

Robert Young, whose stories are fast becoming mainstays for us, achieves a remarkable diversity of both mood and content with each of his appearances here. This time he describes the breakdown of reality which occurs when an astronaut confronts the—

LORD OF RAYS

ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrated by RICHARD OLSEN

LT. COMDR. GUEST sighted the Unorthodox Orbiting Object less than five hours before the Helios 5 was scheduled to break solar orbit and head for home. Or for where home would be, come next year. Two hours remained before final Burn.

Guest had buried his co-astronaut, Comdr. Avery, on the other side of the sun. Avery had died of uremia. Guest had sat by and watched him die, not knowing what to do till Moonbase checked out Avery's symptoms, made the diagnosis and paradioed the appropriate instructions. By then, it was too late.

Probably it would have been too late anyway.

So Guest had buried Avery in the Solar Sea. His buddy. Nights were gray since he went away. His buddy.

Actually, he had hated Avery. Not in the beginning. In the beginning they had been fast friends. Not till six months after sunlaunch had the first shoots of hatred broken the soil of Guest's brain. It had grown like a noxious weed, poisoning everything he said.

In retrospect he realized that he couldn't have avoided hating Avery, any more than Avery had been able to avoid hating him. There should have been three men in the tub, like the rhyme went—not two. But both limitation of living space and conservation of energy had said No.

Since Avery's death, Guest had hated himself. There was no one else available.

The UOO lay about an eighth of a mile off the Helios 5's prow on the sunward side. He centered it on the control-panel viewscreen and described it to Moonbase: Some thirty feet long by perhaps eight wide; upturned at both ends like a two-toed Persian slipper. Apparently constructed of wood. (*Wood?*) A bench situated mid-ships with a masked figure lying on it. Two other figures, indubitably statues, one stationed at the prone figure's head, the other at its feet. Decor: a riot of reds, yellows, blues.

MOONBASE: "Get closer, Andy. Lock one of the cameras on it."

HELIOS 5: "Right."

Guest got busy on manual. He shrank the Helios 5's orbit with a brief burst of retro-fire, and by means of a series of attitude maneuvers brought her directly behind and within fifty feet of the UOO. He programmed the A.P. to maintain the relationship, then crawled into the forward control cubicle and focused the prow television camera and put it on automatic. The outer hull of the Helios 5 was analogous to a one-way mirror, its exterior surface constituting the mirror-side, its heavily tinted inner surface the transparent side. By rotating at a predetermined speed, it maintained an interior ship's temperature of 65° F.

The picture being beamed back to Moonbase registered on the forward cubicle monitor screen. Despite the glare of the sun, it was clear and detailed. The masked figure lying on the bench was swathed with strips of white linen, or its equivalent. It was that of a man—a dead man. The bench, unquestionably, was a bier; the statues posted at either end of it were those of young women. Both had banged black hair that fell below their shoulders, and both wore simple tunic-like dresses.

A pair of cumbersome wooden oars swept down at 45" angles aft of the bier, and stationed between them was a third statue. That of the helmsman.

Charon?

Guest got hold of himself. This was Space—not the Styx.

MOONBASE: "We thought you might have been hallucinating, Andy. It appears you weren't. Keep the damn thing on camera—we're going to try to contact a good Egyptologist."

HELIOS 5: "Why an Egyptologist?"

MOONBASE: "All of us are pretty much agreed that what we're viewing on our screens is an Egyptian sun boat. You know—the boats they used to put in pharaohs' tombs so the old boys could accompany the sun god Ra on his underworld travels."

HELIOS 5: "That's preposterous!"

MOONBASE: "Utterly. And in every conceivable way. We'll get back to you presently."

GUEST RETURNED to the Helios 5's living room. That was what he called the main control-room. It was mostly gauges, dials and computer banks, and instruments for studying the sun; but a chart table bolted to the deck lent a homey touch, while the main porthole on the sunward side had something of the aspect of a color TV screen. Trouble was, there was only one program. Moreover, the porthole was a tricky little devil: its heavily tinted glass minimized the main character so that it could be seen *in toto* on what at most would have approximated a 24" screen. The purpose of this was practical as well as psychological. At such close range, the sun was not only awesome to behold but could be beheld *in toto* only by the instruments situated in the hull. This way, Guest could view the entire body and simultaneously not be reminded of his proximity to potential perdition.

He sat down in his "armchair"—his half of the co-astronaut chair-couch (he wouldn't have dreamed of occupying Avery's half)—and activated the control-panel monitor screen. Once again, the UOO swam into his ken. He stared at it glumly. He should have been elated to have run across something that promised to relieve the monotony of his days and nights. He wasn't: he was too depressed.

He'd been depressed ever since Avery's death. No, long before. Avery's death had merely exacerbated the condition by directing his hatred back upon himself. He'd tried once or twice to redirect some of it toward Moonbase: but Moonbase was too remote, too impersonal.

ON THE BLACK TRUNK of the star-bedight tree of space someone has carved a big misshapen heart and within its boundaries engraved the legend, *A.G. hates A.G.*

Guest, hating, glances sideways at the "color TV-screen". The character of the only character of the play has subtly changed. It is a simple golden disk now, a beautiful golden disk, its rays distinctly individualized, two of the lower ones curving downward and terminating in a pair of tiny hands—

"Hail, thou Disk, thou Lord of Rays. Hail, Divine Aton! May I not be shut up in the tomb, may I not be turned back, may the limbs of my body be made new again when I view thy beauties, because I am one of those who worshipped thee on Earth . . ."

SHOCKED, Guest gripped the armrests of his chair-couch. The strange words had issued from his own mouth, originated in his own brain.

Lord of Rays. Divine Aton.

Terrified, he glanced at the "color TV-screen" again. Sol had shed its tiny hands and resumed its normal countenance.

For how long?

Guest glared at the UOO. "Burn, damn you!" he said. "Incinerate the way wood should when exposed to such hellish heat!" he shouted. "Go away!" he screamed.

The UOO continued serenely along its orbital path as though it had as much business being there as the Helios 5 did.

Naturally it couldn't have burned even if it had wanted to.

But exposed to such intense heat it should have shrunk, warped, disintegrated or clone something. Assuming it really was made out of wood. And the figure lying on the bier—it couldn't possibly have withstood such heat for more than a few seconds without *some* change taking place.

Guest stared at the figure. You didn't need to be an Egyptologist to have at least a minimum of knowledge about ancient Egyptian burial customs. Guest had read about mummies: about pharaohs and lesser luminaries being sealed in their tombs along with their silly sun boats and their naive convictions of an afterlife via their ka. Of a reunion with their sun-god Ra. The figure lying on the bier was a dead ringer for a mummy. However, if its ka was anywhere in the vicinity, it wasn't discernible.

Angrily, Guest straightened out his thoughts. If the UOO was a sun boat, then it was an imitation of the real thing and had been placed in solar orbit not by bronze-age barbarians who hadn't known what a wheel was but by a bunch of tech-age practical jokers who had somehow managed to beat ISA to the Solar Sea.

He had a bite to eat, took a mild tranquilizer and dozed.

MOONBASE: "Andy, you there?"

HELIOS 5: "Where in hell else would I be?"

MOONBASE: "Easy, old buddy. Final Burn's hardly an hour away. In less time than you know it, you'll be on your way home. Meantime, some info: We've contacted an Egyptologist, tuned him in on your Space Program, and he's confirmed our suspicion. Your UOO's a sun boat beyond peradventure of a doubt."

HELIOS 5: "But it can't be a *real* sun boat!"

MOONBASE: "Whether it can be or can't be, we have to proceed on the assumption that it is until we can come up with a better answer. Okay: our Egyptologist says that the figure on the bier may quite possibly be a dignitary from the days of Ikhnaton, King Tut's father-in-law. He admits this is an educated guess based on Ikhnaton's throwing out henotheism in favor of monotheism as personified by Ra-Horakhte, or Aton, and that during that particular dynasty—the Eighteenth—sun-worship, while not particularly popular with the populace, was officially in. He says there's no chance of its being Ikhnaton's boat because his would've been bigger and far more elaborate. Addendum: The figure's mask is the mask of Osiris: it was standard operating procedure for anyone bound for the Afterlife to wear such a mask. The two female statues are those of Isis and Nephthys respectively. Isis was Osiris' wife and sister; Nephthys was just his sister. Now, as to how the damned boat got there—"

HELLOS 5: "There's only one way it could've got here! A bunch of practical jokers put it here to belittle us!"

MOONBASE: "You know better than that, Andy. Granted, it could have been launched into orbit from a conventional craft. But it would've had to have been a terrestrial conventional craft and the only terrestrial conventional craft that have got that close to the sun have been the Helios's 1, 2, 3 and 4, all of which were unmanned and none of which was large enough or powerful enough to have done the job in any case. Besides which, ISA'S not in the habit of playing belittling practical jokes on itself."

HELIOS 5: "So you don't know how it got here."

MOONBASE: "At the moment—no. But we have a team of ontologists working on the problem."

HELIOS 5: "Why ontologists?"

MOONBASE: "Because we're confronted with a phenomenon that demands a new approach to reality. The boat is there; its presence can't be accounted for by orthodox means; therefore it must be accounted for by unorthodox means. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than we have ever dreamed of in our technology.

"As soon as we have something, we'll get back to you posthaste. Meantime, keep the camera running. Take care."

GUEST GOT UP from his "armchair" and half walked-half drifted back into the tiny rec compartment where the entertainment tapes were kept. He couldn't find a damned one even remotely

connected with ancient Egypt.

It figured.

On his mother's side he had a smidgin of Egyptian blood. Could that have accounted for the strange words he'd uttered? Dormant DNA patterns awakened by the sight of the sun boat?

Guest didn't believe it. Real problems never lent themselves to pat solutions. To solve a real problem you had to fight your way through thousands of scientific sacred cows.

Maybe Moonbase was right in trying to outflank the omnipresent herd.

When Guest returned to the control room he found that he had a visitor. The visitor was a slight dark-skinned man wearing an elaborate headdress, a short white skirt and sandals fashioned of interwoven reeds. He held an unrolled papyrus before him and was reading from it. He didn't seem to be aware of Guest's presence. The language was one Guest wasn't even faintly familiar with, although he guessed from the visitor's appearance that he was hearing words written millennia ago and deduced from the manner in which they were being spoken that they constituted an invocation of some kind. The visitor read for a while longer, then rerolled the papyrus and vanished.

Time lag was triple its usual length after Guest reported the incident to Moonbase. Then:

MOONBASE: "We've consulted our Egyptologist, Andy. He says you've just given us a pretty good description of one of the major characters in *The Book of the Dead*."

HELIOS 5: "That's reassuring as hell!"

MOONBASE: "We're not trying to reassure you, Andy. We're giving everything to you straight because prior experience in space has taught that a spaceman's major enemy is the unknown. Once anything ceases to be unknown, he has a chance at least to cope with it. Granted, we don't know how your visitor got on board, to say nothing of how he traveled millions of miles through space and thousands of years through time; but at least we know approximately where and when he came from, and now you do too. We also know, thanks to our Egyptologist, that the papyrus he read from was *The Book of the Dead* itself, and we're reasonably sure that the particular passage he read was one of those designed to ensure the deceased's safe entry into the Boat of Ra."

HELIOS 5: "But you don't know *why* he read it."

MOONBASE: "No. But our team of ontologists are working on it. Just hang on, Andy. We'll get back to you as soon as possible."

GUEST HUNG ON. To the armrests of his chair-couch. He hung on tightly because he wanted with all his being to get up and go over to the chart table and lie down upon its smooth surface.

He looked at the control-panel chronometer. Forty-two minutes to final Burn.

He glanced at the "color TV-screen". He wished he hadn't. Sol had transmuted to a golden disk again with humanoid hands.

Aton.

"Hail, thou Disk, thou Lord of Rays," he heard himself say. "Hail, thou Great God who art in thy boat, bring thou me into thy boat."

Thirty-six minutes to Burn.

At length he realized that holding tight to the arm-rests wasn't enough, that he was going to get up anyway and compose his body upon the table. He half walked-half drifted. Carefully he composed himself upon his bier. His visitor, he realized, had returned and was standing above him, holding *The Book of the Dead*. This time, Guest understood the words, even though the language they were intoned in was as unfamiliar as before. He had begun intoning the passage himself a few minutes ago; now it was being delivered for him, as was proper:

"Hail, thou Great God who art in thy boat, bring thou me into thy boat. Let me be the director of thy journeyings and let me be among those who belong to thee and who are among the stars that never rest. The things which are an abomination unto thee and the things that are an abomination unto me I will not eat, that which is an abomination unto thee and which is an abomination unto me is filth and I will not eat thereof, but sepulchral offerings and holy food will I eat, and. I shall not be overthrown thereby—"

After completing the incantation, the chancellor-in-chief rolled the papyrus, deposited it upon Guest's chest and departed.

MOONBASE: "Greetings, Andy. Listen carefully. Our team of ontologists have concluded that the present phase of the Helios 5's orbit constitutes an interface—in this case, a common boundary of two realities, Reality One being the physical universe, Reality Two being the non-physical underworld as envisioned by the ancient Egyptians. Reality Two, the ontologists insist, is as valid as Reality one, since both are subjective interpretations of the Noumenon. Your situation is critical and presents two grave possibilities. Possibility One: since some of the traits of both realities are present in the interface, Reality Two may at any moment totally dominate Reality One. Possibility Two: the Helios 5's orbital path may leave Reality One completely and enter Reality Two. In either eventuality, the result will be the same: your status as a living being will be altered.

"Fortunately, less than thirty minutes remain before final Burn: the thrust should see you safely out of your predicament. But you've got to hang on till then, Andy: if you don't make the Burn you'll remain in orbit forever and it'll no longer make any difference which reality you're in.

"Your best bet is distraction. Keep your mind busy. Play entertainment tapes, watch dirty movies (I know you and Avery sneaked some on board); think of Earth, think of when you were a kid climbing into an apple tree. Whatever you do, don't look at the sun boat, and no matter what happens, *don't look at the sun!*

"Andy?"

MOONBASE: "Helios 5, are you there?"

MOONBASE: "Helios 5, come in."

MOONBASE: "Come in, Helios 5."

MOONBASE: "Andy! Andy! *For God's sake, come home!*"

—ROBERT F. YOUNG