

SPACEMAN'S LUCK
BY GEORGE O. SMITH
ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

Holt wasn't interested in mere glory. He was on his way to the Moon, but only because that's where he'd find the road to all the money he could spend. Holt had it all planned. . . .

A flare of light arced upwards and moments later the shattering report dinned in the ears of the crowd, rolling across the field like thunder. The noise covered the sharply indrawn breath of ten thousand people. A sonorous voice, amplified a millionfold announced: "X Minus Fifteen Minutes!"

There was a second or two of absolute silence and then the waiting crowd let out its breath all at once in an audible sigh. They wiped their glasses nervously, or poised their binoculars, or scratched their heads for the last nervous time, hoping that they would not sneeze at the improper second and so miss the takeoff; it would be over just about that quickly.

Out across the field, the focus of ten thousand pair of eyes; stood the *Lady Luna*. She looked small from the crowd, but the three men who stood at one tail-fin were dwarfed by her size.

"This is about it, Gordon," said the oldest of the lot.

Gordon Holt nodded. "I've about five minutes yet," he said nervously.

The middle-aged man said, "Time for a last cigarette, Gordon."

Holt shook his head. "Not after training to do without for six months. Save it until I come back."

Doctor Walsch nodded. "That's good sense, Gordon. We'll be waiting for you. How do you feel?"

"Fine. Just a bit jumpy."

"You ought to feel as fit as a Guarnerius. You've been trained and you're trim and fit. I doubt that you'll ever feel any better in your life than you do right now."

General Towne nodded. "Don't forget the honor, either," he said. "The excitement should give your high feelings another lift. Imagine being the first man to ever set foot on the soil of another world."

"It's a bit of a sterile world, I'm told. Not much more honor than the first man to put his sandal on the top of Pike's Peak. They sell postcards there, now."

"Too bad we've named all the visible Lunar Craters," said General Towne. "Seems to me that some signal honor—well, anyway, Gordon, we'll name a big one on the other side after you."

"It—"

A siren wailed and Holt jumped. "That's it," he said.

"Good luck, Gordon," said the general, wringing the spaceman's hand. The doctor clapped Gordon on the back as he turned away.

Doctor and general got into the waiting jeep, and the driver turned and called, "Don't take any wooden moonbeams up there, Holt!"

Holt shrugged noncommittally and climbed the ramp into the spacelock. He sneered at the crowd beyond closing spacelock.

"Wooden moonbeams?" he said aloud. "Oh brother!"

He went to the control chamber of the *Lady Luna* and ran through his checklist almost mechanically. He waited almost breathlessly until the radio barked the word that told him to hit the ignition switch, and when it came he hit it with a vigor and enjoyed the crushing sensation that followed. The thunder from below was music in his ears; now he was on his way and they wouldn't call him back.

Holt was no mere glory machine. Not for him was the simple honor. He had it planned, had it planned from the moment he was selected.

For Holt, the honor of setting the first foot on another world was a flat and tasteless award. It would last only until someone else did something slightly better. What could he get out of driving a space rocket to Luna? Not a hell of a lot. He was not headed for an adventure and he knew it; with everything precalculated, including the risk, what adventure could he have? To land and collect a quart of pumice and a pound of rock and maybe a shiny stone. Look for lichen or moss. Listen to the Geiger.

This sort of dry action would sell no books, collect no royalties, make no moving pictures, bring in no dough.

Gordon took a deep breath as soon as the motor shut off. He was on his way and he knew how to handle everything from here on in.

He had seen enough of human nature to foresee it all. A slight mishap and a call for help would start it. A landing just hard enough to bend the control vanes or to plug up the rocket exhaust. Maybe to ding up the spacecraft enough to make it unspaceworthy. Then:

The cry for help and the whole world crying in return that a Human Being was marooned out there, helpless and alone.

They'd come.

They'd turn handsprings to get out there. Time and money would be tossed down the drain, and men would strive and women would cry, and the news would be filled with daily columns of how the rescue was progressing.

Drop a man in the ocean and the navies of every country go out and comb the sea to find him. Put a cat on the telephone pole and three hundred people struggle to get the animal down. Drop a child in a well and the countryside turns out en masse to help.

Well, maroon a man on the moon and watch 'em struggle.

He had air for ninety days and food and water And just about anything a man would need. He could sit it out and he knew it. And he knew that there was a second rocket that could be put in space within a couple of months. Sixty days he'd sit it out and then—

It would be the story of his life, the tale of his rescue, the bright lights and the personal appearances. Radio and television and endorsing this junk and that googoo. Women and liquor and money.

He came down in the Crater Plato, tail first but far too fast. The tailfins crumpled and the sifting pumice drove up into the exhaust and packed like cement. A seam whistled far below to let out some air from a sealed compartment, cracked in the bump.

The crash staggered him a bit, but all he suffered was a nosebleed and a set of sprained chest muscles. He sat up and looked around.

The radio. He snapped it on and called: "*Lady Luna* Gordon Holt reporting. Made a crash landing. May be dangerous. Will check and call at 0300."

He eyed the radio thoughtfully; it only took about three seconds for an answer, but in that time Gordon considered smashing the radio in the middle of the next broadcast and then discarded the idea because it might lead people to think that he, too, had been smashed. Gordon wanted to be rescued, not given a hero's brief hail and farewell.

"Calling *Lady Luna*. Holt! Are you all right? Explain!"

"I am all right. I am not hurt. Crash landing rather rough but nothing broken. No air leakage, nothing completely ruined that I can tell. Landed as per program in the dead center of Plato, but a little too hard."

That ought to do it. Let 'em get excited slowly. They'll forget me less slowly.

"*Lady Luna* what happened?" They were worried.

"I don't know. I have a hunch that the pumice does not provide a true ground-plane for the radar. We landed as though the ground were about thirty feet below the surface."

That sounds logical. Such things are entirely possible, I'm told. Powdery, filmy stuff with no water shouldn't have a firm ground-plane.

"*Lady Luna* inspect your damage and report as planned at 0300."

Holt checked his air first. Plenty of it. Not a bit gone. Water next and food next. He checked the hull as well as he could from the inside and then went out in his space suit to view the damage.

He had done an admirable job. The tail fins were bent messily and the hull was crumpled a bit, just above the place where the rocket motor ended. If this ship took off—

"*Lady Luna* calling home. Reporting as per plan. Hull bent, tail fins ruined. Crater filled with powdery pumice and I feel that the exhaust is packed. Shall I try a blast to clear it?"

While he waited for the answer Gordon found a bit of wire and shorted the battery for a second. He had to fade out slowly enough to fool them completely.

"*Lady Luna*, do not try a clearing blast. You'll explode. Wait for instructions."

"Will do. Will do."

He shorted the battery a couple more times and watched the voltmeter drop.

"*Lady Luna* can you dig down to the exhaust port?"

"Will try. Note battery dropping. Nothing else in danger. Food, water, air all okay. Hull sound but battery dropping."

Seconds went on and Holt could see the resources of the entire world collecting to prepare the First Spacewreck Rescue. Complete with video, reporters, clergymen, politicians, and humanity waiting.

"*Lady Luna* repeat. You are fading."

Holt repeated, insisting that he was all right. "I can stick it out. I can stick it out."

He watched the radio battery fade. '

Let it fade. He could stand the silence for two months until rescue came.

A billion people listened to his voice die away. And when their radio networks went dead, they raced to their telephones and clogged the land wires demanding that something had to be done.

Congressmen gave speeches and clergymen spoke and doctors gave opinions and scientists differed. A government seldom known for its cooperation announced that its new atomic-powered rocket was about to effect the rescue single-handedly. But the atomic part blew up in front of the video cameras and took some of the landscape with it. The Council of the United Nations called a meeting. The newspapers and networks covered everything.

A man known for his brilliance came on the air.

"The batteries of the *Lady Luna* have run down," he said.

"We must get there in less than ten days."

They tried to do it.

A second rocket exploded in France.

A third blew up in Germany. The fourth would not be ready for space for sixty days.

That was seventy long days after Holt's landing.

Without a miracle, Holt would be dead, even if the experts were wrong.

Protestants prayed, Catholics crossed themselves, and Mohammedans called it *kismet* and let it go at that. A scientist suggested that since there was no habitable planet in the solar system and that mankind could never reach the stars, there was small point in this effort to make space travel pay off. An economist computed the sum of money shelled out already and called it damned foolishness. A Senator Maculay suggested that taxes could be lowered if such expenditures were cut out.

And ten days after the accident there was a world-wide prayer said for Gordon Holt.

The other rocket at White Sands grew cobwebs in its empty fuel tanks.

And the *Lady Luna* slipped into the dark of the moon. It grew colder and colder as time went on ...