars." The screen went dead.

One thousand and eighty-four dollars. That was plenty. He could safely spend as much as half of it, if the spree got as lively as he hoped it would. His monthly dividends were due in another week or so, and he wouldn't have to worry about current expenses. Yes, indeed, Si Pond was as solvent as he had ever been in his thirty years.

He opened the small, closet-like door which housed his vacuum-tube two-seater, and wedged himself into the small vehicle. He brought down the canopy, dropped the pressurizer and considered the dial. Only one place really made sense. The big city.

He considered for a moment, decided against the boroughs of Baltimore and Boston, and selected Manhattan instead. He had the resources. He might as well do it up brown.

He dialed Manhattan and felt the sinking sensation that presaged his car's dropping to tube level. While it was being taken up by the robot controls, being shuttled here and there preparatory to the shot to his destination, he dialed the vehicle's teevee-phone for information on the hotels of the island of the Hudson. He selected a swank hostelry he'd read about and seen on the teevee casts of society and celebrity gossip reporters, and dialed it on the car's destination dial.

"Nothing too good for ex-Space Pilot Si Pond," he said aloud.

The car hesitated for a moment, that brief hesitation before the shot, and Si took the involuntary breath from which only heroes could refrain. He sank back slowly into the seat. Moments passed, and the direction of the pressure was reversed.

Manhattan. The shuttling began again, and one or two more traversing sub-shots. Finally, the dash threw a green light and Si opened the canopy and stepped into his hotel room.

A voice said gently, "If the quarters are satisfactory, please present your credit card within ten minutes."

Si took his time. Not that he really needed it. It was by far the most swank suite he had ever seen. One wall was a window of whatever size the guest might desire and Si touched the control that dilated it to the full. His view opened in such wise that he could see both the Empire State Building Museum and the Hudson. Beyond the river stretched the all but endless city which was Greater Metropolis.

He didn't take the time to flick on the menu, next to the auto-dining table, nor to check the endless potables on the autobar list. All that, he well knew, would be superlative. Besides, he didn't plan to dine or do much drinking in his suite. He made a mock leer. Not unless he managed to acquire some feminine companionship, that was.

He looked briefly into the swimming pool and bath, then flopped himself happily onto the bed. It wasn't up to the degree of softness he presently desired, and he dialed the thing to the ultimate in that direction so that with a laugh he sank almost out of sight into the mattress.

He came back to his feet, gave his suit a quick patting so that it fell into press and, taking his credit card from his pocket, put it against the teevee-phone screen and pressed the hotel button so that registration could be completed.

For a moment he stood in the center of the floor, in thought. Take it easy, Si Pond, take it all easy, this time. No throwing his dollars around in second-class groggeries, no eating in automated luncheterias. This time, be it the only time in his life, he was going to frolic in the grand manner. No cloddy was Si Pond.

He decided a drink was in order to help him plan his strategy. A drink at the hotel's famous Kudos Room where celebrities were reputed to be a dime a dozen.

He left the suite and stepped into one of the elevators. He said, "Kudos Room."

The auto-elevator murmured politely, "Yes, sir, the Kudos Room."

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At the door to the famous rendezvous of the swankiest set, Si paused a moment and looked about. He'd never been in a place like this, either. However, he stifled his first instinct to wonder about what this was going to do to his current credit balance with an inner grin and made his way to the bar.

There was actually a bartender.

Si Pond suppressed his astonishment and said, offhand, attempting an air of easy sophistication, "Slivovitz Sour."

"Yes, sir."

The drinks in the Kudos Room might be concocted by hand, but Si noticed they had the routine teevee screens built into the bar for payment. He put his credit card on the screen immediately before him when the drink came, and had to quell his desire to dial for a balance check, so as to be able to figure out what the Sour had cost him.

Well, this was something like it. This was the sort of thing he'd dreamed about, out there in the great alone, seated in the confining conning tower of his space craft. He sipped at the drink, finding it up to his highest expectations, and then swiveled slightly on his stool to take a look at the others present.

To his disappointment, there were no recognizable celebrities. None that he placed, at least—top teevee stars, top politicians of the Ultrawelfare State or Sports personalities.

He turned back to his drink and noticed, for the first time, the girl who occupied the stool two down from him. Si Pond blinked. He blinked and then swallowed.

"*Zo-ro-as-ter*," he breathed.

She was done in the latest style from Shanghai, even to the point of having cosmetically duplicated the Mongolian fold at the corners of her eyes. Every pore, but *every* pore, was in place. She sat with the easy grace of the Orient, so seldom found in the West.

His stare couldn't be ignored.

She looked at him coldly, turned to the bartender and murmured, "A Far Out Cooler, please, Fredric." Then deliberately added, "I thought the Kudos Room was supposed to be exclusive."

There was nothing the bartender could say to that, and he went about building the drink.

Si cleared his throat. "Hey," he said, "how about letting this one be on me?"

Her eyebrows, which had been plucked and penciled to carry out her Oriental motif, rose. "Really!" she said, drawing it out.

The bartender said hurriedly, "I beg your pardon, sir...."

The girl, her voice suddenly subtly changed, said, "Why, isn't that a space pin?"

Si, disconcerted by the sudden reversal, said, "Yeah ... sure."

"Good Heavens, you're a spaceman?"

"Sure." He pointed at the lapel pin. "You can't wear one unless you been on at least a Moon run."

She was obviously both taken back and impressed. "Why," she said, "you're Seymour Pond, the pilot. I tuned in on the banquet they gave you."

Si, carrying his glass, moved over to the stool next to her. "Call me Si," he said. "Everybody calls me Si."

She said, "I'm Natalie. Natalie Paskov. Just Natalie. Imagine meeting Seymour Pond. Just sitting down next to him at a bar. Just like that."

"Si," Si said, gratified. Holy Zoroaster, he'd never seen anything like this rarified pulchritude. Maybe on teevee, of course, one of the current sex symbols, but never in person. "Call me Si," he said again. "I been called Si so long, I don't even know who somebody's talking to if they say Seymour."

"I cried when they gave you that antique watch," she said, her tone such that it was obvious she hadn't quite adjusted as yet to having met him.

Si Pond was surprised. "Cried?" he said. "Well, why? I was kind of bored with the whole thing. But old Doc Gubelin, I used to work under him in the Space Exploration department, he was hot for it."

"*Academician* Gubelin?" she said. "You just call him *Doc*?"

Si was expansive. "Why, sure. In the Space Department we don't have much time for formality. Everybody's just Si, and Doc, and Jim. Like that. But how come you cried?"

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She looked down into the drink the bartender had placed before her, as though avoiding his face. "I ... I suppose it was that speech Doctor Girard-Perregaux made. There you stood, so fine and straight in your space-pilot uniform, the veteran of six exploration runs to the planets...."

"Well," Si said modestly, "two of my runs were only to the Moon."

"... and he said all those things about man's conquest of space. And the dream of the stars which man has held so long. And then the fact that you were the last of the space pilots. The last man in the whole world trained to pilot a space craft. And here you were, retiring."

Si grunted. "Yeah. That's all part of the Doc's scheme to get me to take on another three runs. They're afraid the whole department'll be dropped by the Appropriations Committee on this here

Economic Planning Board. Even if they can find some other patsy to train for the job, it'd take maybe a year before you could even send him on a Moon hop. So old man Gubelin, and Girard-Perregaux too, they're both trying to pressure me into more trips. Otherwise they got a Space Exploration Department, with all the expense and all, but nobody to pilot their ships. It's kind of funny, in a way. You know what one of those spaceships costs?"

"Funny?" she said. "Why, I don't think it's funny at all."

Si said, "Look, how about another drink?"

Natalie Paskov said, "Oh, I'd love to have a drink with you, Mr...."



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"Si," Si said. He motioned to the bartender with a circular twist of the hand indicating their need for two more of the same. "How come you know so much about it? You don't meet many people who are interested in space any more. In fact, most people are almost contemptuous, like. Think it's kind of a big boondoggle deal to help use up a lot of materials and all and keep the economy going."

Natalie said earnestly, "Why, I've been a space fan all my life. I've read all about it. Have always known the names of all the space pilots and everything about them, ever since I was a child. I suppose you'd say I have the dream that Doctor Girard-Perregaux spoke about."

Si chuckled. "A real buff, eh? You know, it's kind of funny. I was never much interested in it. And I got a darn sight less interested after my first run and I found out what space cafard was."

She frowned. "I don't believe I know much about that."

Sitting in the Kudos Room with the most beautiful girl to whom he had ever talked, Si could be nonchalant about the subject. "Old Gubelin keeps that angle mostly hushed up and out of the magazine and newspaper articles. Says there's enough adverse publicity about space exploration already. But at this stage of the game when the whole ship's crammed tight with this automatic scientific apparatus and all, there's precious little room in the conning tower and you're the only man aboard. The Doc says later on when ships are bigger and there's a whole flock of people aboard, there won't be any such thing as space cafard, but...." Of a sudden the right side of Si Pond's mouth began to tic and he hurriedly took up his drink and knocked it back.

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He cleared his throat. "Let's talk about some other angle. Look, how about something to eat, Natalie? I'm celebrating my retirement, like. You know, out on the town. If you're free...."

She put the tip of a finger to her lips, looking for the moment like a small girl rather than an ultra-sophisticate. "Supposedly, I have an appointment," she said hesitantly.

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When the mists rolled out in the morning—if it was still morning—it was to the tune of an insistent hotel chime. Si rolled over on his back and growled, "*Zo-ro-as-ter*, cut that out. What do you want?"

The hotel communicator said softly, "Checking-out time, sir, is at two o'clock."

Si groaned. He couldn't place the last of the evening at all. He didn't remember coming back to the hotel. He couldn't recall where he had separated from, what was her name ... Natalie.

He vaguely recalled having some absinthe in some fancy club she had taken him to. What was the gag she'd made? Absinthe makes the heart grow fonder. And then the club where they had the gambling machines. And the mists had rolled in on him. Mountains of the Moon! but that girl could drink. He simply wasn't that used to the stuff. You don't drink in Space School and you most certainly don't drink when in space. His binges had been few and far between.

He said now, "I don't plan on checking out today. Don't bother me." He turned to his pillow.

The hotel communicator said quietly, "Sorry, sir, but your credit balance does not show sufficient to pay your bill for another day."

Si Pond shot up, upright in bed, suddenly cold sober.

His eyes darted about the room, as though he was seeing it for the first time. His clothes, he noted, were thrown over a chair haphazardly. He made his way to them, his face empty, and fished about for his credit card, finding it in a side pocket. He wavered to the teevee-phone and thrust the card against the screen. He demanded, his voice as empty as his expression, "Balance check, please."

In less than a minute the robot-voice told him: "Ten shares of Inalienable Basic. Current cash credit, forty-two dollars and thirty cents." The screen went dead.

He sank back into the chair which held his clothes, paying no attention to them. It couldn't be right. Only yesterday, he'd had twelve shares of Variable Basic, immediately convertible into more than fifty thousand dollars, had he so wished to convert rather than collect dividends indefinitely. Not only had he the twelve shares of Variable Basic, but more than a thousand dollars to his credit.

He banged his fist against his mouth. Conceivably, he might have gone through his thousand dollars. It was possible, though hardly believable. The places he'd gone to with that girl in the Chinese get-up were probably the most expensive in Greater Metropolis. But, however expensive, he couldn't possibly have spent fifty thousand dollars! Not possibly.

He came to his feet again to head for the teevee screen and demand an audit of the past twenty-four hours from Central Statistics. That'd show it up. Every penny expended. Something was crazy here. Someway that girl had pulled a fast one. She didn't seem the type. But something had happened to his twelve shares of Variable Basic, and he wasn't standing for it. It was his security, his defense against slipping back into the ranks of the cloddies, the poor demi-buttocked ranks of the average man, the desperately dull life of those who subsisted on the bounty of the

Ultrawelfare State and the proceeds of ten shares of Inalienable Basic.

He dialed Statistics and placed his card against the screen. His voice was strained now. "An audit of all expenditures for the past twenty-four hours."

Then he sat and watched.

His vacuum-tube trip to Manhattan was the first item. Two dollars and fifty cents. Next was his hotel suite. Fifty dollars. Well, he had known it was going to be expensive. A Slivovitz Sour at the Kudos Room, he found, went for three dollars a throw, and the Far out Coolers Natalie drank, four dollars. Absinthe was worse still, going for ten dollars a drink.

He was impatient. All this didn't account for anything like a thousand dollars, not to speak of fifty thousand.

The audit threw an item he didn't understand. A one dollar credit. And then, immediately afterward, a hundred dollar credit. Si scowled.

And then slowly reached out and flicked the set off. For it had all come back to him.

At first he had won. Won so that the other players had crowded around him, watching. Five thousand, ten thousand. Natalie had been jubilant. The others had cheered him on. He'd bet progressively higher, smaller wagers becoming meaningless and thousands being involved on single bets. A five thousand bet on odd had lost, and then another. The kibitzers had gone silent. When he had attempted to place another five thousand bet, the teevee screen robot voice had informed him dispassionately that his current cash credit balance was insufficient to cover that amount.



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Yes. He could remember now. He had needed no time to decide, had simply snapped, "Sell one share of Variable Basic at current market value."

The other eleven shares had taken the route of the first.

When it was finally all gone and he had looked around, it was to find that Natalie Paskov was gone as well.

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Academician Lofting Gubelin, seated in his office, was being pontifical. His old friend Hans Girard-Perregaux had enough other things on his mind to let him get away with it, only half following the monologue.

"I submit," Gubelin orated, "that there is evolution in society. But it is by fits and starts, and by no means a constant thing. Whole civilizations can go dormant, so far as progress is concerned, for millennia at a time."

Girard-Perregaux said mildly, "Isn't that an exaggeration, Lofting?"

"No, by Zoroaster, it is not! Take the Egyptians. Their greatest monuments, such as the pyramids, were constructed in the earlier dynasties. Khufu, or Cheops, built the largest at Gizeh. He was the founder of the 4th Dynasty, about the year 2900 B. C. Twenty-five dynasties later, and nearly three thousand years, there was no greatly discernable change in the Egyptian culture."

Girard-Perregaux egged him on gently. "The sole example of your theory I can think of, offhand."

"Not at all!" Gubelin glared. "The Mayans are a more recent proof. Their culture goes back to at least 500 B. C. At that time their glyph-writing was already wide-spread and their cities, eventually to number in the hundreds, being built. By the time of Christ they had reached their peak. And they remained there until the coming of the Spaniards, neither gaining nor losing, in terms of evolution of society."

His colleague sighed. "And your point, Lofting?"

"Isn't it blisteringly obvious?" the other demanded. "We're in danger of reaching a similar static condition here and now. The Ultrawelfare State!" He snorted indignation. "The Conformist State or the Status Quo State, is more like it. I tell you, Hans, all progress is being dried up. There is no will to delve into the unknown, no burning fever to explore the unexplored. And this time it isn't a matter of a single area, such as Egypt or Yucatan, but our whole world. If man goes into intellectual coma this time, then all the race slows down, not merely a single element of it."

He rose suddenly from the desk chair he'd been occupying to pace the room. "The race must find a new frontier, a new ocean to cross, a new enemy to fight."

Girard-Perregaux raised his eyebrows.

"Don't be a cloddy," Gubelin snapped. "You know what I mean. Not a human enemy, not even an alien intelligence. But something against which we must pit our every wit, our every strength, our strongest determination. Otherwise, we go dull, we wither on the vine."

The other at long last chuckled. "My dear Lofting, you wax absolutely lyrical."

Gubelin suddenly stopped his pacing, returned to his desk and sank back into his chair. He seemed to add a score of years to his age, and his face sagged. "I don't know why I take it out on you, Hans. You're as aware of the situation as I. Man's next frontier is space. First the planets, and then a reaching out to the stars. This is our new frontier, our new ocean to cross."

His old friend was nodding. He brought his full attention to the discussion at last. "And we'll succeed, Lofting. The last trip Pond made gives us ample evidence that we can actually colonize and exploit the Jupiter satellites. Two more runs, at most three, and we can release our findings in such manner that they'll strike the imaginations of every Tom, Dick and Harry like nothing since Columbus made his highly exaggerated reports on his New World."

"Two or three more runs," Gubelin grunted bitterly. "You've heard the rumors. Appropriations is going to lower the boom on us. Unless we can get Pond back into harness, we're sunk. The runs will never be made. I tell you, Hans...."

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But Hans Girard-Perregaux was wagging him to silence with a finger. "They'll be made. I've taken steps to see friend Seymour Pond comes dragging back to us."

"But he *hates* space! The funkier probably won't consent to come within a mile of the New Albuquerque Spaceport for the rest of his life, the blistering cloddy."

A desk light flicked green, and Girard-Perregaux raised his eyebrows. "Exactly at the psychological moment. If I'm not mistaken, Lofting, that is probably our fallen woman."

"Our *what?*"

But Doctor Hans Girard-Perregaux had come to his feet and personally opened the door. "Ah, my dear," he said affably.

Natalie Paskov, done today in Bulgarian peasant garb, and as faultless in appearance as she had been in the Kudos Room, walked briskly into the office.

"Assignment carried out," she said crisply.

"Indeed," Girard-Perregaux said approvingly. "So soon?"

Gubelin looked from one to the other. "What in the blistering name of Zoroaster is going on?"

His friend said. "Academician Gubelin, may I present Operative Natalie of Extraordinary Services Incorporated?"

"Extraordinary Services?" Gubelin blurted.

"In this case," Natalie said smoothly, even while taking the chair held for her by Doctor Girard-Perregaux, "a particularly apt name. It was a dirty trick."

"But for a good cause, my dear."

She shrugged. "So I am often told, when sent on these far-out assignments."

Girard-Perregaux, in spite of her words, was beaming at her. "Please report in full," he said, ignoring his colleague's obvious bewilderment.

Natalie Paskov made it brief. "I picked up the subject in the Kudos Room of the Greater Metropolis Hotel, pretending to be a devotee of the space program as an excuse. It soon developed that he had embarked upon a celebration of his retirement. He was incredibly naive, and allowed me to over-indulge him in semi-narcotics as well as alcohol, so that his defensive inhibitions were low. I then took him to a gambling spot where, so dull that he hardly knew what

he was doing, he lost his expendable capital."

Gubelin had been staring at her, but now he blurted, "But suppose he had won?"

She shrugged it off. "Hardly, the way I was encouraging him to wager. Each time he won, I urged him to double up. It was only a matter of time until ..." she let the sentence dribble away.

Girard-Perregaux rubbed his hands together briskly. "Then, in turn, it is but a matter of time until friend Pond comes around again."

"That I wouldn't know," Natalie Paskov said disinterestedly. "My job is done. However, the poor man seems so utterly opposed to returning to your service that I wouldn't be surprised if he remained in his retirement, living on his Inalienable Basic shares. He seems literally terrified of being subjected to space cafard again."

But Hans Girard-Perregaux wagged a finger negatively at her. "Not after having enjoyed a better way of life for the past decade. A person is able to exist on the Inalienable Basic dividends, but it is almost impossible to bring oneself to it once a fuller life has been enjoyed. No, Seymour Pond will never go back to the dullness of life the way it is lived by nine-tenths of our population."

Natalie came to her feet. "Well, gentlemen, you'll get your bill—a whopping one. I hope your need justifies this bit of dirty work. Frankly, I am considering my resignation from Extraordinary Services, although I'm no more anxious to live on my Inalienable Basic than poor Si Pond is. Good day, gentlemen."

She started toward the door.

The teevee-phone on Gubelin's desk lit up and even as Doctor Girard-Perregaux was saying unctuously to the girl, "Believe me, my dear, the task you have performed, though odious, will serve the whole race," the teevee-phone said:

"Sir, you asked me to keep track of Pilot Seymour Pond. There is a report on the news. He suicided this morning."

**END**

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SPACEMAN ON A SPREE \*\*\*

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