

The incredible account of one Henry Dickens of Salem, Mass. and what happened on Orbital Excursion Flight Number 54 . . .

The Curious Case of Henry Dickens

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

The gaunt individual wearing the seedy black business suit and the shabby black homburg, lugging the antiquated portmanteau whose existence the boarding inspector later so vehemently denied, was listed on the Orbital Flight 54 passenger roster as Henry Dickens of Salem, Mass. Other than for the discordant note struck by his archaic apparel among their gay slacks and shorts and skirts and shirts, he did not markedly stand out from the other excursionists swarming up the boarding ramp, although Miss Shaw, the senior stewardess, later recalled having noted a certain arrogant air about him that "one seldom encounters among the middle classes."

Upon gaining the OEV passenger compartment, he sat down in the exact center of the rearmost double seat on the starboard side— "like he wanted people to think it was a single one so he could hog it all to himself," to quote one of the other excursionists, a Mrs. Halloran, who had entered just behind him — and shoved his portmanteau underneath it. Mrs. Halloran may or may not be right. It does seem unlikely, however, that, knowing as he must have from spending two months on the Celestial Excursions, Inc., waiting list how difficult even one such seat was to obtain, Henry Dickens would have been naive enough to believe that by means of so childish a stratagem he could retain possession of two.

An OEV (Orbital Excursion Vehicle) passenger compartment, as anyone who has ever gone on an orbital excursion flight knows, is distressingly reminiscent of the interior of a species of ground-transportation vehicle, now extinct, known as the Greyhound Bus. While it is true that the "driver's seat" (read cockpit) is in the "rear" rather than in the "front," there are still the same two rows of double seats with the same narrow aisle in between; and while it is true that the ladies' and the men's rooms are located in the vehicle's nose rather than its rear end, the emergency airlock occupies almost the exact position the emergency door did. Augmenting still further one's instinctive conviction upon entering such a compartment that he has stepped into the past are the square portholes distributed at even intervals along the hull, one to each double seat. Not only do they look like windows, they are called windows.

At this point, however, the Space Age asserts itself with a vengeance, and one is suitably impressed by the rectangular floorviewers, inset in the deck in front of each double seat, and downright dazzled by the ceiling, which from fore to aft and from port to starboard consists of a single mammoth viewscreen that, once orbit is attained, relays the Heavens and all Its Wonders with such uncanny accuracy that the awed excursionist forgets for the duration of the five celestial circuits which excursion flights comprise that there *is* a ceiling.

The question of whether Henry Dickens meant to pre-empt both the window and the outside-seat is academic in any case; at any rate, he retained sole possession of them till the last excursionist entered and, for want of any other place to sit, sat down beside him. Dickens made room readily enough, but it was immediately evident to the latecomer — a Mr. Artemus Solnitz of Pittsburgh, Pa. — that his seatmate was a loner — "a misanthropist," as he later expressed it, "of the first magnitude." (Mr. Solnitz is a retired sanitation engineer who lives with his mother and who dedicated the best years of his life to collecting the variegated and inevitable by-products of civilized living (his phrase) and who now collects rare volumes. He is a member of the Holy Brethren Society of the New Reformed Presbyterian Church and sings in the choir every Sunday.)

Shortly after Mr. Solnitz's arrival, Miss Shaw entered the compartment, delivered her little spiel about the Heavenly Fare everyone was soon to partake of, explained how, in the unlikely event of an emergency, to unfold and get into the lightweight spacesuits hidden under the seat cushions, flicked a little switch next to the emergency airlock that caused the seats to tilt back into couches, and ordered everyone to relax while "Big G" was in command, promising it would only be a short while before "Arty G" replaced "him." She then reentered the cockpit, drew the steelflex curtains separating it from the compartment and arranged herself becomingly on the double acceleration-couch she shared with Miss Nicely, the junior stewardess, and that flanked the padded tilt-back seats occupied by Astro-pilot Archie Murdock and Astro-copilot Bix Braxton. Moments later, GO came through, and the OEV started starward.

The ion drive functioned flawlessly, and in no time at all "Big G" relinquished command, and everyone felt a faint, rather pleasant tug as "Arty G" took over. Miss Shaw re-entered the compartment and returned the little switch to its original position, retransforming the couches into scats. "Whew!" exclaimed Mr. Solnitz, who is rather portly and frequently suffers from shortness of breath, "that was really something, wasn't it!" Henry Dickens didn't say anything.

He was staring out the window. "It was as though," Mr. Solnitz observed afterward, "he had stopped breathing and turned into a statue."

Gradually the compartment filled with "Oooh's" and "Ahhh's" as pair after pair of eager eyes took in the Wonders the Celestial Excursions Baedeker had promised — those contained in the ceiling viewscreen, those visible through the windows, and, most of all, the blue-green one that had exploded into being at everyone's toe tips. "Why," someone exclaimed, "it looks just like a great big beachball!" Everyone laughed.

Everyone except Henry Dickens.

He was still staring out the window. Fixedly.

"Although I could not see his face directly," Miss Shaw stated at the inquest, "I was able to determine from its reflection in the glass that his gaze was inclined at a slight downward angle, not enough of a one to bring Earth into his ken, but one that strongly suggested that whatever it was that was so acutely fascinating him was located at but a brief distance below the orbital path the OEV was pursuing. Moreover, both the velocity at which we were traveling and the rigidity of his stare suggested that the source of his fascination was a panorama of some kind, rather than a single object. "Following his gaze," she went on to add, "I could see nothing — nothing, that is, other than a handful of distant stars which, to me at least, were singularly uninspiring and could not conceivably be responsible for his absorption."

In addition to being a most attractive young lady, Miss Shaw is a most astute observer. We owe a great deal to her. It may very well be true, as Miss Nicely has so cattily pointed out on more than one occasion since the tragedy, that the senior stewardess sleeps with Astro-pilot Archie Murdock one night and Astro-copilot Bix Braxton the next, except on Tuesday, which is her day off, when, presumably, she sleeps with her fiance; however, Miss Shaw's putative promiscuity in no way detracts from her qualities as a reliable reporter and, in any case, may very well amount to no more than a malicious fabrication on the part of Miss Nicely, whose facility for turning men off is surpassed only by Miss Shaw's facility for turning them on.

It is to Mr. Solnitz, who, having sat next to Dickens for almost one and one-half orbits, was provided with the maximum opportunity to observe him at close range, that we are most indebted for our intimate knowledge of this strange and disquieting personage. "I estimated his age at fortyish," Mr. Solnitz, numbered among whose many rare volumes are the Complete Works of Warwick Deeping, Somerset Maugham and John Galsworthy, said at the inquest. "But sometimes when I'd glance sideways at him, I'd get the devilish notion that he was either much younger or vastly older than I had initially surmised. I had to go by profile exclusively, because he never once looked in my direction — not even when he got up and stepped past me into the aisle."

"When he did this," asked J.P. Modd, the coroner who conducted the inquest, "did you suspect from his manner or his mien what his true intentions might be?"

"Why, no, of course not," Mr. Solnitz replied. "I simply took it for granted that he was going to 'the little boy's room.' "

OEV orbits are always equatorial and have a perigee of about one hundred and thirty miles and an apogee of about one hundred and forty. Thus, the celestial path followed by the OEV that carried Henry Dickens to his doom was a well-traveled one. So whatever he saw that ultimately moved him to act as he did cannot be imputed to the vehicle's happening to pass through a previously untraveled sector of space. Besides which, all of the excursionists — with the exception of Mr. Solnitz — were and are agreed that he couldn't have seen anything. "Why, my gosh," Jennifer Grossi, the pretty teen-ager who occupied the window seat just ahead of him remarked afterward, "there was nothing out there to see except a lot of silly stars, a cheesy old moon and big fat old Earth! If there had been, I'd have seen it too!"

Her opinion, if not the way she expressed it, is typical of those voiced by the other excursionists before, during and after the inquest — again with the exception of Mr. Solnitz.

We have it from the last mentioned that not once during the one and just-under one-half orbits he observed his seatmate did Dickens remove his gaze from the window other than to give his head a quarter turn every fifteen minutes or so, presumably to relieve a crick in his neck. And when Mr. Solnitz called his attention to a particularly fine view of the Himalayas during the early part of orbit no. 2, all the rare-volume collector got for his gesture of friendship was a cantankerous, "Bah! Shove the f----- Himalayas! Shove the whole f----- Earth!"

Understandably, Mr. Solnitz made no further attempts at striking up a conversation. "There was no need for me to, in any case," he stated during his testimony, "for not long after his foul outburst, Dickens struck up a sporadic conversation with himself. A mumbling sort of affair conducted, or so it seemed to my uninitiated ear, throughout the entire linguistic spectrum. Limited as I am to a smattering of Latin and a smidgen of French surviving from my halcyon high-school days, my comprehension was confined to those parts of his monologue uttered in English. Once, in this latter language, he said, 'I could swear that throne was bigger than that!' On another occasion, he said, 'The lazy bastards have let the whole place go to pot. Believe you me, they'll snap shit when *I* take over!' And on a third, 'Bet he'll be surprised to see *me* after all these years! The bad penny —ha-ha! He never figured on the Space Age ... we'll see who kicks out who this time!' " All three of these odd utterances were corroborated by Jennifer Grossi, who overheard them also.

Our admiration of Miss Shaw's astuteness in the art of observation has already been noted. Exonerated *ex officio* from such time-consuming chores as preparing the midflight snack in the kitchenette aft of the cockpit and inventorying supplies in the adjacent larder, she could and did spend a great deal of her time in the passenger compartment, commenting knowledgeably on this Heavenly Wonder and that, and pointing out the Pleiades, Messier 31, the Magellanic Clouds and other such celestial sights to her attentive — with one exception audience. "Both his posture and his indifference to what I was saying," she said of Dickens afterward, "reminded me of a time when I was a little girl and had been away to pre-finishing school for what seemed an eternity to my youthful perspective and was returning by monorail to my suburban home. Throughout the latter half of the return trip I kept my nose flattened against the window pane and my eyes glued to the familiar buildings and malls and shopping centers whisking by, utterly unresponsive to the repeated attempts on the part of my older sister to engage me in small talk. I was oblivious to all save those nostalgic touchstones I had once so blithely taken for granted and which now seemed so dear to me; and whenever there swam into my ken a building in need of repair or a mall whose greensward was overgrown, I felt personally affronted, fiercely indignant that the powers-that-were could have permitted such beauty to become tarnished out of sheer neglect.

"However," she went on to add, "subsequent self-analysis has revealed to me that this sentimental journey back to my childhood was sparked neither by Dickens' posture nor his indifference, but by the stark loneliness a young girl sometimes experiences while aspace, even when she is safe aboard a vessel surrounded by members of her own kind ."

Toward the halfway point of orbit no. 2 when Henry Dickens retrieved his portmanteau from beneath

the seat and stepped past Mr. Solnitz into the aisle ostensibly to go to "the little boy's room," the rare-volume collector was provided with a closer view of his seat mate's face. He was particularly struck by the size and markings of Henry Dickens' nose. "Actually, it was more like a snout than a nose," he told the coroner. "Reddish, as though he'd had a cold for some time and had been blowing it rather frequently, and pitted with pores as large as pockmarks. His face and neck, or at least those portions of them that were visible to me, were also pitted with pockmarklike pores. I couldn't see his ears — or rather, the one turned toward me (the other, of course, I couldn't see at all) — very well. Not only was a great deal of reddish hair growing out of it, it was partially hidden by more reddish hair sticking down from under his homburg. It was at this time, incidentally, that I at last located the source of the subtle odor which I had been half aware of ever since sitting down beside him and which I had absentmindedly attributed to an unpleasant emanation from one or other of the various pieces of mechanical equipment endemic to an OEV."

This last remark (together with several subsequent statements Mr. Solnitz gave utterance to) was at the behest of J.P. Modd erased from the inquest tapes. "In view of the fact that none of the other passengers nor any of the crew detected this 'faint sulfurous emanation,' " the coroner said, "it is my considered opinion that in all probability its sole source was Mr. Solnitz's imagination."

After gaining the aisle, Henry Dickens began walking in the direction of the rest rooms, unnoticed initially, save by two of the other excursionists (in addition, of course, to Mr. Solnitz), both of whom instinctively assumed, just as had the rare-volume collector, that his destination was "the little boy's room" (although, as one of them recalled later, it certainly seemed strange that he should have needed to take his suitcase with him). Unfortunately, during the weird sequence of events that rapidly ensued, Miss Shaw was in the cockpit (playing grabass with the crew, if we are to believe Miss Nicely), thus depriving us of a first-rate witness to the tragedy; however, by piecing together the accounts given by the excursionists and by adding to Mr. Solnitz's a large grain of salt, it is possible to reconstruct with reasonable accuracy Henry Dickens' final moments inside and outside the OEV.

He did *not* go to "the little boy's room" or anywhere near it. Instead, he proceeded up the aisle only as far as the emergency airlock, whereupon he stopped, grabbed the lever that secured the inner door and gave it a powerful yank. Nothing happened.

The lock protruded some three feet into the passenger compartment. Seated just aft of it were a Ms. Mary Hentz and her small son Vinnie. "Mary, Mary!" the little boy cried, "the bad man's eyes are buring!" At first Mary Hentz merely stared. Then, as a stream of "the foulest, vilest imprecations I ever heard in my life" began issuing from Henry Dickens' lips, she grabbed her son and "clutched him protectively to her breast."

Henry Dickens gave the lever another powerful yank. Another. The execrations issuing from his lips grew both in variety and volume, filling the entire compartment and bringing every eye to bear on this gaunt, terrible, blackclad figure wrestling wrathfully with a recalcitrant technological device "that would have tried the patience of a saint."

"With all that commotion going on in the passenger compartment," J.P. Modd demanded of Archie Murdock when it came the Astro-pilot's turn to testify, "how could you people in the cockpit possibly have heard nothing?"

A faint flush was seen to creep upward from Archie Murdock's neck and into his boyish cheeks. "We were completely absorbed, Bix and I, computing re-entry point, over coffee Miss Nicely had perked in the kitchenette and which Miss Shaw had just brought us, besides which those steelflex curtains they use nowadays are virtually soundproof. Also —"

The coroner cut him short. "Let's get back to the airlock lever. I won't go into the incongruity of the presence of such a relatively crude technological contraption aboard an OEV in an age wherein miniaturization has become a religion, but will you kindly tell me how such a device — upon whose successful manipulation the lives of an OEV's passengers could very well depend — could stick so tightly a grown man couldn't even budge it?"

Astro-pilot Archie Murdock shrugged. "I don't build OEVs — I only orbit 'em. Besides, he did get the lever unstuck finally."

When the lever yielded and the door swung open, Henry Dickens rushed into the lock and slammed the door behind him. Immediately, a red light began blinking just above it. "Oh, my God!" Ms. Mary Hentz screamed, "he's going to do it!"

Stenciled in big black letters on the door were the words, DO NOT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES ATTEMPT TO ENTER LOCK WHILE RED LIGHT IS NICTITATING. Perhaps this was why no one tried to abort the mad course of action Henry Dickens had apparently-embarked upon.

More likely it was because everyone — port and starboard excursionists alike — was staring out the starboard windows.

Presently the mass vigil was rewarded: Henry Dickens floated into view.

"Floated" is the correct word. For even though he'd jettisoned himself, he was still part and parcel of the OEV's trajectory. Logically, he should have remained part of it throughout the remainder of the flight, or at least until re-entry took place. That he did not do so represents yet another irksome aspect of this already irksome case.

True, he continued to float for some time in full view of his enthralled audience. Visibility wasn't of the best, because Earth at this phase of the flight was between the OEV and the sun, and the only light there was to see by was the pale light of the stars. So, while Henry Dickens was indubitably dead, no trace of his ruptured lungs could be discerned upon his lips. As a matter of fact, he appeared quite comfortable, floating there. He floated for a while on his back — or at least with his back toward Earth — his portmanteau resting on his stomach. At this stage, he rather resembled a large otter. Then, through some quirk of space, or perhaps as a result of a slight vacillation in the OEV's orbit, he rolled over onto his stomach, miraculously retaining possession of his portmanteau, and drifted rapidly away at a slight "downward" angle. Mere moments later, he winked out of sight.

With regard to the manner of Dickens' departure and disappearance, Mr. Solnitz's account differs radically from those given by the other excursionists and is responsible for the disproportionate amount of publicity accorded the inquest. "As I watched spellbound," he testified, "a pair of great reptilianlike wings sprouted suddenly from his shoulders and spread out gracefully on either side. He then quite matter-of-factly flew away from the OEV till he arrived at his destination, whereupon he quite naturally became as invisible to our mortal eyes as is the ethereal world upon which he landed. I am fully aware," Mr. Solnitz continued, in response, perhaps, to J.P. Modd's elevated eyebrows, "that in a vacuum, wings cannot function. But it is my contention that Henry Dickens' wings were not — are not — of the ordinary variety — that they are of a kind that function *only* in a vacuum; that indeed, in order even to manifest themselves, they *require* a vacuum. It is my further contention that encompassing the planet Earth at a mean elevation of some one hundred and twenty-nine and one-half miles there exists a reality we are incapable of perceiving physically but whose existence we have been aware of spiritually all our lives but have located, when we bothered to locate it at all, much closer to the surface of our globe. Generally, just above the clouds."

At this point, J.P. Modd posed a rather odd question: "Do you happen to have among your many rare volumes, Mr. Solnitz, an 1866 edition of *Paradise Lost* illustrated by Gustave Dore?"

"Indeed, I do," replied Mr. Solnitz. "It is one of my proudest possessions."

"Thank you, Mr. Solnitz. And thank you for your co-operation. You may be excused."

"Whether," the coroner said when he summed up, "Mr. Solnitz saw what he thought he saw or substituted for what he really saw a rather well-known Gustave Dore illustration is irrelevant. The 'Fallen Angel Theory' which he implied in his testimony simply will not stand. Logic confutes it. Consider: Would a Fallen Angel with workable if invisible wings require a spaceship to get back into Heaven? And even if he did — even if, as Mr. Solnitz would have us believe, his wings work only in a vacuum — would he have needed to wait for millenniums for mere mortals like ourselves to create a vehicle which he, merely by applying his vaunted supernatural powers, could have created in a trice? Furthermore, would he have

needed to wait more years yet for a less energy-consuming drive to be developed so the vehicle could be made available to the public, *and then have needed to wait two whole months to obtain a seat on it?*

"I maintain that he would not. I maintain that the reason Henry Dickens acted as he did is simplicity itself: he was tired of living. Just like the rest of us. In the absence of any evidence of foul play, there can be no other answer. Why he chose to make his quietus in so spectacular a fashion, we will never know, any more than we will ever know why he considered it necessary to take his personal belongings with him, or, for that matter, how he managed to get both them and the receptacle that contained them on board the OEV without the boarding inspector's knowledge. However, it isn't necessary for us *to* know these things.

"I think that I should also point out that the failure of the investigative authorities to unearth the slightest evidence that Henry Dickens lived in Salem, Mass., or ever did, cannot be construed as proof that Salem, Mass. was not his place of abode. There isn't a city in this country that doesn't have at least one recluse holed up somewhere of whom virtually no one is aware and of whom no official records exist.

"It is my decision, after considering all aspects of the case, that Henry Dickens was a perfectly ordinary, if somewhat eccentric, human being, who died by his own hand, of his own free will. I will so advise the appropriate authorities."

The coroner was right, of course. Just as we, as a race of people, were right in taking the initiative in the present Confrontation. There are some, of course, who insist that we didn't take it. That the mini-bomb that reduced Moscow to its basic molecules came from On High. The romantics, it would seem, are always with us. A pox on them!