

The Real Thrill

by James Blish

(author of "Phoenix Planet," "Callistan Cabal," etc.)

ONE OF THE FEW abilities time had left Martin Burrowes was that of being bored, and he was taking advantage of it to the fullest extent. The incessant, mindless windjamming of the suspiciously blonde girl sounded on beside him and down the cold darkness of the empty street, but he was learning to say "Yes," "You're quite right, m'love," automatically and without interrupting his own stream of thought.

Those thoughts were not particularly happy ones. At the age of 47 Burrowes was hardly a middle-aged man. In these days normal life expectancy exceeded a century, and the middle-age level had been moved up to the vicinity of

fifty-five. No, Burrowes had certainly not passed his prime.

But time and technology had betrayed him. Fifteen years ago Martin Burr owes had known all there was to know about rocket engines, and had served as technical adviser to the government, the IP, and a dozen private spaceship yards.

Then--the gravity impellor, geotrons, atomic power--and rocket technicians were suddenly as useless in the scheme of things as blacksmiths. "Sorry, Mr.

Burrowes." "I'm afraid we have little use for rocket engineering these days,

sir." "We realize that a man of your ability--"

"We'll call you immediately if anything comes up--"

And now the lunar colonies had revolted; there was war, and industries of all kinds were booming, and there was nothing for Martin Burrowes to do. Even the night clubs and similar places of nonconstructive amusement were folding rapidly in the serious intensity of the warfever. All the young men and the adaptable older ones were in the IP or the yards, and the ships were in space, fighting or patrolling. Left behind were the crocks which ran on rocket power, and the human crocks who serviced rockets.

The blonde tugged insistently on his arm.

"Martin," she said. "Look. Let's go in there, huh?"

He followed her over-manicured finger to a large sign overlooking the dark street.

STOP

Here and see the former

Interplanetary

POLICE CRUISER

C2-77

Now open to the public.

Admission 50cents

A Real Thrill

"That's right," he said, half to himself. "The old IP drydock was down here once."

"Let's go in," she said. "Won't it be fun?"

There might be a melancholy pleasure in seeing the inside of one of the old boats again. Abandoned cruiser, abandoned technician-- a fitting juxtaposition.

"Okay," he agreed, and she tugged him toward the sign.

IF THE FENCED-OFF area had ever been a dry-dock, it showed little sign of it now. Most of the heavy machinery had been moved to other quarters and what had been left for useless had rusted into unrecognizable lumps of scrap, amorphous, contorted giants in the darkness. The ship itself lay on hydraulic risers, the kind they had used to repair and scrape the underjets and a rickety gangplank, lit yellowly by one dismal bare bulb, ran up to the airlock. The berylliumalloy hull was pitted and burned in a hundred places--sightseers would think them ray scars, but Burrowes recognized them as the ordinary marks of ten times a hundred passages through the atmosphere. He stamped on the boards and a flight lieutenant a little past his own age appeared from the dark interior, blinking sleepily.

"You're the first all day," he said, taking the money. "Come in." He fumbled in the blackness and found a switch, and the corridors lit abruptly. Bare bulbs again--evidently the C2-77 antedated the general installation of gas-glow tubes.

"This passage," the officer began in a bored voice, "is the core of the ship, running lengthwise from tubes to control-room. The gravity plates, which act similarly to the modern geotron-stasis, are on the hull, so that the down

direction in flight is always away from the center--"

"I know," Burrowes interrupted. "I used to service these things. Designed the engines for this type."

"That so?" said the officer, not much interested. "Well, I suppose there's always a job for technies. Me, I have to hang around this tub and take people through, and everybody else gets on the geotronic ships and gets some excitement."

"Why isn't this one fightin'?" the girl wanted to know.

"Lord," said the officer indulgently. "This thing hasn't seen active service since the Nationalist Coup. Against the Lunies it'd be practically helpless. Those fellows have as good a navy as we have--they ought to--the lunar colonies had a branch of the terrestrial service right in their hands when the rebellion came." He slammed a bulkhead back viciously.

"This is the control room."

"Goodness," said the girl. It's upside down."

"It wouldn't be in space-- remember, out is down in flight."

Burrowes peered around interestedly, the older days coming back to him as he marked the condition of the apparatus, but the things that attracted him didn't appeal to the girl.

"Goodness," she said again. "What a lot of clock-faces."

"All necessary," the officer nodded, and mistaking the comment for a question, pointed to them one by one. "Speed in MPS, acceleration in G's, fuel, oxygen, tube heat, surface temperature, outside and inside atmospheric pressure, gravity altimeter, circuit load indicators, detectors of various kinds--"

"Uh-huh," said the girl.

"Main rocket valves, steering rockets, braking rockets," the officer went on

relentlessly. "Search beam wheel and switch, starter, screen controls, lights, silencers, wings, wing brakes, generators, landing gear. Compartment release directly above you--"

"Rocket, hold, deck, control," Martin recited without looking, and the bored lieutenant looked at him in surprise. "Yeah, that's right. Waste weight, that release apparatus. Then there's the airlock, emergency lock, autopilot, air, gun controls--"

"Uh-huh," said the girl. "Let's see somethin' else."

The officer shrugged and opened another door.

"Officer's quarters?" asked Burrowes.

"Yep. My little home."

There was little to see but three bunks and a desk upon which lay some dusty books and scattered, yellowed papers. The girl grunted and made for the door, but Burrowes was attracted by the books. He picked them up one by one.

"See this," he said, holding up one marked Jet Propulsion Engines: Types and Maintenance. "I wrote this one."

"Yeah?" The officer was more interested. "The captain had a lot of books in here in the days before I took over. He had ambitions for being transferred to a grav-boat, and he studied like fury. See--" He picked up several of the books.

"Mechanics of Achronic Fields. Geotron Operation and Repair. The Stasis Effect. No use for those on a rocket ship."

"True enough," Martin agreed, while the girl squirmed impatiently. "The rest is ordinary enough, though."

"Oh, the usual math tables, Barclay's Journal, Government orbits, takeoSSs, landings, the IP Yearbook of Hazards to Navigation and a million of the monthly

supplements to it--every ship carries those, gravboats included."

"Mar-tin," whined the girl. "Let's see somethin' else."

HE SIGHED and followed the officer out. He shouldn't have come in here. It made him too conscious of the days which should properly be forgotten. The great metal shell seemed empty and dead. So far he had seen no one else on board except the three of them.

"No crew?"

"Skeleton," the officer said over his shoulder. "Don't need many to fly this boat, and it isn't going to be flown, anyhow. A few of the boys are down in the engine compartment playing cards; my engineer is out on one of his periodic binges. I don't blame him," he added bitterly.

They went down the central core to the end of the passage, where another metal door admitted them to a balcony overlooking the engine room. Below, four burly toughs sat around a circle on the floor, each with a pile of matches before him. Burrowes chuckled slightly to himself as he watched the girl pat her hair and turn on her archest smile. He was more than conscious of his own rather flabby construction, the poor condition into which he had allowed himself to slip with the onset of despair and boredom.

The tube-men barely glanced at them, however, before going on with their game.

Evidently they were used to sight-seers, and had little respect for them.

Burrowes ran his eyes over the banks of tubes. They had seen heavy use at one time; they were blue with heat-stain. He pointed.

"If you don't get number two cleaned out pretty soon you'll have a back-blast."

The officer shrugged. "What's the difference? This boat won't see space again.

Let the stuff rot. The government's just using it to collect a little petty cash

before they melt it up for new ships." A red light began to wink on and off by the door. "Excuse me a minute," he said. "Call coming in. Be right back." He turned and ran back down the corridor.

The girl hung on Burrowes' arm.

"Martin," she said, "let's look around for ourselves, huh? Just a little look around. I'll bet there's a lot of places he hasn't shown us."

Burrowes shook his head. "I don't think we'd better. We might get into trouble. This is still a government ship, you know, and they won't be easy on snoopers."

"Please. Aw, come on, baby--"

"No," he snapped, irritated by the "baby." She let go of his arm.

"Well, I don't care, if you're goin' to be an old spoil-sport--" and she started down a side corridor by herself.

"Hey," he growled, stepping after her. She giggled and ran.

"Come back here, you little witch!" he yelled, but by this time she had vanished around a corner. He stopped, suddenly realizing how quickly he got out of breath these days. Oh, well, let her go. If she got into trouble he'd let her worry her own way out of it.

Returning, he nearly bumped into the officer, who was running back down the core. "Oh," said the latter excitedly. "Oh, it's you. Listen, you and your friend'll have to get off. GHQ called--attack on the north side of the city--we're called in."

"What! You're going to take this tub into the air again?"

"Yeah, yeah--most of the fleet's in a fight over Tycho City--they're hard up for ships, say this may be a decisive battle--where's my rummy engineer?" and he started for the airlock. A light burst in Burrowes' brain, and he grabbed the

man's arm.

"Listen. It'll take you valuable time to find your engineer--he might be in any one of fifty dives around this part of town. How about letting me take his place?"

"You're battier'n an asteroid orbit."

"No, listen, I know a lot about rockets--I was an expert, remember. And I can still manage the technical end."

The older man scratched his head. "Well, we've got a pick-up crew as it is--okay. Come on. It may be sholt but it'll still be action."

In the tube room the men had apparently gotten the news by communicator from the bridge, for there was a ferocious racket of old jets being tuned. Somebody was pounding madly on a breech-valve with a hammer. Martin winced and pounded down the stairs.

"Hey, you," he hollered over the din, grabbing the man. "Don't you know any better'n that?" He snatched a U-wrench and the offending valve opened with a scream of protest. SHow far? 63? All right. If you snap those carbopoints inside we'll blow higher than a kite."

"Who the hell are you?" the tubemarl growled.

"New engineer," the flight lieutenant's voice cut in. "Get 'em started, boys.

We're going to see some fighting." He ran back up the stairs. Martill had an idea he had forgotten something, but in the excitement and sudden din he could not remember what it was. He moved rapidly down the banks, correcting mistakes in adjustment, checking, helping when a recalcitrant old tube refused to yield to persuasion. This was his first experience with actual field-work; before he had been a mere paperand-drydock man. It was a real thrill.

THE WARNING BELL rang, and he went back on the platform to watch the dials,

which duplicated those in the control room. There was even a telescreen whose eyes opened on the forward viewplate, so that the engineer could follow the maneuvering. These old boats had been pretty good in their time, at that. A tube began to sputter and he plunged back down to adjust the mixture.

"Hey, bud, take it easy," the tubeman in charge of that section protested. "I can watch it. You don't have to be the whole damn black gang."

Martin returned to his platform "Watch your mixtures!" he howled. Then he clung to the railing as the commander flung the ship eagerly upward.

The shock of take-off knocked all the breath from him. He had not known what to expect, for despite many years of lab training, he had never flown in a rocket-powered ship any farther than thirty miles. For a moment he sat stupidly on the platform. Then from somewhere an insistent, wicked pounding came to his ears, and he shook himself back to consciousness. The banks were glowing dull red now with the over rapid firing after so many years of inaction, but he couldn't see anything radically wrong. The pounding was coming from that half-clogged number two tube. Well, if the lieutenant took it easy there'd be little trouble there.

He ran his eye over the dials. The lieutenant was taking little account of safety; but then, they would probably come to grief against the first Lunar ship they met, anyhow. Maybe they would be too late as it was. In the screen he could see the partly darkened city and a red flaring on the horizon. The clock grinned at him and he was astonished to see how long they had been traveling. Four minutes. It hadn't seemed like that many seconds. Things moved fast these days, even time. He tried to calm his breathing, but about his rapid heart he could do nothing. Why had he let himself get into such poor physical condition?

There was another jerk of acceleration and the pounding in number two became a continuous rattle, like a machine gun. The engine-room was almost insufferably hot, and the tube-men were stripped to the waist. The communicator buzzed and Burrowes put on the phones.

"We're coming up on it from behind," said the lieutenant's voice. "There's a big Ligget-type battleplane above it that seems to be directing the Lunies, and I don't think they've seen us. Can we stand more speed?"

Burrowes narrowed his eyes. "A little," he said into the mike. "Feed it slow, or they'll be picking scraps of us up in Florida."

The C2-77 bounced upward like a nudged frog and the number two began to howl. The tube-men looked nervously at it and then up at Burrowes. They were ok enough hands to recognize the signs and the need of expert advice.

And Burrowes knew suddenly that a paper-man couldn't give such advice properly. If that tube backblasted now--

As if to spur him, the howling rose to a scream. He made a quick decision.

"Clear out," he ordered at the top of his voice. "I'll get it." If it did blow, that way it would take only one man instead of five. He rattled down the stairs, and the black gang, frightened now, headed for the bulkhead as fast as possible.

The screaming of the overloaded, defective tube was a terrifying thing. It seemed to fill the whole universe. He took the U-wrench in a shaking hand, and in a moment the note died away to a low, ominous mutter. He tried to get that out, but an adjustment just a fraction further in the other direction brought the howl in again. He hastily returned the valves to the final position. There were several painful burns on his hands where he had inadvertently touched the white-hot breech, and his heart was making more noise than the jet. Another farther down the bank began to whisper, and when he ran to correct it the number

two lifted its voice a little higher.

THEN, SUDDENLY, the girl was behind him, screaming.

"Get me out of here," she yelled, her face hard. "Get me out, do you hear?"

He grinned mercilessly. "Too late, little explorer. We're in the air."

"I don't give a damn where we are. You got me into this and you can get me out."

The number two, its first polite request ignored, demanded attention more loudly. The earphones buzzed. "We're above them," the lieutenant said. "All okay?"

"All wrong," Burrowes told him grimly, pushing away the furious girl. "Listen.

That number two jet is going to either burst or backblast any minute. Fall free past your Luny and drop the engine compartment on him and parachute the rest of the way."

"The hell ! How about you guys--?"

"The gang's out. There's only me, and I'm satisfied. Make it quick. When the tube goes, the gang and you will go too, besides me."

There was a brief silence, just a second, but age-long. Burrowes' reasoning was inexorable and according to the IP code--one life for many--and he knew it.

"All right," said the lieutenant's voice, strangely altered. "I'll remember you if I get out."

"Thanks, and good luck," Burrowes said, and broke connection. "Now, you," he snapped, and, grabbing the girl, he propelled her toward the bulkhead, clenching his teeth doggedly as she kicked him repeatedly. "Fresh!" she screamed at him, and the double doors of the engine room slammed in her face. The floor shifted under him, and he recognized the feel of a slanting fall. He knew what would happen--the C2-77 would drive for the nose of the Luny, clearing it as it was

relieved of the weight of the engine compartment, and then drop on a 'chute.

Behind him number two began to scream again, and he ran to it, swearing.

"If you'll shut your trap for three seconds," he told it, plying the U-wrench frantically. There was a lurch and a snapping sound, and again the floor shifted. The compartment had been cut loose--

That last second, Martin Burrowes felt the burden of uselessness at last lifted completely from his shoulders. At the count of three, he smashed in the back of the valve--

THE GIRL pressed her nose to a tiny port and watched the fused masses of metal tumble past her together, flaring. She did not understand what had happened, but she knew that this had been more of a real thrill than the battered sign had promised. She stood by the engine room door with her hands on her hips. She was going to give Martin Burrowes a piece of her mind when -he came out.

On the other side of the door the air shrieked dismally.