

WANDERLUST

By Alan E. Nourse



Tad, like other young men, looked to the spaceways for adventure. But George Barlow, like other fathers, knew that disaster would end his—

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Somehow George Barlow had sensed that something was wrong the moment his son drove into the barnyard that evening. He had been waiting impatiently for Tad's return all afternoon; the men needed those tractor bolts before they could do the mowing. But George had felt the uneasiness, quite suddenly, deep in his chest when he heard the boy's three-wheeler chugging up the rutted country road from town.

He sat quietly, waiting, stroking old Snuffy behind the ears. He heard the little motor-car pop into silence as Tad drove it into the garage; then there was a long silence. George waited several minutes before running a hand through his tawny hair. "What's that boy doing out there, anyway?" he growled.

Florence Barlow glanced up through the kitchen window. "He's gone up on the ridge," she said. "He's just standing up there, looking down the valley." She turned back to the stove, pushing back an unruly whisp of graying hair.

George sat back in his chair, puffing his pipe, the uneasiness growing. Tad was usually back from town hours earlier. The oats had to be cut this week—the shipment of Venusian *taaro* was due from the next Rocket, and they had to have a field free for it. But still, he knew it was more than the tractor bolts that bothered him.

Then suddenly the door burst open and Tad was there, filling the room with his broad shoulders, whistling tunelessly to himself. A cool east breeze followed him in the door, and with it an aura of excitement. Tad's sunbaked hair was wild from the ride through the wind, his sharp eyes sparkling:

"Dad! The Rocket landed this afternoon. Out at Dillon's Landing. It's three weeks early this time!"

A chill swept up George's spine, tingling his scalp. "Then we should get the *taaro* in a couple of days," he said smoothly.

"We should." Tad's eyes were bright as he patted the dog's head. His whole body seemed alive with excitement. "I walked up on the ridge to get a look at it, dad. It's a beauty—tall and slim—you should see it down there. It catches the sunset like you never saw before—"

He was still talking as he walked out to the kitchen, stooping to kiss his mother on the forehead. "You ought to go up and take a look at it, mom—before the sun's gone."

"I've got plenty to do without going to gawk at a Rocket ship," his mother's voice was sharp. "You have too, for that matter. Did you get the tractor bolts for your father?"

The boy frowned suddenly, and snapped his fingers. "Plumb forgot them. The ship was landing just as I got into town, so I went over to watch it—" he took his place opposite his father at the table, his face brightening again. He didn't see the cloud on his father's face. "And they let us go inside it to look around, dad. I never saw anything like it. You wouldn't believe that they could get such a ship off the ground. Why, even I can remember when it was all

they could do to blast off with a little ten-man ship, and now—why, this one is like a yacht. It's the STAR KING, the newest one in Dillon's fleet."

George Barlow scowled, the tightness in the pit of his stomach suddenly making his food tasteless. "That's lovely," he said sourly. "They can build them a mile long for all I care. They still aren't fit for rats. At least here you can wash your face if you want to—" He turned back to his plate, hoping the discussion was over, hoping—

"But this one had complete showers, soft bunks, everything. Hydroponic tanks that make the experimental station look like pikers—"

"Eat," said George.

Tad lapsed into silence, the hearty silence of a hungry nineteen-year-old before a full dinner plate. His father took another mouthful and put down his fork, his appetite gone. He could feel the tension growing, the tightness of his breathing. He sensed his wife's apprehension as she too slowed and stopped eating. As if she, too, were waiting—

"Saw Len Cooper when he came off the ship, too, dad. Do you remember Len? This was his first cruise." Tad's eyes sparkled. "He says there's nothing like it, that Rocket life. They stopped on Venus, you know, and then did a reconnaissance in toward the Mercury orbit before they came back. Almost five years away from Earth! They've got a stack of reports as big as an almanac for printing. And Len—you know how scrawny he was? He's put on muscle now. Looks great." Tad put down his fork, a subtle change in his voice, his hand trembling. "We had a long talk, dad. Len says—"

"Len Cooper's a fool!" George Barlow's voice snapped irritably. "He hasn't got all his marbles. A kid like that—all the potential in the world—brains, opportunity—and what does he do with it? Shoots it into Rockets! First cruise, huh? It isn't his last, by a long shot. Those Rocket boys aren't stupid. They know it takes a good cruise to teach a youngster his way around out there. He can't begin to work for his wages until the second cruise, or the third. And then it's too late to come back—"

Tad fiddled with his fork, his eyes down. The room was silent; even Florence sat tense, startled by the outburst. George sat glumly. That was stupid, he thought. Inexcusably stupid. You'll have to face it some day—you know that. Now? Maybe—oh, Lord, not now—maybe tomorrow. But what could you say? What if it *is* now? His hand trembled as he fumbled awkwardly for his pipe. Where were the words, the phrases, the arguments, so long rehearsed, so sensible, so fatherly?

"Dad."

His fingers were like ice on the pipe bowl. Not tomorrow, then. Now.

"Dad."

"Yes, Tad."

The boy looked straight at his father, his voice very low. "I'm going, dad," he said. "I'm going with it."

The chill widened in George Barlow's stomach, spreading into his legs and chest. He heard his wife's startled gasp, and the chill deepened. He searched for words, and no words came. How long,

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