

'Tis the season once again, and if SF magazines don't quite lend themselves to gala Christmas issues, it doesn't mean we're not having a spirited time here in the office. Meanwhile, here's a story about the ultimate Christmas sell-out—Christmas Eve in the Green Pastures Room of an orbiting nightclub, complete with baromat, buxom angels and a new singing group called the Celestial Seven. Awful. Now you'll have to pardon us; that red package the boy just placed on our desk turned out to be Chivas, 12-years-old. Cheers!

KINGDOM COME, INC.

by Robert F. Young

FOR SOME REASON I FAIL TO notice this guy until he comes into the Seventh Heaven baromat, which is strange, because during the early part of the evening I always station myself at the Pearly Gates whenever a shuttle ship comes up from Earth and greet the customers. That's why everybody calls me Pete, when my real name is Charley. It's strange also because he isn't the sort of guy anybody would be likely to overlook. Not only because he's tall and thin and distinguished looking and has real class, but because his face is so sad. You never saw a man with such a sad face. It's as though he is convinced that the world is coming to an end and feels sorry for everybody in it, including himself.

He walks across the room and sits down on a stool not far from where I am leaning on the counter talking to Henry the Hustler and, after a quick look over his shoulder, orders a glass of sarsaparilla. It's the first time the baromat has ever had a call for such a concoction, its banks of lights go on and off like crazy, and it appears for a moment that it is going to throw an electronic fit, but finally it calms down, and the little window in front of the stranger opens up and the drink comes out. He is wearing a quiet gray business suit which is a little the worse for wear, a black string tie, and plain black oxfords. There is nothing fancy about him at all, but that's part of what I mean by real class. It's something you can't put your finger on, but you can see it when it's there. I'm what you call a dresser myself, and I wouldn't dream of wearing a tie that didn't match my socks. But I never fool anybody, least of all myself. I have a full-length mirror in my suite, and every time I get dressed for my tour of duty, which starts at eight at night and ends at five in the morning, I take a good long look at myself, and all I ever see is a spaceclub-station manager who draws a big fat paycheck every week and who goes in for bourbon and big blondes.

Anyway, it's this guy's class that starts me to wondering what he is doing in a place like the Seventh Heaven, because it makes him stand out from the rest of the customers like a glass of champagne on a barful of beers. Big Tony, I reflect, has seven Heavens working for him up here in the sky, but Big Tony doesn't own the sky, and there's nothing to stop somebody else from orbiting a few spaceclub stations of their own. So maybe this guy is a billionaire promoter who is doing a little scouting around with the idea in mind of going into the Heaven business himself, and if he is, I better find out ahead of time.

So I walk down the counter to where he is sitting and introduce myself and say, "Welcome to the Seventh Heaven Club. Will you do me the honor of having a drink on the house, seeing that this is the first time you've ever visited our celestial establishment and seeing also that there are only two more days left before Christmas?"

He says his name is Mike, and that no thanks, he doesn't care for another sarsaparilla right now. He has a soft sad voice, and he brings out his words with an almost bell-like clearness. For some reason, I take a liking to him right away. "Have you visited any of our other Heavens?" I ask politely.

"No," he says, shaking his head, "this is the first one I've entered to date."

"Well, you'll never enter a better one," I tell him. "This one is the best of the lot. That's because it was built last. When you build something last you can profit from the mistakes you made before and work in a lot of improvements you might not have thought of otherwise."

"Yes, that's very true."

I am reasonably convinced by now that orbiting a few Heavens of his own is as remote from Mike's mind as the Andromeda galaxy is from Timbuktu and that he is visiting the Seventh Heaven for no other reason than to get his mind off his troubles. So I ask, "Like me to show you around the place?"

"Why yes," he says, "I'd be delighted."

I take him to the Green Pastures Room first. It's the second largest compartment in the space-club station and when you step inside your first thought is that you really are in Heaven. The deck is covered with wall-to-wall carpeting that looks and feels and smells exactly like green grass. The ceiling is perspectivized to look like a blue sky, and little white clouds suspended on invisible wires drift back and forth in an imaginary wind. Also, there's an artificial sun which is so cleverly perspectivized that it looks as though it's a million miles away instead of only fifty feet. All four walls are covered with three-dimensional electro-murals which blend with the floor and the ceiling and make it seem as though the green grass and the blue sky extend for miles and miles and miles on every side. In the distance you can see green hills with cows grazing on them. I asked Big Tony once about the cows, saying that if I remembered right, cows didn't go to Heaven, and he said, "Maybe not, but this happens ta be *my* Heaven, and if I want cows in it I'm going ta have them."

The roulette tables and the cocktail lounges are painted green and appear to be part of the natural scenery. All of the lounges are full when Mike and I come in, and as usual the roulette tables are doing a landslide business. The voices of the croupiers and the voices of the customers are pleasantly backgrounded by taped music, and angels are running this way and that, carrying trays of drinks. They're not real angels, of course, but 40-28-38 Big Tony girls wearing artificial golden wings and not much else.

Mike looks up at the sky. He stares at the green grass that seems to spread out for miles and miles and miles on every side. He glances sideways at the angels. He gapes at all the guys and the girls lounging in the cocktail lounges. He stares at the crowded roulette tables. "Gosh!" he says. And then, "No wonder."

"No wonder what?" I ask.

He looks at me with those sad blue eyes of his and then looks away. "I—I guess I'd rather not talk about it."

I can see, though, that he does want to talk about it, whatever it is, but I don't press him. I find myself liking him more and more by the minute. "Come on," I say, "I'll show you the Still Waters Room."

The Still Waters Room *is* the largest compartment in the space-club station. It's similar to the Green Pastures Room except, as you'd naturally expect, water plays the leading role instead of grass. There are ponds and little lakes and brooks and winding streams and all of them are so clear and sparkling that just to look at them is enough to make you want to go for a swim. That's what the guys and girls are doing when Mike and I come in. Oh, a few of them are sitting on the grassy banks, chug-a-lugging champagne out of mini-magnums, but the majority already have their clothes off and are frolicking in the H-Two-Oh.

There is a bewildered expression on Mike's face. "Aren't—aren't they supposed to walk by them?" he says.

I don't catch what he means at first. "Walk by what?" I ask.

"By the Still Waters. It doesn't seem quite appropriate for them to be ah —ah—"

"Oh, that," I say. "That's a mere technicality. The Still Waters are there—that's the main thing. If they want to walk by them, they can, and if they want to horse around in them, they can do that too. It's up to them. So long as they pay the tab, it makes no difference to Big Tony what they do."

"Big Tony?"

"He's the wheel. Owns all the seven Heavens. Real nice guy."

A thoughtful look comes into Mike's eyes, driving out some of the sadness. He glances over his shoulder and then back at me. "Do—do you think—"

"Do I think what?"

"Oh, never mind," he says, and the sadness comes back. "It was just a thought. I'd never make out anyway."

I let it go at that. I have a hunch he'll return to the subject before long, and I'm right. After I have

shown him the fun rooms and we are walking along the corridor that gives access to the crew's quarters, the main hub tube, the angels' rooms, my suite, the special suite set aside for Big Tony, and circles back to the baromat, he throws a quick look over his shoulder and then says to me in a low voice, "Do—you think Big Tony would give me a job?"

Immediately I am all business. "Any experience?" I ask.

"In—in a way."

We have reached the end of the corridor by this time, and we enter the baromat and find two vacant stools and sit down on them. I order a bourbon and water, and he orders a sarsaparilla. "In what way?" I ask.

He takes a nervous sip and sets his glass back down on the counter. "I—that is, my six brothers and I—used to run a place analogous to this one."

"What do you mean—analogous to it?"

"Like it, and yet not like it. But I've had considerable experience in the managerial line, and—"

I can contain my enthusiasm no longer. "Why, that's great!" I tell him. "Big Tony's looking for someone to manage Heaven number 5. The guy managing it now can't adjust himself to centrifugal grav and keeps getting spacesick all the time and wants to quit, and Big Tony said he'd let him just as soon as he could find somebody to take his place."

"Do—do you think he'd consider—"

"I don't see why not. Look, he's going to be here tomorrow night—every Christmas Eve he plays Santa Claus in one of his Heavens, and this Christmas Eve it's going to be this one, and he'll arrive a day early. So as soon as he shows, I'll speak to him about you and arrange an interview. That is, if you can make it tomorrow night—"

"Can I!" There are tears in the poor guy's eyes. But even though there is sadness in them too, I can see that he has taken out a new lease on life. He even forgets to look over his shoulder. "Pete, I'll never forget you for this!" he says. "Why, it'll be like old times, almost. Back in harness again, with a place of my own, and new customers to greet and take care of and—and—why Pete, you've made me whole again!"

His gratitude embarrasses me, especially in view of the possibility that he may not get the job after all. So I call over Pinky MacFarlane, who is one of the hostess angels we keep on hand to entertain the stag customers, and introduce him to her, thinking that an angel is just what he needs to relax him. Then I excuse myself, saying that I have to go over the books, and retire to my office.

When I return to the baromat a couple of hours later, Mike is gone, so I naturally assume that he and Pinky have discovered some mutual interests and are sojourning in one of the fun rooms. Then who should come up to me but Pinky herself, all alone and carrying a big chip on her shoulder. "You've got your nerve," she says, "saddling me with a yech like that! Where'd you find him—living on an asteroid?"

This enrages me. "Is this the thanks I get for introducing you to a real gentleman for a change and providing you with an opportunity to better yourself culturally?" I ask. "Where is he now?"

"I don't know where he is," Pinky says, "and I don't care. He didn't even offer to buy me a drink—he just sat there sipping that yechy sarsaparilla of his and staring at my wings. And when I said, 'What's the matter—don't you approve of my pinions?', he said, 'I'm sorry, Miss MacFarlane—I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that I'm having a hard time adjusting myself to some of the more literal aspects of this new order of things.' So I ast him, 'What's new about a girl wearing wings? Us Big Tony girls have been wearing them ever since Heaven number 1 opened up, and—'"

"Never mind all that," I interrupt her. "Just tell me where he went."

"I told you, I don't know. I talked him into going to the G.P. Room, thinking maybe he'd loosen up with some of his LBJ's, but we never got there. While we were passing the Pearly Gates, he dropped behind me, and when I looked around, he was gone."

"Probably took an early shuttle-ship back to Earth," I muse aloud. "He looked kind of tired."

"But there weren't any shuttle-ships in the boat bay. I know, because I looked."

"Probably the one he took had already pulled out."

This must be the case, because I see no more of him that night. By the time I turn in at 5:00 A.M. I

have pretty much forgotten all about him, but I remember him right away when Big Tony comes into my suite late that afternoon while I am eating breakfast. "Big Tony," I say, "I've got just the man for that number 5 spot of yours," and I tell him the whole story.

"Sure, Pete," he says, after I finish. "I'll talk ta him. You bring him inta my soot just as soon as he shows up."

Mike arrives on the 8:15 shuttleship, but it's like the night before: even though I am stationed at the Pearly Gates to welcome the customers, I don't see him till afterwards when he walks into the baromat. I can tell that he's real nervous, because he keeps glancing over his shoulder every other step he takes. "What did Big Tony say, Pete?" he asks in a low voice, joining me at the counter where I am keeping company with a big blond angel named Doris. "Will he see me?"

"Take it easy, Mike," I say. "You've got yourself all worked up over nothing. Come on—I'll take you to him."

Big Tony is in his dining room eating dinner. He waves us into two chairs with what's left of a leg of lamb. The table is spread with squab, lobster, pheasant, duck, suckling pig, sweetbreads, smoked whitefish, veal cutlets, grapes, oranges, tangerines, apples, corn-on-the-cob, asparagus, rolls, butter, and sundry other items. It is a large table, but Big Tony makes it seem small. That's because he's such a big man. Sometimes after a meal he goes as high as 550 pounds. His face is real broad, but the flesh doesn't sag the way you'd think it would. That's because he's still young yet.

Whenever he talks, his face takes on a kind of glow. Some people say that this is because there's a film of sweat covering it. But I know better. The glow comes from inside. It's as though there's a big bonfire burning in him that he has to keep refueling all the time and as though the glow from it comes right through his skin. Let me tell you, it takes a big man like Big Tony with a big bonfire burning in him to create seven Heavens and hang them up in the sky.

"So this is Mike," he says, spearing a squab with his fork. "Pete here says you used to run a place of your own. That right?"

"Yes sir," Mike says. "That is, I used to help run one. Last week, my six brothers and I decided to get out, and we did."

"Why?"

"Because business had fallen off to a point where it was no longer practical for us to stay. Oh, there's still our old customers, of course, but they don't need us any more."

"What made it fall off?"

Mike shifts uneasily in his chair. "I—I guess it was our entry fee that was mostly to blame. Even in the beginning, people found it pretty steep. But just the same a lot of them paid it, and we couldn't have lowered it in any case. When things started to go bad, we thought that what with the population explosion and the demand for higher and higher education that they'd pick up again. But they didn't. They just got worse and worse and worse, and finally my brothers and I looked reality in the face and got out."

Big Tony is working on the drumstick of a duck. "What makes you think you could show a profit on one of my places when you couldn't show a profit on your own?"

"Why, I hadn't thought about it in exactly that way, sir. But I feel certain I could succeed."

"A feeling ain't enough." Big Tony begins gesturing with his fork. "You failed once—you'll fail again. And tell you why. You don't know the three golden rules. I'll tell them ta you but it won't do no good, because you won't go by them. You can't go by them, because you're built upside down. Here they are—listen. *One*: give people what they really want. Ta hell with what they say they want and ta hell with what they pretend they want and ta hell with what you think they should want. Give them what they *really* want. *Two*: price it low enough so they can afford it and high enough so that they'll think it's something special. *Three*: make sure they can see it, feel it, and smell it. If they can't, they won't buy it. The world is full of businessmen who failed just because they couldn't follow those three simple rules. You expect me ta hire a businessman like that ta manage one of my space-clubs?"

"But Big Tony," I butt in, "Mike needs a job and—"

Big Tony looks at me with a pained expression on his face. "Did I say I wasn't going to give him one?" he asks.

"No-no, you didn't, but—"

"Like you told me, Pete, this guy's got real class. I'd have rocks in my head the size of asteroids if I didn't know just by looking at him that I'd get my money's worth even if I hired him just to walk around the place and do nothing. He's window dressing—real window dressing. But I'd have even bigger rocks in my head if I made a manager out of him, because manage, he can't." Big Tony looks at Mike. "What *can* you do?" he asks.

Mike throws a quick glance over his shoulder. "I—I can sing a little," he says. "Hymns and carols and stuff like that."

Big Tony winces, but he's game. "Okay—let's hear something."

Mike gets to his feet. He throws another quick glance over his shoulder, then he clears his throat. "This one's called *In the Garden*," he says, and lets loose with the sweetest, most heavenly, Irish tenor you have ever heard in all your life.

Big Tony sits spellbound till the hymn is finished. So do I. Then Big Tony says, "Holy Mackerel!"

"I'm afraid I don't do very well, just by myself," Mike says apologetically. "You see, I'm used to working with my brothers. Gabe, he plays the trumpet, while Raf and the rest of us sing. We've never performed in public, though, and—"

"*They* sing like that, too?" Big Tony asks incredulously.

"Well no, not exactly. Actually, Raf stands head and shoulders above the rest of us in the singing department. He—"

"Are your brothers looking for a job, too?"

"Oh yes—they're as desperate for one as I am. You see—"

"Well tell them they're hired," Big Tony says. "Tell them they start tomorrow night." He turns to me. "Do you see it, Pete?"

I don't yet—not quite—but I am beginning to. "I am beginning to, Big Tony," I say.

He pops a bunch of grapes into his mouth and starts peeling an orange. His eyes are shining, but the effect is marred by the folds of fat that surround them. "The Green Pastures Room," he says. "Tomorrow night. Christmas Eve. That's when we'll launch them. With carols. It's a natural. Do you see it, Pete—do you see it?"

I have the picture now. "We'll build a special platform for them," I say excitedly. "A stage. Right next to where we're going to put the Christmas tree. And we'll spring them as a surprise."

"Ha! We'll do better than that. We'll put them on TV. I'll buy the time. I don't care how much it costs. We'll let the whole world know what it's like to go to Seventh Heaven, We'll show them we've got class up here—real class. And after Christmas we'll get Mike and his brothers working on some modern numbers and start rotating them between the spaceclubs . . . How big a Christmas tree you order, Pete?"

"A twenty-foot spruce."

"Get a bigger one. The bigger the better. There's room enough for a forty-footer, easy."

"Right, Big Tony. I'll have the angels trim it tomorrow afternoon. And I'll fix up Mike and his brothers with some costumes with wings."

"Big golden ones," Big Tony says. "The bigger the better. And have the crew retract the hull above the ceiling so the stars can shine through the sky . . . were you going to say something, Mike? You're getting a thousand a week to start, you know."

"I—I was just clearing my throat," Mike says.

"Good," says Big Tony. "It's all set then. Take care of everything, Pete."

Well I want to tell you, I am a busy man for the next twenty-four hours. First there is the TV time to arrange for. This takes a long stint on the station-to-Earth phone and requires all my ingenuity and persuasive powers, but finally I land a prime-time 9:30-10:00 spot on a major network for the following evening. Then there are my regular duties to keep me jumping till five o'clock in the morning, at which time I go to bed. But I don't sleep long, because Mike and his six brothers show up at eleven o'clock when no shuttleship is supposed to be scheduled and barge into my bedroom and wake me up. His six brothers look and act a lot like him. All of them have the same sadness in their eyes and all of them keep

glancing over their shoulders every two or three minutes. I set up a rehearsal for them in Big Tony's suite, and when Big Tony and I hear those six heavenly voices and that out-of-this-world trumpet, we know we've got it made.

I get Earth on the line again and change the Christmas-tree order from a twenty to a forty-footer. Then I superintend building a stage for the Celestial Seven, which is the name Big Tony and I have agreed upon for the seven brothers. When the tree arrives on the two-o'clock shuttle, I superintend putting it up and afterwards I supervise the angels while they are trimming it. Then I have to superintend the decorating of the Green Pastures Room. Then I have to get hold of the spaceclub tailor and have him let out Big Tony's Santa Claus suit, which for some reason has shrunk since last Christmas. Then I have to console Pinky MacFarlane, who has been eavesdropping at the door of Big Tony's suite where the Celestial Seven are still rehearsing, and talk her out of jettisoning herself because she feels so bad about the terrible things she said about Mike before she knew what a heavenly voice he has. Then I have to get hold of the station's maintenance crew and put them to work retracting the hull above the G.P. Room ceiling, which, after you disconnect the perspectivization field, turn out the sun, and take down the clouds, is little more than a concave glass slab.

Then I have to choose a costume from among the several which the station's *couturier* suggests for the Celestial Seven, and talk them into having themselves fitted, which for some reason they are reluctant to do. Then I have to check the automatic kitchen and the baromat to see that they are in good working order and are well supplied with the staffs of life. Then I have to arbitrate an argument which arises among the angels over which of them is going to turn the Christmas-tree lights on. I want to tell you, managing a Heaven can be an awful headache sometimes.

But at last everything is all set. The stage has been built, the tree has been trimmed, the lights have been turned on, the angels have stopped arguing, the hull above the G.P. Room ceiling has been retracted, Big Tony has squeezed into his Santa Claus suit, the Celestial Seven have gotten into their costumes, the baromat has been oiled, the mistletoe has been hung, the Pearly Gates have been polished, Peace is the password, and we are all ready to hum.

The TV crew show up at 7:30, accompanied by the professional pitchman who is going to announce the show, and get their gear into place. The customers begin arriving at 8:15. I greet them at the Pearly Gates, wearing a new azure suit for the occasion, and a new commodore's cap. Shuttleship after shuttleship pulls in, and people pour into the baromat and the Green Pastures Room, and spill over into the Still Waters Room—those of them, that is, who have had all the Christmas cheer they can hold for the moment and wish to work some of it off. By nine o'clock we are so packed we couldn't take another soul on board if we had to.

I adjourn to the Green Pastures Room and make my way through the customers and the angels and the roulette tables to the lounge where Big Tony is sitting in his Santa Claus suit with an angel on each knee. I squeeze in between him and his bag, which is filled with mini-magnums of champagne which he will pass out at midnight. There are red-and-green lamps on all the tables, but the main source of light is the stars. They hang in the sky like candles, and the slow spinning of the spaceclub station makes it seem as though they are drifting by of their own free will. A wedge of Earth appears and for a while the green coastline of North America is visible, bounded by the blueness of the Pacific Ocean; then the wedge is gone, and stars have taken its place.

At 9:25 the TV pitchman comes over to the lounge and taps me on the shoulder. The time has come. I snap my fingers, and the taped music that has been providing a background for the proceedings goes off, and an inbuilt lens in the glass ceiling focuses the starlight on the stage. The Celestial Seven move out of the shadows and step up into the circle of light, and the TV cameras advance on their dollies. Presently the pitchman steps in front of the Seven and raises his hand for silence. We are on the air.

He gives a short speech about the Seventh Heaven Club, bragging it to the skies and saying that people don't know what true bliss is until they enter its Pearly Gates. Then he brags up the six other Heavens, and then he brags up the proprietor. While he is doing so, one of the TV cameras rolls over to our lounge and focuses its glassy eye on Big Tony in his Santa Claus suit and on the two angels sitting on his knees. "And now," concludes the pitchman, "I will introduce without further preamble a new singing

group called the Celestial Seven, who will regale you with Christmas carols in honor of the festive season."

He retires into the shadows and the Celestial Seven are alone on the stage. I can see that they are nervous, but I can also see that they are determined to go through with the performance and bring it off with a bang. The costumes I have chosen for them are blue and silver and covered with iridescent sequins, and are they ever terrific! And those big golden wings! Not everybody can wear wings. Myself, for instance. They do nothing for me at all. But on Mike and his brothers, they look like they belong.

Gabe raises his trumpet and cuts loose with a beautiful lick, and it's like Bix Beiderbecke and Bunny Berrigan and Louie Armstrong all rolled into one. The six heavenly voices are lifted to the stars . . . "*Si-i-lent night, ho-oly night, all is calm, all is bright*" . . . The Christmas tree is like a big bright bonfire. It makes me think of the big bonfire that burns in Big Tony and provides him with the energy he needs to carry on his work, and I feel a deep sense of pride that I am one of his managers . . . "*Slee-eeep in heavenly peace—Slee-eeep in heavenly peace*" . . . A big tear rolls down Big Tony's painted cheek and splashes on his fur collar.

The heavenly voices are lifted again. And again and again. It *Came Upon the Midnight Clear* . . . *The First Nowell* . . . *Joy to the World!* . . . *O Come, All Ye Faithful* . . . *Angels, from the Realms of Glory* . . . *What Child is This?* . . .

They save *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing* till the last

"Hark! the herald angels sing,

Glory to the new-born King!—" I don't know what makes me glance up at the stars, but I do. And I see this great big UFO hovering above the station. At least I think it is a UFO. It is shaped like a gigantic finger, and the finger is pointing straight down at the stage. The Celestial Seven see it also, and Gabe's trumpet gives a despairing squawk, and the six heavenly voices gurgle and die out. By this time everybody else has seen the finger, and the Green Pastures Room is silent as death.

Suddenly somebody begins to scream. It is Mike. He is staring up at the pointing finger and frantically waving his arms. "No! No!" he cries. "You don't understand! We had to do what we did. We couldn't compete any longer. Only fools fight on when the battle is lost. At least this way we'll do *some* good. At least this way—"

This bolt of brightness shoots out of the pointing finger then, and stabs down and bathes the stage and the Celestial Seven with the most hellish radiance you ever saw in your life. The Celestial Seven turn red. Then orange. Then yellow. Then green. Then blue. Then indigo. Then violet. And then the bolt is gone and so is the pointing finger, and Mike and his six brothers are lying motionlessly on the stage.

I get to them first. Mike is the only one left alive. I pillow his head on my knee. "Mike, Mike," I say.

He looks up at me, but his eyes don't focus on me. It's as though he's looking right through me. "I never thought it would end like this," he says.

"You never thought what would end like this?" I ask.

"Armageddon," he says, and dies.

Now I ask you, what does he mean by that?