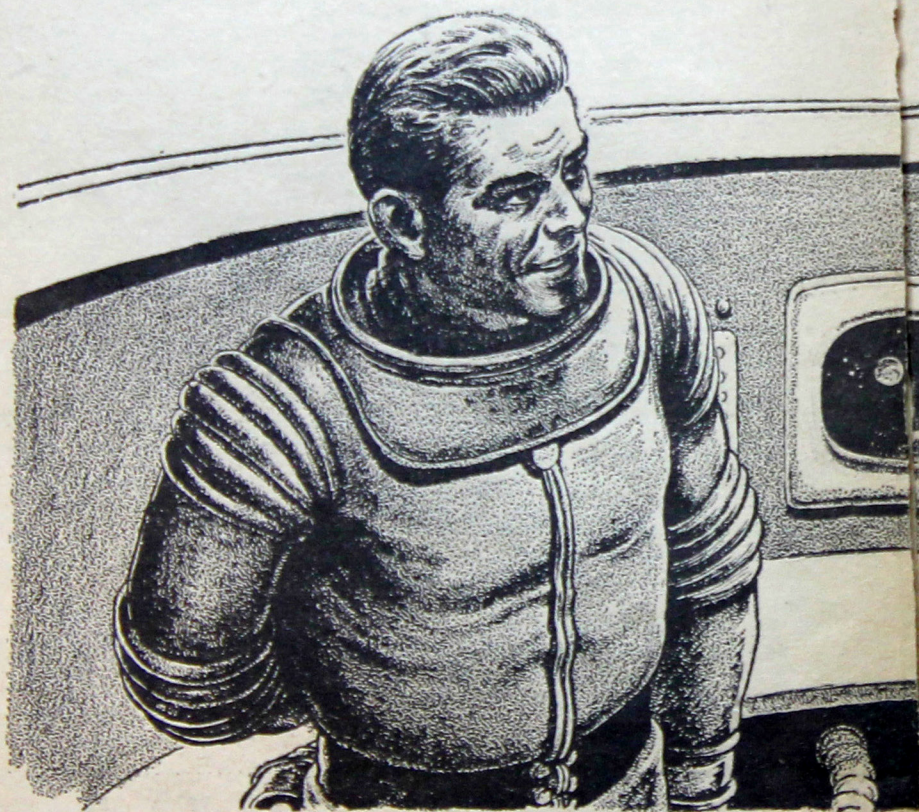


Many years ago Frank R. Stockton wrote a famous story called "The Lady and The Tiger." With the same fiendish cleverness, Poul Anderson creates a tale that we think, sf fans will talk about and argue over for years to come—a tale of real people, of life and death, of man's inhumanity (and humanity) to man.



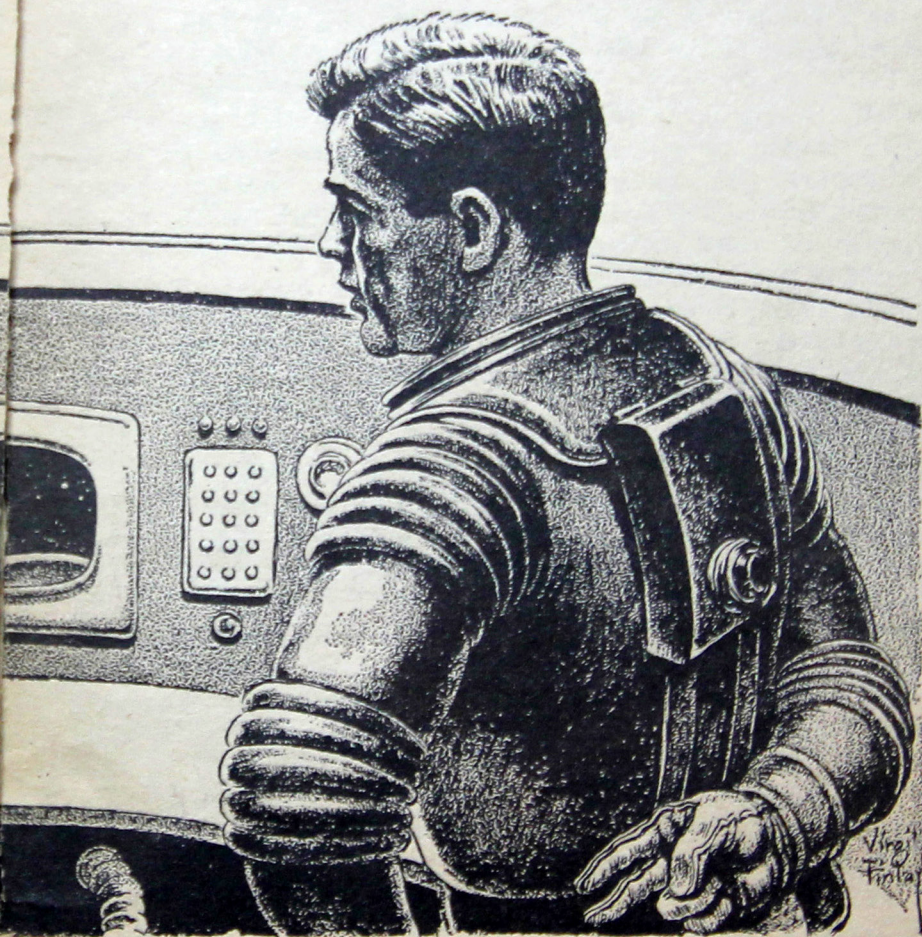
NOT long after sunset, a storm far out to sea veered in a direction the Weather Bureau computers had called improbable. By

midnight there was rain over Cape Canaveral and Buckler, roused from his bed, said the shot would likely have to be post-

THIRD STAGE

By POUL ANDERSON

Illustrated by FINLAY



poned. But the rain soon slacked off and technical crews beneath the arc lights could find no harm done their bird. At dawn there

was only an overcast, beneath which a muggy breeze came sighing through the gantrys and across the field. The final deci-

sion, whether to abort or go ahead, was left to the men who must actually ride the rocket. "Why on earth shouldn't we take her?" Swanberg shrugged. "Or off earth, for that matter." Holt nodded, a quick jerky movement: "Yeah, think a fifty million women who might have to watch Enis Preston today, if we aren't on the TV."

When Swanberg noticed a passing thought, he seldom let it go in a hurry. He was a large, squinting, tow-headed man with a friendly slow voice. As they left the briefing room and started toward the rocket, he went back to Holt's remark. "Do you really think this flight is such a big production, Jim?"

"Sure." His companion made a wide gesture at buildings, machines, and bare concrete. "Didn't you know? We're clean-limbed American boys bound forth to Ride Out The Lethal Space Storms."

"But, uh, it isn't that interesting. Just a routine orbital flight. Not as if we were the first men around the moon, or even the first Americans—"

"But we are the first men of any stripe, chum, to head into the Van Allen belt and stay a while. Haven't you watched *TV-Time*? Don't you know how far the new radiation screen puts us ahead of those Russian nogoodniks?" Holt shifted his helmet to

the other arm. "No, I guess you're uninformed, Bill. All you ever did was help develop the gadget. Probably spent your spare time with a book or some such anachronism. Downright subversive, I calls you."

Swanberg chuckled. He didn't like rapid-fire New York accents; the taut, status-scrabbling, publicity-wise types who infested the space project got on his nerves; but he made an exception for Holt. "Really, though," he said, "I don't get the reason for the ballyhoo. This hop is nothing but the last test of a long series. If the news services want something significant to report, why don't they do a piece on . . . oh, the ion feedback work, or—"

Holt spat. "You misunderstand, Bill. You think the news programs are to enlighten the people. Actually, they're to sell cigarets."

"Bitter today, aren't you?"

"Me? Christ, no. What have I got to be bitter about? A laugh a minute, every time I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh the video transmission. You're the soured old gaffer, not me."

"Could be." Swanberg sighed. He made no secret of wanting to go back to Idaho, where he spent every vacation as it was, tramping the mountains and the forests. But how do you get a job re-

motely comparable—in interest and importance; to hell with pay—that far from anyplace? When he looked at the rocket where it stood waiting, tower high, iceberg massive, but with speed and grace, *upwardness*, built into every flowing line, he forgot climate and office politics and his dreary little tract house and the desperate gaiety of Laura's farewell. There was only the bird, about to fly.

HOLT, brisk even in the blue spacesuit, reached the pad first. He gave his helmet to one of the technicians, who slipped it over his head and made it fast. All the techs were enlisted men this morning, Swanberg noticed. Though civilians like Holt and himself had been infiltrating the project in ever greater numbers since the organizational shakeup of '63, the Pentagon was fighting a valiant rearguard action. At that, he'd rather have generals breathing down his neck than the reporters who'd invaded his privacy during the past few days. Swanberg was by nature an obliging soul, but after a while he began to resent being told what pose to assume on his own patio. . . . The helmet went on him too. He stared through clear polydene at a last-minute bustle which had become muffled and vague in his ears.

"How's that, sir?" asked a

voice in the 'phone. "Comfortable?"

"Fine." Swanberg went almost absent-mindedly through the check routines. Not until he was rising in the cage with Holt, seeing the rocket's clifflike immensity slide past him, monster first stage, lanceolate second stage, and the capsule in the nose which would carry him around the world and through the radiation zone and back, not until then did he fully realize that the talking and planning and trying and failing and starting over again were likewise past, that today he personally was going up.

He'd done so before, of course: nowhere near as often as Holt, the test pilot; but several times, in connection with trying out some electronic development in which he had had a part. Not even a night along the upper Kootenai was as beautiful as the night above this gray heaven. He had envied the *voyageurs* who first saw the loneliness of the high West, until he became one of today's *voyageurs*—if only his journeys could be often-er! He pulled his mind back to practicalities, squeezed through the capsule airlock after Holt and strapped himself into his adjoining seat. Though the Aeolus three-stager was by now the most reliable workhorse in the whole American space program,

there would be a dull couple of hours to go through, checking and testing, before blastoff.

He threw a glance at Holt. The pilot's dark sharp features were misted. Sweat? Swanberg felt a slight shock. When he listened closely, he detected a note of shrillness in Holt's responses on the intercom. But Holt couldn't be scared; he wouldn't do this, time after time after time, if he was scared; why, merely thinking of his responsibilities, his own wife and kids, would—High-strung, that was it. Of course. Swanberg tried to relax and concentrate on his own job.

STAGE Two dropped on schedule. A-OK," said the voice from above. There was no need; telemetered instruments had registered the fact clearly enough in the control blockhouse. But Tom Zellman was glad of the words. They were a much needed dramatic touch. Blastoff had been great, as always, vapor clouds and immense boneshaking roar and sudden, accelerating climb of the giant. But since then there had been little to see down here. He had had his cameramen pan in on the faces of the ground crew—visible through a thick glass panel between their work space and the TV booth—until he felt his audience was sick of it. His roving reporters elsewhere on the

base had gotten nothing interesting from the scientists. The interviews amounted to a bunch of young crewcuts and old Herr Doktors saying yes, we sent men on the final test of the radiation screen, but not to check on the screen itself; our unmanned shots gave us enough such data; only because man is the one instrument whose observations are not limited to those for which someone designed him. What kind of show was that? Especially when the Dodgers-White Sox game would soon start on another network.

Zellman signalled for the view to cut back to him. He beamed and said resonantly: "A-OK. Everything's fine up there, Laura Swanberg, Jane Holt, and all your kids. Everything's fine, Mr. and Mrs. America." He deepened his tone. "Cold thousands of miles above the green fields of their native land, two young men are entering the deadly radiation current which boils eternally around our planet. Trusting their lives to an invisible shield of pulsed magnetic energies—and to God," he remembered to add, "they are going to circle the globe for ten lonely hours. If they succeed . . . if they come home again unharmed to their loved ones . . . then the way is open for Americans to explore the Solar System, unafraid of those lethal blasts from the sun

which—" He saw the Number Two cameraman holding his nose and barely suppressed a scowl. That smart aleck would hear from Tom Zellman after this was over. "—which have so long limited the time and places our ships could venture beyond the atmosphere." Well, maybe the corn syrup was getting too thick at that. Zellman flipped a switch and projected a still pic onto a screen for transmission.

IT WAS a cutaway view of a standard Aeolus third stage. Because a good deal of the innards had still been secret when the drawing was made, the artist had relied considerably on his imagination. Joe Blow wouldn't know the difference anyway. The capsule was shown blasting with its spin jets as well as the main rocket motor. Actually, Zellman supposed, those small swiveling nozzles were only to aim it in the right direction. The real thrust would come from the stern jet. And would hardly be used at the present time. Maybe a bit of push here and there, to get Stage Three into precisely the correct orbit. But generally speaking, Stage Two did that job. The main task of the Stage Three motor was to bring the capsule down again—to brake orbital velocity until the ship spiraled into atmosphere and its parachute could take over.

HOWEVER, the clip was a good dramatic pic. Zellman left his desk and pointed at the two human figures. "That's Jimmy Holt piloting the spaceship. The ground crew is standing alertly by, ready to take over if he needs help. A giant computer clicks madly" (or does it whirr, or flash lights, or what?) "digesting the information sent down by radio instruments. Powerful remote-control impulses are sent back, guiding, helping. But in the last analysis, the pilot controls the ship. How do you like that, Pete and Hughie? That's your dad there, riding that rocket like a cowboy rides a bronco. Next to him Billy Swanberg peers at the radiation shield meters. If the screen should fail—But no, little Julie, that isn't going to happen. Your father is going to come back to you, safe and sound—"

"*Preparing to assume final orbit,*" said the dry voice. There went a hissing and crackling undertone of static.

"That was Jimmy Holt," explained Zellman. "Jimmy Holt, preparing for the last delicate touch of jets that will throw him into the heart of the densest Van Allen belt." He glanced at the clock. The damn capsule ought to be stabilized or whatever you called it in another few minutes. Then he could turn the program over to Harry while he got

lunch. He'd missed breakfast and his belly was growling. Good Lord! Suppose the sound mikes picked that up?

The idea worried him so much that for a while, a whole thirty or forty seconds, the fact didn't register on him, what it meant, Holt speaking again: "The main jet doesn't respond. The goddam thing won't fire. What's gone wrong?"

THE vision scope showed Earth like a globe of itself, so enormous against blackness that Holt's eyes joined his middle ear canals in making weightlessness appear to be a meteor's fall. Any minute now, any second, they'd hit the ground and spatter. . . . He shook off the illusion. *Stop that, you schnook. You've been orbital often enough to know better. I wish to God we were headed down. No, we're stuck in the sky like Mohammed's coffin. Like half a dozen other dead guys in capsules that never returned, still whirling around the world. I wonder if we'll see one of 'em.*

He pulled his gaze from the scope. Bill Swanberg could sit for hours mooning over how pretty Earth was. Holt had other business on hand. He'd long ago stopped getting any kicks from the scenery. (Oh, no denying it had beauty, the vast round ball, softly blue, banded with white

clouds, blazoned with green and dusky continents . . . crowned by uncountably many stars, guarded by the Horned Goddess herself . . . but the cabin here wasn't big enough to swing a kitten, it clicked and whickered, ventilators blew continuous gusts in your face, the air stank of oil and man, and you really had no time to look at anything but the meters.) He had never been glamor-struck by the spaceships anyhow. When routine psychophysical exams showed he had a natural aptitude for piloting, he'd snapped at the offer from Canaveral, because that was an even quicker route to executive rank than the engineering in which he had trained. A pilot who knew his way around people and watched his chances could step into some very fat jobs after a few years.

If he lived that long, of course.

Holt glanced at Swanberg. Unhelmeted, the electronics man's broad freckled face glittered with sweat. Little droplets broke off and floated in the air currents. But he proceeded doggedly with his instrumental checks. From time to time he told Base his results, in a perfectly cool tone. Bill was a good joe, Holt thought. The phrase struck him funny. He started to laugh, but stopped himself in time.

"That's about everything," Swanberg finished.

"You're getting near our horizon," said the man down at Canaveral. Static hissed and sputtered around his words. "I think we can figure out what your trouble is, though, before you're gone from line of sight."

"Hope so," Swanberg drawled. "Hate to wait out another half orbit or thereabouts, wondering whether it's gremlins or trolls." He hesitated. "Standing by, then," he said. "Over and out." He cut off the transmitter.

TRAVELING eastward at miles per second, the capsule was once again over the night side. Earth's disc had become a crescent, its darkness edged with sunlight and tinged by moonlight. Had the tracking stations in that hemisphere been prepared, continuous contact would have been maintained. But they weren't. No one had expected this to be anything but a milk run.

"How's the rad screen holding out?" Holt asked, to drown the machinery noises. His throat felt caught between cold fingers.

"Fine," Swanberg said. "Hardly an electron more is getting through than 'ud get through half an Earth atmosphere."

Suddenly his calm was intolerable. Holt pounded the control panel with his fist, softly and repeatedly. His thin body rebounded in the harness. "What's gone

wrong?" he groaned. "Why won't the main jet fire?" In a rush of resentment: "Goddam Rube Goldberg monstrosity. Five million things to go haywire. Why can't they design 'em simple and right?"

"They're working on it," said Swanberg. "But a spaceship has a lot of separate functions to perform, you know. You and I are Rube Goldberg monstrosities too. It doesn't take much to make us stop functioning—one blood clot can do it."

"Yeah, yeah. I guess so." Holt tensed his tongue to spit, but recalled where he was. "So much for that God guff," he said. "I can't believe in a God who's that lousy an engineer."

"I daresay a molecule of fuel could make a similar objection as it burns," Swanberg answered. "No religion worth a hoot ever promised us happiness. We do get a fighting chance, though. Does a man really want more?"

"This one does," Holt said. "I want to get back where I belong."

"Sure," Swanberg said. "Don't misunderstand me, Jim." A grin stretched his mouth, less a smile than a baring of teeth. "I'm scared worse than you are."

"Wanna bet?"

SILENCE closed in again. Holt tried frantically to think of

something to say that wouldn't sound too stupid. Speculation on what the trouble with the rocket was . . . but that was being computed, not guessed at, down on Base, where they had not only the data Swanberg sent but information telemetered from the entire ship. . . . Continue the God argument? No, he and Bill had left their sophomore years behind them. . . . Sentimental reminiscences about wives and kids? Cannonballs! Laura and Janie—oh, Janie gal—

"Canaveral to Aeolus. Canaveral to Aeolus."

The voice was dim, wavering across the scale, nearly drowned in hoots and squeals and buzzes. So fierce was the ionic current beyond this hull that a tight, hard-driven FM beam could barely get through. But Swanberg leaped in his chair to switch on the transmitter. Holt beat him to it.

"Do you receive me, Aeolus? Cana—"

"Aeolus to Canaveral," Holt rattled through a mouth full of cotton and pepper. "We read you. What's the word?"

The voice dropped formalities. It shook. "We've identified your trouble. I'm afraid—the—Your main discharge valve is stuck. Probably a thin seal of ice, due to condensation last night when the air was so damp. A, a little water vapor in that cranny—you

know?—normally the rocket exhaust would flush it out, but in this case—"

"Get to the point!" Holt screamed, for the voice was fading away every second. "What do we do?"

"Can't cut out the safety circuits and blow the valve open with a minimal jet," came the remnant of answer. "Ordinarily you could, but—" Static sheeted.

"I know that," Swanberg barked. "The rad screen's in the same hookup, to save weight. We'd fry. I helped install the blinking thing, you! What *can* we do?"

A gulp: "Someone . . . got to go out the airlock . . . crawl around behind, into the tube, bust the ice loose by hand—one of you—" Then there was only the seething.

Holt stared at a meter face for an indefinite while. Eventually he glanced at Swanberg. The big man was finishing a slide rule calculation.

"I suppose you know the magnetic deflection effect drops off on a steep inverse square curve," Swanberg said without tone. "If a guy went outside here in the middle of the Van Allen, even hugging the hull, he'd get a lethal dose in something like ten minutes. How long would he need to free the valve and get back inside?"

"Half an hour, at least," Holt

heard himself answer. "It's a clumsy business, working in free space."

They fell silent again.

TOM Zellman looked straight into the pickup. As soon as the news arrived, he had ducked out to change his sports shirt—although it was his trade mark—for a dark suit and sincere tie. Now he spoke in measured cadence.

"You have just seen an interview with General Buckler, commander of Cape Canaveral Base, the man on whose shoulders has fallen the agonizing responsibility of choosing who shall live and who shall die," he said. "General Buckler did not, of course, have time to explain the situation in detail." (General Buckler, in point of fact, had retreated so far into his military shell that getting a dozen words from him had been like milking a constipated cow. Hysterical reaction; this kind of publicity could crumple a career. But Zellman would cover for him: such IOU's were always collectible later.) "So let me try, Mr. and Mrs. America. You want to know what faces your boys out there. Savage cold, blazing heat, whizzing meteorites, weightlessness, raw vacuum . . . and now the deadly, blasting radiation of the charged particle zone in which they are trapped.

"Because one valve has stuck, the main jet on their capsule won't fire. The side jets are only for steering. Their small separate motors can't burn long enough to bring the capsule down out of orbit. It won't be hard to get that vital part unstuck. Half an hour or less, and the third stage rocket is free to come home again. But—that half hour must be spent outside the hull. The force screen that protects Billy and Jimmy from the radiation, *inside* the cabin, cannot protect the man who goes out. He will get such a searing blast through his spacesuit that no medical science can save him. In a few days he will be dead. But his comrade" (oops!) "his friend will come down to Earth unharmed." Zellman dropped into the upper bass register. "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend."

THE teleboard behind the cameras had been forming words for some seconds. Zellman crooked a finger beneath his desk. A boy came running and handed him a sheet of paper. Zellman unfolded it and spent thirty seconds letting emotions play across his face. Then he lowered the paper—carefully, so the audience couldn't see it was blank—and raised the pitch and speed of his delivery.

"Flash! Three more tracking

stations have locked onto the capsule. This means that continuous two-way contact can be maintained. Billy and Jimmy can't see us, but our voices, our prayers, can come to them. By special arrangement, this network will have the honor of preparing the unofficial messages they can now receive. Do you hear me, Jimmy and Billy? You are not alone. One hundred and ninety million of your fellow Americans are with you, fighting, suffering, praying with you." The teleboard wrote **STANDING BY WITH JANIE STILL CAN'T GET LAURIE.** "But you don't want to hear me talk," Zellman said, venturing a gallant smile. "We have contacted Jimmy's wife, Janie Holt, and his four children, Pete, Hughie, Susie, and little Gail. The engineer is signalling me that we can go on the air, Jimmy, direct from your own home to you. Do you hear me?"

Faintly, scratchily, as if it were a midge caught somewhere inside the blackness of a telephone receiver, there came: "Holt speaking. I read you." The engineer scowled and twiddled knobs in his cage. The sound wasn't going onto the TV frequencies very well. But his assistant nodded, and a monitor unit came to life beside Zellman's desk. The visual transmission across the country would be split-screen, one side showing

himself in the blockhouse TV booth on Base, the other side showing the scene in the monitor: Holt's family in their house downtown.

Jane Holt was small and dark like her husband. The plain black dress showed her figure to advantage, and the makeup man had done a good job on her and the kids. They were well posed too, the boys on either side of her chair, the girl at her knee and the baby in her arms.

"Hello, Janie," said Zellman with his Undertaker's Special smile.

"Hello . . . Tom." He wished she wouldn't speak quite so thinly.

"In a minute, Janie, we'll put you through to your Jimmy. But first, wouldn't you like to say a word to the rest of your family? Your family and his—the great, warm, wonderful family of America, hanging on the edge of their television screens, hoping, loving, and praying. Their hearts are with you at this moment. Believe me, they are; I know those wonderful people so well. Just a word, Janie?"

Whoever had set up the idiot board behind the camera in her place knew his job; her eyes seemed to look straight from the screen, into the viewer's. There hadn't been time to rehearse her, so her delivery was rather mechanical—

"—Thank you so much, each and every one of you. I, I know how much Jimmy thanks you too—"

—but on the whole, Zellman thought, she was effective. Harry had always been able to whip out a fast script with zing in it.

THE TELEBOARD SAID STILL CAN'T GET LAURIE STOP DOORS LOCKED AND CURTAINS DRAWN STOP DOESN'T ANSWER PHONE STOP HODGKINS AND BURR CAMPING ON HER PORCH WITH OTHER NETWORKS MEN AND REPORTERS.

"—God's will be done. But oh, we do hope Jimmy comes back safe!"

HAVING finished, Jane sat at a loss. Her kids stared woodenly into the camera, and the baby started to cry. Zellman said hastily, "Thank you, *Jannie*. Have you been in touch with Laurie Swanberg yet? You know her well, don't you?"

"Yes. No, I mean, I haven't heard from her. I, I tried to phone . . . we ought to be together, oughtn't we? . . . but—" Jane drew a deep breath and flung out: "She's probably off by herself, with her *two* children."

"I'll switch you over to your husband now," Zellman said before a crisis was precipitated.

"Jimmybuck," Jane said like a sleepwalker.

"Hi, kid," said the voice torn by static.

"How . . . how are you?"

"Okay so far. Sweating out the Old Man's decision."

"Jimmy—come back. Tell your daddy to come back." Hughie began to blubber. "We need you so."

"Hey, wait—" Holt's response was lost in the crackling.

"Jimmybuck, I love you," Jane said. She began to cry too.

"Same here, kid. All youse kids. But—" The static chose that exact moment to let up, so the harshness came through. "This is no place to say it, huh? We'll do whatever the Old Man tells us, Bill and me. So long, darling."

"*Jimmy!*" she called, once and again. Only the static answered. Until Swanberg said, recognizable as himself: "I think we better cut off transmission for a while."

"Is that you, Billy?" Zellman asked.

"This is Swanberg, yes."

"Billy, we've been trying as hard as we can to get your Laurie for you, but—"

"Aeolus to Canaveral," Swanberg said. "Over and out." There was a distinct snick. The static went off the air.

That bastard!

Zellman turned to Jane in the screen. She was weeping, quite prettily. But beyond a certain point in affairs like this, you risked a public squawk. "I think we had best leave you for a while,

Janie," he said, sweet and low. "Not alone, of course. You will never be alone again; our hearts will always be with you."

She whirled on him and screamed: "I've played your game! Why not? It might get him back. And we've got four children and she only has two!"

Luckily, Zellman and the camera crews had seen that coming, and had a delay circuit to help them. None of her outburst went onto the air.

THE teleboard said **BILLYS MOTHER CONTACTED IN TWIN FALLS AND CONSENTS TO INTERVIEW BUT NO SCRIPT.** Zellman signalled "Stand by" and his order was phoned to Idaho. Better space the tear jerking scenes further apart. He switched to outside views of the Holt and Swanberg houses, with his own commentary. The state police were breaking up the traffic jams.

Whoa! Laurie herself came out on the porch. She swatted three reporters aside and yelled for a cop and got him to chase everybody off her grounds. There was no chance for closeups; her door slammed again before a telecamera could arrive. But even from a distance—what a scene, what a **SCENE!**

Of course, she wasn't doing her husband's chances any good. Buckler wasn't dumb enough to

sentence the more popular man to death. . . . Trouble was, though, Swanberg was a big, good-looking, outdoors type; and not just any slob rocketeer, but a co-inventor of the rad screen. Popularity. . . .

The teleboard awoke. Zellman surged from his chair. He almost didn't find words, this was so big. He actually did forget to signal for a sheet of paper.

"Flash! Here's the word from Base headquarters. General Buckler has issued an announcement. Quote: 'Not only are Mr. Holt and Mr. Swanberg both valuable members of our project and citizens of our community, they are both civilians. As such, they lie beyond my authority to give more than normal orders, and this is not a normal situation. I have therefore sent a special request to the President that he decide which of them should perform the task in question. A reply is expected shortly.'

"Unquote. That was General Buckler's decision: to let the President of the United States choose, in the name of all America. While we wait, anxiously and prayerfully, here is a word from—"

FALLING and falling, Swanberg thought. And now the silence had began to press inward. Still he heard click, buzz, whirr, whuff; lately he had been

hearing the blup-blup of his heartbeat. (Maybe that was because it had gotten irregular, sometimes skipping so that he jerked in his harness and tried not to gasp.) Yet the silence grew.

Imagination, he understood intuitively. Silence wasn't a thing, it was an absence of sound, just as the void was an absence of matter. His sensation of black nothing eating in toward the core of himself was purely subjective, based on no more than . . . well, reality. The universe was in fact a trillion light-years of emptiness wherein a few sand grains were lost.

*No, now you're thinking like Jim. Size hasn't got anything to do with importance. Vacuum and gamma radiation are real, sure. But so's the sunlight on a mountain lake, and Laura, and—*He shook his weary head and turned to Holt. The pilot had tuned radio reception so far down that they could hear only a murmur; but he was alert for anything important. "What's being sent us now?" Swanberg asked.

Holt put his ear close to the receiver. "The Reverend Norbert Victor Poole, author of the best-selling book *The Strength in Confident Living*, will deliver us a message of hope shortly. And the Emperor of Abyssinia has added his official best wishes to those of other governments."

"Yeah," Swanberg mumbled.

Presently: "If they don't get off their dead ends and reach a decision soon, we'll have to toss a coin."

"Can't toss a coin in free fall, even if we had one," Holt said. "Gotta match fingers. You know, odd or even number of fingers spread at the same time. If you match me, you win, otherwise I do. Unless you'd rather it was the other way around."

Swanberg checked the odds. "Makes no difference."

"Maybe we should'a done it that way in the first place," Holt said. "Instead of asking Base for orders. But I just automatically figured—Or didn't I have the nerve? Better this way. Let an outsider give the word, backed by public opinion if not by law, and the unlucky one has got to go, period. But if we matched, and I lost . . . dunno what I'd do."

"Scared?" Swanberg asked, forcing a smile.

"Christ, yes. Worse every minute. Why don't those sods *decide*?"

"Would you like to make a choice like that . . . for somebody else?"

"I'd get it over with. I would! Judas, Bill, you aren't human, sitting there so quiet and—Why won't Laura talk to you?"

"With a planetful of morons listening in?" Swanberg snapped. "We know what we're

thinking right now, she and I. It's nobody else's business."

"Hey!" He saw Holt stiffen in the spacesuit. The pilot reached a fist toward him. "Do you mean Janie—What're you getting at? Spit it out!"

"Sorry. I'm awfully sorry," Swanberg exclaimed in dismay. "I didn't mean anything. Honest. Your arrangements are your own affair. She's got to do what she thinks is right."

HOLT unclenched his fist. The hand drifted limply between them. "I'm sorry too," he muttered. "I blew my top. She did embarrass the hell out of me." Suddenly he laughed. "What are we doing, being embarrassed? One of us is going to die in an hour or so."

"No, he'll take several days to die, on Earth," Swanberg said, stolidly, since that was his best defense against panic. "They'll send him wherever he asks." He paused. "They might even let him alone."

"Fat chance," Holt said.

Swanberg fumbled for words. "If . . . if you're the loser, Jim . . . I'll see to it that your family—"

"Oh, they'll be left well off, money-wise," Holt said. "Yours too, I suppose. Bill—"

"Yes?"

"Are you scared like I am?"

"Worse, probably."

"Thanks for saying so, any-

how. It's this sitting and waiting. I'd almost rather go out and do the job now, myself!" Holt started. "Hey, isn't that a call from Base?" He turned the receiver to full volume. The mellow baritone rolled forth:

"—Oh, my brave brothers, be happy, be confident. There is no death. God is waiting to call you home."

Swanberg reached out a long arm and switched on the transmitter. "Aeolus to Earth," he said, loud and clear. "Horse manure." He switched off again and Holt turned the receiver back down.

THE President of the United States left his desk and went to a window. Outside, the White House lawn stretched dazzling green—*What a beautiful planet we have*, he thought; *why do men go away from her to die?*—until it ended at the fence. Beyond, sidewalk and street were packed solid. The police had stopped trying to make the crowd move on. It wasn't physically possible. The latest word was that one man had had a fatal heart attack and one woman of less than average stature had suffocated out there. Not that the crowd was disorderly. The President thought he had never seen one more quiet.

"Death watch," he said aloud.

"Sir?" asked his press secre-

tary. They were alone together.

"Nothing. You know," said the President, "it's funny how a person keeps thinking of irrelevancies at a time like this. Anything to postpone the main issue. I keep wondering whether Buckler pulled me such a scurvy trick that I ought to have him transferred to the Aleutians . . . or did the only right and honorable thing under the circumstances."

"He could have told Holt and Swanberg to make their own decision," said the press secretary.

"No. That would have been shifting the burden onto them. And they have enough to bear." The President sighed. "There isn't any basis for decision. I've spent an hour with their dossiers. Both are fine, decent, outstanding citizens. Both have dependents who'd be cruelly hurt."

"Holt has two more kids than Swanberg does, Mr. President."

"That cuts very little ice with me. Especially remembering that Holt has no close kin alive, while Swanberg's got a mother and two sisters."

"Last time I had Tom Zellman on the phone, down at Canaveral, he said calls coming in to his station were running about five to three in favor of Holt. Of Holt getting back whole, I mean."

"No doubt," said the President dryly. "Swanberg and his wife have been less politic, shall we say. However, I feel reasonably

sure that his backers tend to be more intellectual, somewhat wealthier, and with more influence per capital. Three bankers and college presidents versus five housewives and mail clerks. Beg pardon, I mean five homemakers and junior executives. What sort of odds will that amount to by the time the next election rolls around? Pretty even, I'd guess."

The secretary made no answer, but the President filled one in for him and went on:

"Bitter? Of course I am. Bitter at how this whole affair has been mishandled, and bitter, with quite a little self-pity, at becoming the goat. The one who has to say, He shall live and you must die. I never wanted to play God."

"You'll have to, Mr. President."

"Uh-huh. Right now. I've prepared two statements here, one for Holt and one for Swanberg, explaining the reasons why he should be the survivor. They are good, sound, carefully chosen and shrewdly phrased reasons, if I do say so myself."

"And—?" The secretary stepped close.

"Lend me a quarter, Bob."

Wordlessly, the coin changed hands. "Heads, Holt," the President said. "Tails, Swanberg." He tossed. The coin caught a shaft of sunlight and glittered. He didn't catch it. It went on the rug. Both men knelt to look.

"Heads," said the secretary in a whisper.

The President nodded. He got slowly to his feet, like an aging man, and tore the paper with Swanberg's qualifications into shreds. The other he handed to the secretary. "Give this to the press as my considered reasons for picking Holt," he said. "Then clear my calendar. I'll call Buckler myself—I've got that much guts left—but I can't see anyone else today. Nobody."

CANAVERAL to Aeolus. Canaveral to Aeolus. Are you there? Come in, Aeolus."

Abruptly Holt knew what the mumble was—two or three syllables leaped out into his understanding—and he turned the volume high with darkness rising ragged before his eyes.

"Aeolus to Canaveral," said Swanberg across the roar in Holt's ears. "We read you. Come in, Canaveral."

How could Bill sit there like a stone toad and talk? Holt wondered for a moment if his own heart was going to explode.

"(Got them for you, sir.) Hello, Aeolus. This is General Buckler. How are you doing?"

"Okay," said Swanberg. Fighting his pulse rate down toward something reasonable, Holt saw that every trace of color had left the electronician's face. Yet he spoke with machine precision.

"But we'll have to begin deceleration soon or our air supply will get dangerously low."

"That's understood, Swanberg . . . Bill . . . that is you, isn't it? Yes. We, uh, we've heard from the President. Five minutes ago".

"What?" asked Swanberg without inflection. Holt clenched his fists until the nails scored the palms.

"I'm sorry, Bill," Buckler got out.

Swanberg didn't move a muscle, but the ventilation stirred the yellow hair on his head.

"The President's message is as follows," Buckler said. "My decision has been impossibly difficult, for both William Swanberg and James Holt are men whose loss will be felt as grievously by their country as by their own loved ones. However, since a decision must be made, in view of the fact that he has more children and that possibly he will make less pilot error in returning the capsule to Earth if he knows he is to live, I recommend that Mr. Holt remain within the cabin. To Mr. Swanberg and his family I can only extend my deepest sympathy and my assurance that none of us will ever forget his service."

"Thanks," Swanberg said. "We'll get right to work."

"W-w-we're trying to contact your wife," said Buckler.

"No!" Swanberg exclaimed. "Not that. Leave her alone, you hear me?" He snapped off the transmitter with such violence that he almost broke the switch.

I'm going to live, it shouted in Holt. *I'm going to live*. Then he met Swanberg's eyes.

THEY regarded each other a long time. "What can I say, Bill?" Holt managed in the end. He could barely form the words; his tongue felt like a lump of wood.

"Nothing. It's okay, Jim. No hard feelings." Swanberg was quite gray, but he extended his hand.

"Damnation, I wish—I almost wish—"

"It's okay, I tell you." Swanberg left his hand out, untaken, for Holt hadn't seen it. "The President's a good man. Wasn't easy for him either."

"N-no. I wish he'd left out that 'loved ones' cornball, though."

"Me too. Well, no sense wasting time. Shake," Swanberg reminded him.

They clasped hands. Both felt cold.

"Hello, Billy, and you too, Jimmy," roared the receiver. "This is Tom Zellman down at Base. By special arrangement, at this most solemn moment, the Boys' Choir of the New York cathedral of your church, Billy, is preparing to sing the hymns chosen by your

mother in Twin Falls. We will be bringing you her own voice as soon as we can. Meanwhile, the Reverend Norbert Victor Poole—"

"Oh, no!" Holt breathed.

"Hello, Jimmy," said the rich baritone. "Yes, you, Jimmy. I am talking to you. For you have a role even more difficult than Billy. He is making the supreme sacrifice and then going to his so fully deserved eternal reward. But you must live. You must use the life your friend is giving you, confidently, inspiringly, so that the youth of America—"

Holt turned him off.

"You'll have to switch back on," Swanberg sighed. "To get return instructions. But I dare say they'll skip the organ music then." His lips tightened. "Help me on with my helmet, will you? I've got to get outside. Before Mother—Hurry up, will you?"

Holt sat very still. *I don't have to dance at their show*, he thought. *I haven't got strings tied on me. Yet.* It was as if someone else entered him.

"Wait a minute," he said, speaking fast so that he wouldn't get time to interrupt himself; for the fear was thick in his chest. "Ease off. I've got some say in this too."

"You?" Swanberg's tone hurt. Maybe he didn't mean the way he spoke, but—

"Yeah," Holt chattered. "I've

been here with you a good many hours now, listening to 'em below passing the buck, like a mucking three-stage rocket, Buckler to the President, and meanwhile using us to sell underarm grease. Using Janié, as far as that goes. I wish she'd had Laura's backbone."

"Hell," muttered Swanberg, flushing the least bit, "that's only a matter of—uh—"

"Lemme finish, damn you! We started this nightmare, you and me, passing the buck ourselves. Now it's come back to us. Or ought to, at least. We're the third stage. What the hell am I saying? Mainly, I guess, we don't have to go along with this farce. The President knows that. Think his words over. He didn't order, he recommended. He hasn't got power to give orders. As long as this bucket is aloft, only the captain can give orders that stick, and I'm the captain."

"What are you getting at?" Swanberg's big hands reached as if to seize Holt and shake him, but withdrew again, an inch at a time. The ship mumbled, tumbling through endlessness.

"We don't have to go along

with them," Holt yelled. "I've had it, I tell you. Up to here. Shut up, I'm the captain. Listen. I'm not trying to be any hero, but—I don't know. Maybe I'm afraid you'd come back every night. . . . I'll take full responsibility, when we reach Base. You don't have to fear any consequences. Buckler, the President, and now me. I'm the third stage and I've cut loose and I'm going home under my own power!"

HE recognized the hope that flickered so wildly across the other man's face, and a part of him shrieked with anger at the foolishness of the other part and none of him understood very well what this was about. But having gone this far, he couldn't retreat. And it was worth it—maybe completely worth it, maybe only almost worth it—to know, for however long he might live, that he was a free man.

"What do you mean?" Swanberg sagged in his harness.

"We're going to do this right," Holt answered. He put one hand behind his back. "Odd or even. Match me."

THE END

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