

## HERO

Joe Lyons should have been glad to be so close to home. The Earth turned ponderously on his right, and the moon lay stolidly before him—and behind him was the red pinpoint of Mars.

It had been three years since he had seen that sight, but he had no nostalgic lump in his throat, picturing himself home at last with his mother and brother. Lyons had the important problem of approaching Earth at the correct angle, distance and speed.

His automatic distance-finder triangulated his position in space. The integrator figured his position in relation to Earth at his present speed, and the angle at which he would approach it.

He made the slight changes the figures called for, blasting his bow tubes once at full speed, then at quarter capacity, and correcting his course by an eighth stern port blast that brought the ship pointing a degree over to the left of the moon. Earth was blowing up to an enormous, shining globe. At the right moment—

Nine times he circled the world, his speed gradually falling from miles a second to miles a minute; and then the air was screaming around the hull. He was over Africa. He turned the bow north, until he flew over the Pacific.

He overtook California, the Rockies, the middle west; and in the distance he could see the Atlantic seaboard. Only then did he close the radio circuit, for instructions from the home port.

"Hello, Lyons!" an excited voice broke out. "Ronkonkoma calling Lyons. If you hear me, please answer—"

The sound shocked him into dumbness. After three years of hearing no Earthly voice . . .

Experimentally, he cleared his throat to test the quality of the sound it produced.

"Lyons speaking," he said uncertainly.

"Anything wrong, Lyons?" the voice rushed out in anxiety. "We spotted you four hours ago—been trying to get you ever since. Anything wrong?"

"N-nothing wrong," he said in a careful monotone, though he was not sure his voice would not crack, squeak or stop altogether.

"Fine!" the announcer cried. "It sure is great to hear you, Lyons!" Then, suddenly businesslike: "Cut your speed, Lyons. Pittsburgh just reported sighting you flashing overhead at a rate that'll shoot you right past us."

"Okay," Lyons said.

He held down the bow studs until he could feel the ship sinking slightly with the loss of momentum. He leaned forward and stared at the keel visi-plate. Low, broad buildings, none more than forty stories tall; an unscientific hodgepodge of narrow and wide streets, less than half of them mechanized, in spite of the three years he had been away.

"Isn't that Philadelphia under me?" he asked.

"Yeah. You should be here in about ten minutes. Brake when you cross Long Island City."

"Are you all clear down there?" Lyons asked.

The announcer's next words mystified him. "Boy, are we! You're the only ship coming in here today, Lyons. Everybody else is rerouted over to Ashokan."

"What's the idea?"

"Don't ask questions, pal. Just keep a'coming, fast as you can. You can't get here too fast to suit us. But be careful, will you?"

Ronkonkoma, set aside just for his small ship? Ashokan would be mobbed, swamped with all the ships that usually landed and took off in both ports. It was senseless. They would jam themselves up with an unnecessary snarl of rocket traffic—

"Making repairs down there?" he asked puzzledly.

"Nope. The place was never in better shape. How does it feel to be back, pal?"

"Not bad," Lyons said abstractedly.

"That all?" the announcer shouted.

But Lyons was busy with his controls. The gigantic buildings, square-roofed for helicopter landings;

web-bridged; levels of mechanized ways and traffic streets; the air lanes swarming. Manhattan, and danger of collision. He nosed up, out of the air lanes, over the East River, fret now of bridges, and across Queens. Steadily, he checked his rushing speed. The long oval of Lake Ronkonkoma lay directly ahead.

Lyons was not stolidly unemotional. He had a job of landing to do, and he had to do it efficiently. Any other Globe-Circler rocket pilot would have behaved the same way. The important thing was get your ship down safely—it represented an enormous investment.

Thinking of nothing but the job at hand, Lyons kicked up the stern, braked until the ship's bow fluttered over the hangars and angled down in a long dive, straight for the water.

Blackness, the tumbling, hissing, swooping blackness of water, drowned all of his visi-plates, smashing along the hull with a deafening roar.

Suddenly the water glowed yellow. He headed directly for the lights. The ship faltered, sagged heavily, its last momentum swiftly dying. It sank unevenly to the bottom.

Something gripped it and dragged it across the bed of the lake and up, until it burst into the light and over the shore, between the passenger and freight platforms of the tremendous rocket station.

"Okay, Lyons," the announcer cried eagerly. "Come on out!"

But Lyons sat numbly in his oil pressure chair, scared stiff.

"I—I can't!" he stammered. "All those people—"

They were packed densely on both platforms. Nervously he began to understand why all rocket traffic had been rerouted from Ronkonkoma. He could not hear the noise of the crowd, though he could see mouths open widely, arms wave hysterically, noisemakers whirring.

"I—d-don't want t-to come out," he whispered. Through the double hull he heard faint pounding.

"Come on, Lyons!" the announcer pleaded. "Get it over with. You can't stay in there all day."

So many people to face, Lyons thought frantically. Even a few would make him self-conscious. Alone so long in the silence, no one to speak to—he wasn't even sure he could talk sense any more.

There had been long months of dreadful, absolute, vacuum silence, alone in a cramped ship with even the nearest planets remote points of light. And there had been no one to tell him whether his gabblings were coherent.

"I can't face them," he muttered, cowering in his seat.

"Stop that nonsense, Lyons!" the announcer rapped sternly. "If they have to, they'll cut their way in. You might as well open the door."

Lyons stood up shakily, trying desperately not to look at the visi-plates, so frighteningly crowded with people. Holding on to the high, thick back of the control seat, he moved to the door. His feet were ton weights, his knees sagged miserably under the unaccustomed drag of gravity.

The pounding on the hull was growing louder. If he didn't open the port, they would cut their way in and drag him out. Then he'd get a bawling out from headquarters for letting his ship be scuttled.

It wouldn't last long, he told himself anxiously. He could make some excuse and break away. Landsickness—fever—maybe he could get the authorities to rush him to a hospital, and quiet. He stumbled through the hold corridor he had walked along so many times in the past three years that he knew every weld seam and rivet, every plate in the floor. He walked on past the stairwell that led down to the ground level gang hole. Reluctant to leave the ship that had been his sole home and companion for three years, he clung to the wheel of the airlock. Conscious of the pounding so close to him now, he backed away from the inner airlock, staring at it. He could leave it at lock position. He could slink behind the fuel hoses and hide there if they cut their way in. He would be out of the noise and swarm just that much longer.

But he couldn't, of course. His mother, his brother, his friends—were they still alive? Somehow he had to get past that mob and find them. That, suddenly, became his most overwhelming apprehension.

He whirled the airlock wheel until it came to rest, shot the bolts out of their holes. Air rushed in to fill the partial vacuum that in nearly a year of space travel had been caused by the slow leakage through the great outside washer.

The noise was closer. If they would only give him a chance to get used to the sound of human voices and the press of crowds! Normally he was not afraid of people. But this was so sudden—the change

from silence to deafening clamor.

His hands shook so that he could scarcely make them grip the outer airlock wheel. That one he turned very slowly, reluctantly. He clutched the lever that drew in the safety bolts, listening intently for sounds to come through the thick, insulated door. There was dead silence, almost as if he were still out in space. He could no longer hear the terrifying din, and that gave him courage.

He threw the lever. Abruptly, he leaped back. The outer lock crashed in, forced by the weight that had been pressing against it.

A mob! Rushing in to snatch at him!

He could not close the inner airlock. It was too late. Men and women were surrounding him, pawing at him, shouting at him. Men and women dressed in formal red skin-tight spun glass suits with flowing green capes of synthetic fur and narrow-brimmed or brimless toques.

"Commander Lyons!" a red-faced, portly man boomed, grabbing his limp hand. "I am Abner Connaught, elected President of the World-State in your absence. In the name of the peoples of Earth, I welcome you."

"Commander Lyons?" the space aviator stammered. "Why, I'm just a regular rocket pilot."

He flushed when the crowd laughed. The word passed along to those at the distant ends of the platforms; then the entire rocket station, packed with people, howled with laughter.

He hung back, ashamed, angry.

The men and women who ringed him were evidently politicians and officials, for when they urged him out of the airlock and onto the platform, the crowd respectfully surged away.

He found himself at a battery of microphones, facing another battery of television scanners, inside a circle of armed police. Beyond, the mob milled, trying to get him—yelling, waving arms.

President Connaught drew him before the microphones. Unwinking, the giant television eyes stared at him.

"Fellow citizens of the World-State," the President's voice boomed again, "three years ago we watched Commander Lyons flash away from Earth, out into space—an intrepid explorer flying through the uncharted wastes of nothingness toward Mars, there to solve the mystery of its possible commercial value.

"For three years we have watched and prayed for his safe return. Now, at last, he returns to us, modest as ever, unchanged by the acid test he has gone through. We are grateful for his safe return and—"

On and on and on, in the changeless formula of politicians since the world began. Lyons had to stand uneasily while the blank-eyed scanners stared at him and the mob behind glowered at the police guard; but at least they were silent now.

He shifted from one foot to the other. His hands hung down clumsily; he could find nothing to do with them. And, all the while, the blank, terrifying stares that he could not avoid.

Nervously, he turned his head. Outside of the ring of officials, two faces leaped into his sight—immobile, remote faces that smiled at him almost as if he were a stranger.

"Mom!" he cried. "Sid!"

Simultaneously, their faces grew pale and distressed. They pursed their lips behind their forefingers warningly, to hush him.

For President Connaught had wheeled about, gripped his shoulder, and was saying: "Now, Commander, tell us what you found on Mars. Remember, my lad, the entire world is listening reverently for your first words."

Lyons gazed in frozen fascination at the microphones. His mind refused to think of two words that could possibly be connected. He stood trembling, unable to speak, as the crowd became restless. The President glanced at him curiously.

"I—I can't talk to—to them," he stammered.

His nerve broke suddenly; he stumbled to his mother, threw his arms around her.

"—I can't talk to—to them," he stammered.

"Please, Joseph," she whispered, "for my sake."

He drew away from her. "Joseph?" he asked. "Not Joey any more?"

Gently, his brother Sid caught his arm and led him toward the microphones.

"I know how you feel," he said in a low, tense voice. "That's why a speech was written for you. Just read off that paper they gave you."

Lyons looked at the paper, glanced around pleadingly. Sid and his mother motioned him forward. The President smiled encouragingly and put him before the frightening array of broadcasting equipment.

He began to read. The words were meaningless to him, and he read in a flat, hurried, rattling voice, without pause or inflection, glad he did not have to think of what to say. It was all there on the paper, whatever it meant.

He scarcely realized he had finished until President Connaught patted him on the back and said:

"Thank you, Commander. That was splendidly put. And now, fellow citizens, let us wait patiently until Commander Lyons is rested and his Martian films developed, when we shall hear more from him. I am sure our patience will be well rewarded."

A detachment of police surrounded Lyons and his family and made a way through the crowd to a long, sleek car outside the rocket station. Two men sat in the rear. Lyons stopped uncertainly when he saw them smiling at him. "It's all right, Joseph," his mother said soothingly. "They're Mr. Morrison and Mr. Bentley. You know them, don't you?"

The president and the treasurer of Globe-Girders! "Hello," Lyons murmured respectfully. "It's nice of you to be here."

"Modest as ever," Morrison said, and laughed. "Eh, Bentley?"

The treasurer grinned. All at once, the car was in motion and swooped into the tunnel highway toward New York. Sid and his mother sat nervously facing young Lyons, their mouths tight in humorless, formal smiles.

"Is my old room ready for me, Mom?" he asked, desperately trying to make conversation.

His mother looked embarrassed.

"I don't know how to say this, Commander," Bentley said, at last. "I think you'll prefer having us be frank with you." "Certainly," Lyons replied.

"Well, you must give up ideas of going back to your old life. No more small apartments or flying. You're a world hero, you know."

"Sure," Sid added brightly. "You're on top of the heap, Joe."

"A world hero?" Lyons asked quizzically. "What's that?"

"It's an old word we rediscovered," Morrison volunteered. "It seems that in our prosaic civilization, until now, there was not sufficient public interest in a single man to make him a hero. In your case, the situation got somewhat out of hand. The newscasters made so much of your flight that the public elevated you to the position of hero. To capitalize on your fame, you must live up to it."

Lyons felt uncomfortable. "I don't understand—"

"Through you," Bentley said, "the world can advance centuries at a leap. Interplanetary travel, on schedule—the riches of the other planets—"

Lyons nodded. "But how do I do all that?"

"All the planets are open to our exploration," Morrison explained. "Globe-Circlers has built two interplanetary ships—yours and a newer, larger one—the first of what will eventually be a great fleet of space liners. Obviously, a single group of stockholders hasn't the money to build all that are needed. Therefore, we put up you, Commander Lyons, in whom the public has enormous confidence; the public puts up the money to build the ships; and we call the fleet the Lyons Line."

"It's the grandest opportunity in the world for you, Joseph," his mother put in.

Sid shook his arm excitedly. "You'll be president of the new company, Joe! And they're going to give me a big job too!"

"And I'd like to help all I can," Lyons admitted. "Only I don't see how I fit in as president of the company. I'm just a pilot."

His mother said: "Don't worry about it, Joseph. Mr. Morrison and Mr. Bentley will tell you what you have to do and when to do it."

"It'll be an irresistible combination," Morrison declared, tapping Lyons' knee, "your reputation, our commercial experience and the money we shall allow the public to invest. Just leave everything to us, Commander, and we'll be top men in this little old world!"

They rushed through the tunnel without encountering any traffic, which had been rerouted to the surface highways. When they came up into an upper city street level the driver swung the car uptown, then under a building that Lyons recognized as the Grand American Hotel—Earth's largest and most expensive.

"Well, Commander," Bentley said expansively, as they went toward the glittering elevator, "here's where you're going to live. In the Grand American Hotel!"

Lyons blinked. "It's nice, but I wouldn't feel right in a place like this. I wish you'd let me stay in my old room at home."

"Now, Joseph," his mother protested, "Mr. Morrison and Mr. Bentley hired an entire floor of the hotel for you. Besides, I gave up our little flat. It was no place for us."

"I liked it," Lyons said wistfully.

He let himself be guided up to a lavish suite of rooms. In the huge foyer he hesitated, confused. A staff of servants—it seemed like hundreds to him—was lined up for his inspection. They all bowed low.

Embarrassed, Joe Lyons sidled around them into a lavishly furnished living room. He could see through the doors into other rooms, carpeted with gorgeous, thick-napped rugs, furnished extravagantly.

"I'd never get used to it," he mumbled. "It scares me."

"Nonsense, my boy," Morrison said. "In no time you'll be striding around as if you were born here. Anyhow, the public expects the president of the Lyons Line to live in a place that fits his position."

"I guess so." Lyons' space-tanned brow creased. "But it still doesn't seem right. You built a space ship and I flew it. I've been handling G-C rockets for the last ten years and according to the tests I was the fittest pilot. That's all it was."

"But if the people want you to be president of the company, Joseph," his mother said, "that's all there is to it."

"Sure, if it means giving space travel a boost. That's my ambition."

"Quite right, Commander," Bentley approved, putting a sheaf of papers and a pen in his hand. "Would you mind signing at the bottom, please?"

Obligingly, Lyons scrawled his signature.

"What does it say?" he asked.

"These are the Lyons Line incorporation documents. You have accepted the presidency of the company."

Morrison folded the papers, and put them in his pocket. He shook Lyons' hand. "We'll leave you now, my boy. Get some sleep. We'll see you tomorrow."

His mother kissed him, and left with his brother Sid.

A butler entered. "Dinner is served, sir. If you wish to sleep, your bedroom is ready."

He was hungry and tired. He managed to eat, though a crew of servants kept slipping plates under his nose. He could hardly wait to sleep in a soft bed with cool white sheets.

In the bedroom he began zipping down the talon fastener of his trim blue jacket, then paused. His forearm had touched a bulge in the breast pocket. He had been so confused he had forgotten it, which he had never thought possible. From his pocket he drew out a statuette.

A photo-statue, made of developer plastic, in natural color. Anyone would have recognized it as a product of a sculptor-camera; but the statue itself would have caused amazement.

"Lehli," he whispered to it.

The sadly smiling little face did not change. In his imagination he could see the red iron-oxide sand of Mars beneath her tiny sandaled feet, just as it had been when he had taken the picture. The shining black hair was only printed on smooth plastic, but he could imagine its silky wealth, could vision the lovely, delicate, sensitive features; the slim body in its flowing white toga.

"Cahm bahk swoon, Joyeee," he heard the sweet, sibilant voice echo.

"Gosh, I wish I could, Lehli," he whispered. "But it looks like I won't be able to do it for quite awhile."

But sooner or later I'll be back with you, Lehli, darling, when I'm not needed around here."

He placed the statuette gently on the night table and undressed. On the return from Mars, he had thought expectantly of invigorating showers, for lack of gravity did not allow them on shipboard. But he was too exhausted to do anything but fall into bed. Funny, he thought unhappily, how Sid and his mother had changed; no warmth at all. Nothing like Lehli who had been so generously affectionate.

A hand, shaking his shoulder, roused him out of his slumber. He opened his eyes and saw Sid bending over him. His mother smiled at him from the foot of the bed.

"My goodness!" she said. "You certainly must have been tired. You've been asleep almost twenty-four hours."

He yawned and stretched, threw the covers off and stood on the floor.

"Boy, I sure feel better. I bet I could've slept a week if you'd let me."

"Sorry, Joe," Sid apologized. "We had to wake you. There's going to be a big blow-out for you tonight—official reception and all that stuff, and you're supposed to make the first announcement of the new company."

"Well, gosh, Sid," Lyons complained. "I was sort of hoping I'd have a day to myself. I wanted to look up some of my old pilot buddies—"

"Some of them'll be at the reception," Sid broke in abruptly. "But, Joe, you've got to think of yourself last, the way we've learned to. You're the biggest public figure in the world today. Everything depends on you, and it all has to work out!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, tonight's the official reception. You make the announcement and the public gets interested. Tomorrow you inspect the space ship that's going to take off in the afternoon. The public buys our stocks, see?"

"Space ship?" Lyons asked. "For where?"

"Your recording instruments and films and all that scientific stuff is being analyzed by our scientists. They'll be finished in time to make any changes in the equipment that'll be necessary."

"The ship's going to Mars?" Lyons asked eagerly.

"Yep, the first of the Lyons Line."

"Boy, if I could only be on her!" Lyons exclaimed.

It was impossible, of course. He had his duty to do first.

"What is this, Joseph?" his mother was demanding. She was holding the photo-statue. "Who is she?"

"Lehli, a Martian girl," he said. "I—I'm going to marry her."

"Marry her? With that horrible coppery skin? Oh, Joseph, the girls on Earth are much nicer!"

"That's protective coloration," he protested. "Cuts off actinic rays."

"But a Martian! Maybe she isn't even human!"

"Yes, she is. Her folks escaped from Earth before one of the ice ages."

Sid grinned knowingly. "One of those savages, eh, Joe?" Lehli, descendant of the gentle, cultured Martian race, a savage? Lyons' face went white and his hands clenched. "You'll give her up for my sake?" his mother pleaded. "But, Mom—"

They heard the elevator door slide open.

"That's Morrison and Bentley, Mom," Sid said quickly. "Go out and talk to them. I'll help Joe get dressed." When she had left, he said to his brother: "Don't worry Mom like that, Joe. You know you can't go back and marry that Martian girl. Your place is here, advancing interplanetary travel. Besides, you know how she worries about us—Dad killed in a crack-up, either of us liable to do the same. Morrison is going to marry her if this deal goes through, and she likes him a lot. It'll be a great break for all of us."

"Yeah, I know," Lyons said doubtfully. "I'll do what I'm supposed to, but after that's finished there's no reason why I can't go back to Mars."

Sid didn't answer but his face was grimly abstracted. Lyons allowed himself to be put into a formal red spun-glass suit, clasped the green cape around his throat and donned a brimless toque. In spite of his discomfort in civilian clothes, he was handsome and dashing.

The butler was standing outside the door with a tray in his hands. Lyons took the single glass it contained and drank the vitalizing breakfast cocktail. Then he followed Sid into the sitting room. Morrison, Bentley, his mother were there—and a beautiful girl. They shook hands with him.

"What a change in you, Commander," Morrison said. "Nothing like a good sleep to put you on your feet." He led the girl forward. "This is Mona Trent—our most famous and glamorous studio star."

"How do you do, Miss Trent?" Lyons murmured.

"Not Miss Trent. Call her Mona, and please be very attentive to her," Bentley adjured. "Think of the publicity—pairing off the two most popular young people in the world today!"

Mona smiled charmingly and took his arm as they entered the elevator. But descending to the main floor and walking through corridors to the vast ballroom, packed with people and audio-casting equipment, Lyons was wondering how interplanetary travel could be advanced by his being attentive to a beautiful audio actress.

People jumped to their feet when they entered. Lyons felt his nervousness coming back. Hands were shoved out at him to be shaken. He shook them obediently. A paper was put in his limp grip and he was brought before the battery of audio microphones and scanners. By staring at the paper and thinking of nothing else, he was able to read off his speech without too much trouble.

Then they ate; speeches were blasted at him; and Mona sat at his right, gazing adoringly at him and angrily demanding that he be more attentive, when no one could hear. Passively, he listened when she whispered meaningless nonsense at him, apparently just to make him look at her.

"Don't be so stupid," she breathed, while her eyes were melting at him. "Smile. Laugh. It's for the effect."

He tried to, but whispering idiotic gabble at her was something beyond him. He was straightforward, as were most rocket pilots. He could see the strategy in being courteous to investors who could advance rocketry; but he couldn't understand the need for acting as if he loved a popular audio star.

She finally demanded that he dance with her. He swept around the floor with her in his arms. Embarrassingly, everybody got off the dance floor as soon as he stepped on it; but she refused to let him stop.

He saw the crowd in confusion. In the compact rows of faces he saw—old buddies of his!

He halted abruptly and walked eagerly toward them, his hand out in greeting. They jumped up and took his hand, grinning a little uncomfortably.

"Gosh, it's great to see part of the old gang again," he enthused. "How about coming up to my place when this brawl's over?"

"Well, we'd sure like to, Commander," Sam Martin, one of them said. "But, hell, roughneck pilots like us can't be seen with a hero like you."

"Quit your kidding, fellers," Lyons said, and laughed.

He introduced Mona. Curiously, their discomfort increased. He sat down and tried to draw them out in conversation. They spoke only when he addressed them, and then in the most deadening respectful tones. Gradually, he was growing more puzzled, defeated and lonely, when Mona led him back to the floor.

Why was everybody so cold and remote? Not only his old buddies, but even his mother and Sid. Despite his loyalty, he was forced to admit that. Mona Trent did not baffle him. She only regarded him as another leading man.

But everybody else—why weren't they as friendly as they used to be? Why didn't they give him the companionship he craved? Lehlis was not like that. Lehlis was warm, generous, affectionate—and understanding. . . .

The next day, standing inside the space ship, waiting for the portable audiocasting equipment to be assembled so he could address the entire world as if he were the greatest expert on rocketry, he felt like the last fool in creation. All this—simply because he had been lucky enough not to have his own ship smashed either by a meteor or by an error in landing.

Mona Trent hung on his arm; Morrison and Bentley were close by; Sid and his mother, of course, could only look on at a distance at a launching exhibition.

"What do you think of her?" Morrison boasted. "First of the fleet!"

"She's a beauty," Lyons admitted.

"If we play our cards right, my boy," Morrison whispered in his ear, "we'll be billionaires! The public's already hollering to buy!"

"I wasn't thinking about making a lot of money," Lyons said.

"All I want to do is help out all I can, and go back—"

"Hold it, Commander," Bentley interrupted. "The audios are ready."

Joe Lyons began walking through the ship, praising it into the microphones. In this he was sincere; she was the finest, most modern, most completely equipped space ship he had even thought possible.

He spoke simply and effectively. Then he took a prepared speech out of his pocket and began reading it. It was mostly a repetition of what he had already said two or three times—the profit possibilities of space travel, the commercial value of the other planets, civilization reaching upward.

His eyes were traveling slightly ahead of his voice when he saw a paragraph that shocked him speechless. It read:

I hesitate to bring my personal affairs into a momentous occasion like this; but I am sure you will all be happy to hear of my engagement to the most beautiful girl in the Universe—Mona Trent! For three years we have been separated. . . .

He glared furiously at Morrison and Bentley. They looked anxious as they gestured him to read on. Grimly his mouth tightened. He walked swiftly away from the audiocasters. Morrison had to jump in and take over.

Bentley and Mona tried to follow Lyons. He slammed a door on them and strode alone through the magnificent control cabin, the living quarters, the laboratory, the cargo hold. There he paused and put his hand into an open crate.

Damn them all, he swore, let them use him all they wanted to, let them make billionaires of themselves—he didn't care, if rocketry could be helped only in that way. But they'd made a damn hero out of him, cut him off from his friends, turned Sid and his mother into schemers—and now were trying to force him into marrying a girl he didn't love!

Sid or his mother must have told Morrison and Bentley about Lehli, and to prevent—

He stalked back, stiff-legged and ominous. Sam Martin, the same old buddy he had seen the night before, stepped forward and saluted.

"We leave in ten minutes, sir!"

Lyons was supposed to shake hands with the crew and wish them luck, and he did. But when the audiocasters left and Mona angrily followed them, Lyons stood stubbornly still.

"Come on, Commander," Bentley urged. "They're going to take off."

Lyons folded his arms. Anxiously, they tried to hurry him. He shook them off savagely.

"What's wrong, my boy?" Morrison asked, surprised.

"I picked up a ray-gun in the hold—" Lyons began meaningly.

"Stop talking nonsense and come along," Bentley said, annoyed.

There was a gun in Lyons' hand.

"Out of here, you two," he snapped at Bentley and Morrison. "As for the rest of you, I'll blast my way to the controls if I have to!"

Bentley and Morrison did not resist when he jabbed his gun into their backs and forced them to the airlock.

"Walk out of here naturally," he grated, "or you'll have a sweet scandal on your hands. So long!"

Their faces were pale, but somehow they managed to walk out. The crowd burst into cheers—which were abruptly shut off. Lyons closed the outer airlock, whirled the wheel, shot the bolts; did the same with the inner port. He thrust his gun at the crew.

"Get to your stations," he ordered coldly. "I'm going along on this ride!" His chin set. "Go on—get!"

One moment more they hesitated, then grins crossed their faces.

"Sure," Sam Martin said. "What the hell're we to stop you?"

Nothing but a bunch of Globe-Circlers, not a hero among us." Lyons searched their faces for irony



that was not there.

"Cut it out, boys!" he begged. "You guys have known me for years. I'm still the same Joe Lyons! No hero, either!" The ship started to move along the mechanized ways to the take-off gun.

"Don't wanna contradict, Commander," Sam Martin said seriously, "but flying between Earth and Mars, alone, does leave a mark on a guy. Either he cracks or he comes out a hero. You're a hero—even if you don't wanna be one. We're all together now, though, depending on each other—and on you!"

In the same ship with four of his oldest friends!

Perhaps on Mars he'd be only a human being again—not a lonely hero.

Smiling, Lyons pressed his forearm against Lehli's statuette inside his jacket, and then he turned his head away. It wasn't right for men to see tears in a hero's eyes.

### **JOURNAL NOTES: Hero**

**THEME:** The first spaceman inevitably will be a hero of heroes—and heroism is an exploitable commodity.

**POSSIBILITIES:** A loudmouth makes the first trip to Mars, capitalizes offensively on it and what a great guy he is, embarrasses government and serious supporters of space flight, yet they can't discredit him because that would hurt their cause; get rid of him by sweet-talking him (through his oversize ego) into taking ship way the hell off to the moons of Jupiter—won't have to worry about him for years and meanwhile can use his success story to get public support. Editor Mort Weisinger says no—make him sympathetic character.

**DEVELOPMENT:** Pilot, just doing a job, returns from Mars, is steamrolled by adulation. In love with a Martian girl, but returned out of sense of duty. Hero-worship is ruthlessly being used by heads of company (and mother and brother) to whip up backing for development of space flight. Pilot is astonished to find he's made president of company—figurehead, of course; the top men will tell him what to say and do. Yet all he wants is to be one of the boys and that's impossible now. He takes this cynicism as long as he can retain his ideas, but goes (at gunpoint) along on next flight, back to his Martian girl friend. Yet he *still* isn't just one of the boys to the crew. Maybe on Mars he'd be only a human being again instead of a lonely hero.

**EDITORIAL COMMENT:** I still think the original development had better story potential, but a sale was a sale, especially in the financially bleak days of 1939, when this was written. In terms of the science fiction of that time, Editor Weisinger was justified in asking for a complete reversal of slant—strong emotion was a particularly hard quality to find in stories. I wasn't wholly successful here—there are clear signs of strain on a still insecure technique. If I were doing the story now, it would be smoother and under greater control, but I'm not sure it would be as effective; that desperate sincerity, like the appeal of handicrafts, can't be duplicated by know-how alone. I *hated* the big shots, was *exasperated* with the mother and brother, and was *angry* and *bewildered* and *yearning* right along with the Hero ... and that Martian girl was the most wonderful creature ever, to *me*. Nevertheless, I can't help wondering how good that other story would have been.