

# **"Latent Image"**

**by WESLEY LONG**

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John McBride stood on the roof garden of Satan's Hotel, looking across the River Styx at Sharon. To his left, the River Styx emptied into the Sulphur Sea, and in the evening sky to his right, the dancing flames lighted the cloud banks over Mephisto, where the uranium smelters worked on a nonstop plan.

John McBride was in Hell.

But Hell is a city on Pluto, where the planners had a free hand because no intelligent life had ever scarred the planet until man came with his machinery and his luxury and his seeking for metal. Uranium had been found in plenty on Pluto, and so man had created a livable planet from the coldest, most forbidding planet in the System.

John McBride was in Hell, on Pluto, but his mind was dwelling in a little cube that rotated about a mythical spot halfway between Sol and Pluto; one of the many stations that created the space warp that focused Sol on Pluto with an angle of incidence equal to the incidence of Sol on Terra. Enid McBride was back there in that minute station, and John McBride wanted to be with her.

But Dr. Caldwell, the resident doctor of the Plutonian Lens, said: "John, if you've got to go to Pluto, that's O.K. But you can't take Enid with you. That's strictly out, with a capital 'O,' get me?"

"I suppose—"

"I've been doctoring for many years, John. It's safe for you to run off for a week or so, but don't move Enid. Your kid won't be born for a month, yet, but if you subject her to the 4- or 5-G you need to get from here to Pluto, you'll have—not only the baby, but as nasty a mess as you've ever seen! Take it from me, fella, 4-G is worse than a fall if you keep it up for hours. No dice!"

"O.K.," said John, unhappily. "She'll be all right?"

"Sure," said Caldwell. "Besides, all you can do now is to sit around, bite your fingernails, and ask foolish questions. If I had my way, you'd be away when the youngster is born, that'd save you from a lot of useless worry."

"That isn't fair."

"I know you feel that way. Enid does too. But it is still sort of futile. You want the right to worry; go ahead and worry. After all, there are enough people around the Lens that know you are worrying. She'll be all right, I tell you!"

"You'll let me know if anything turns up?"

"That's a promise, John."

So John McBride was standing on a roof garden in Hell, thinking how appropriate it was. He was in Hell, all right. Hell was a nice place to be, warm, pleasant, and happily balanced. But it was no place to be when your wife is nineteen hundred million miles away. Ah, well, another week of this and he would be racing homeward.

Home! That was funny, to consider home, a place in space where gravity was furnished by an mechanogravitic warp, and where there were no windows to open, and where you lived in a cube of

steel three thousand feet on a side, mostly filled with the items required for living plus the maze of equipment required to maintain the great lens that gave Pluto its sun.

Home! It was a far cry from his boyhood home on Venus, where the greenery of the forest fought with the very walls. But home is where you like it, and McBride liked it.

He wished that he were there, for he felt that Enid needed him.

Then with that perversity of nature that people call fate, a bellhop approached him and handed him a spacegram. McBride tipped the boy and opened the envelope easily. He'd been getting 'grams by round numbers for several years, and this was no novelty. He was not aware of its importance until he opened the folded page and read:

JOHN MC BRIDE  
SATAN'S HOTEL  
HELL, PLUTO

HIT SKY FOR HOME. ENID IN NO GREAT  
DANGER FROM FALL, BUT HER RECOVERY  
WILL BE ASSISTED BY YOUR PRESENCE.

CALDWELL.

McBride read the words twice, and then looked around himself, wildly. *Hit Sky* was easy to say—but at 6-G it would take just over one hundred hours to make the passage. Four days minimum!

McBride raced to the elevator, chewed his fingernails while the car rode him down the hundred and seven floors with that snail's pace caused by many stops. He shot out of the elevator door, caromed

off the opposite wall into an ash tray which he upset and sent a small cascade of sand across the floor. McBride coasted to a stop before the hotel manager's desk and tossed the 'gram in front of him. The manager read and looked up in sympathy.

McBride said: "Get me a reservation on the next sunward-bound ship. Emergency stop; they'll make the stopoff with an emergency."

"Right." The manager spoke into the phone and then said: "And you'll be checking out?"

"Yes. Have one of the boys collect my stuff and ship it out to Station 1."

"O.K., McBride, we'll see that your stuff is taken care of. Ben!" he called out through the door, "hurry up on that reservation, and see that a car is ready to take Mr. McBride to Hellsport."

"T'won't be necessary," said Ben with a glum face. "The *Uranium Lady* just took off fifteen minutes ago, and there isn't another ship scheduled out of Hellsport for five days."

"Five days!" groaned McBride. "Anything flyable on this planet?"

"Nothing that would take a run to the Lens," said Ben.

"Sure?"

"Almost positive. However, I'll put a request on the radio that may smoke out an unknown."

"I'll buy the thing if they won't let me go any other way," said McBride.

"We understand," said the hotel manager.

McBride stamped up and down the hotel lobby for an hour. His luggage came down, all collected and prepared. He called Caldwell, and spoke to him for an hour, but Dr. Caldwell's protestations didn't help McBride. Enid had fallen from a chair while cleaning out a shelf, and was resting easily, no complications. Yes, there was some pain, enough to make Enid want her husband near. No danger, no, but it would be best if he were there.

But McBride was still one hundred hours and nineteen hundred million miles away.

John McBride didn't see the messenger boy bringing the message until he almost bumped into him. "Mr. McBride, here's your answer," said the lad, and he saw McBride rip the envelope open with a quick gesture to read the following:

MC BRIDE:

EXPERIMENTAL SPACESHIP *HAYWIRE*  
*QUEEN* AT YOUR COMMAND IF YOU CAN  
REPAIR ALPHATRON. MEET ME AT  
HELLSPORT.

STEVE HAMMOND (SKYWAYS)

McBride said to the messenger: "It's grabbing at straws, but get me a cab and I'll take a whirl at it."

"Think you can do it?" asked the lad.

"Don't know. I'm desperate. After all, it's a wild chance because if Steve Hammond and his gang haven't been able to repair it, how can I expect to?"

"Give it a whirl anyway, sir," said the lad.

"That I'll do," said McBride. "And now that cab!"

The *Haywire Queen* stood above McBride as he met Steve Hammond. "What's your trouble, John?" asked Hammond.

McBride explained. Then he asked: "What's yours?"

Hammond smiled wryly. "That's a long, sad tale. We've been trying to increase the efficiency of the drive, you know. We've been hunting up and down the electrogravitic spectrum for a more efficient operating point. We found what we knew already; that we were using the most efficient part of the E-grav range. We went all the way from down low, where the stuff is just beginning to make itself detectable to up high where the equipment is slightly fragile and extremely experimental in construction. Then we took a run at the mec-grav, with absolutely no success other than to ruin a whole bank of relays; the mechanogravitic warp extended farther than we anticipated when we hit the mechanogravitic resonance of the drive bar, and hell sort of flew all over in great hunks. One of the interesting items was the closing of the E-grav field controls, and the resulting power drain over-loaded the alphasatron. We limped in using a jury-rigged line from the lifeship's alphasatron and made a something-slightly-less than a crash landing here on Pluto.

"So now we're either stuck here until we get the new alphasatron we ordered, or you can give us a few hints on household repairs."

"What's your lifeship's output?" asked McBride, following Hammond into the spacelock.

"About eleven hundred alphons."

"You'll need about fourteen hundred to take off from Pluto," said John. "How's the big one?"

"Deader than the proverbial dodo, whatever that was."

"Dodo?" laughed McBride. "That was a mythical critter that went around dead, I think. It was so dead, even when alive, that when it really died, it was really dead."

"You'd better stick to alphas, " laughed Hammond.

"Speaking of the equipment, have you tried to get a replacement on Pluto?"

"Nothing doing. About our only chance is to haywire something together. But remember, we still have to make a landing, somewhere, and that means a safety factor is somewhat to be desired."

"Not at all. If we can take off safely, we're in!"

"Explain. As I was taught in school, anyone can fly a spaceship, but it takes a pilot to land one."

"Sure, but remember you'll be stopping off at the Lens. We've got replacements there that will enable you to make space repairs and go on from there in safety."

"Didn't think of that. Well, here's the mess!"

McBride needed no close inspection to see that the alphas was definitely defunct. A foul smell, faint, ephemerally pungent, permeated the room. It was the smell of burned synthetic coil dope and field-winding varnish which has been described as smelling something like a frying toupee.



"Not only dead," was his cryptic remark, "but dead and suted!"

"Fricasseed," corrected Hammond. "Anything we can do?"

"Is the winding intact?"

"We thought of that, too. Nope. Electrical inspection indicates that the winding is melted together in several places. You couldn't unwind the coil, let alone rewind it with fresh insulation. We've got a couple of gallons of insulation handy, if you get a good idea."

"Not yet. But look, Hammond, have you tried the magnetogravitic spectrum yet?"

"No. That was our next program."

"I'd have tried that first," mused McBride. "Knowing that the drive depends upon the action of a cupralum bar under high magnetic density plus an electrogravitic warp, I should think that the close relationship between the magnetic and electronic phenomena would lead you to try the mag-grav first."

"I didn't want to start at the top," said Hammond dryly. "In spite of the fact that Dr. Ellson claimed to have discovered a region in the mag-grav spectrum that produced a faint success."

"Well, what I'm thinking is that we can rip up the E-grav generator and use the field coil for the alphanatron. It'll carry electrons as well as it carries alphons, you know."

"Better," said Hammond. "But what do we use for an E-grav?"

"First we'll hunt up through the spectrum of the magnetogravitic spectrum. If that doesn't work, we can add the warp produced by your mech-grav, run from the lifeship's little alphanatron. Right?"

"It's an idea. Seems to me that I've heard somewhere that the combined warps of magneto- and mechanogravitic produces some vectors in the electrogravitic spectrum."

"Mind if I brag?" asked McBride. "That was in a paper I scribbled for the Interplanetary Gravitic Engineers. Purely a matter of making a few dimes, at the time there was nothing practical about it, since we had E-grav generators before we discovered the mechano- and magnetogravitics."

"We?" grinned Hammond. "You were still three generations in the future at the time, grandpa. But it's worth a try."

"Never thought that my effort was going to be worth a hoot," smiled John McBride. "Let's give it a whirl."

"O.K. I'll call the gang." Steve Hammond stepped to the communicator and spoke. "Jimmy, Pete, Larry! Come a-running and bring your cutting pliers!"

From what was obviously three different parts of the ship, three voices answered.

Pete arrived first. "Meet John McBride of the Plutonian Lens," introduced Hammond. "This is Pete, whose whole name is Peter Thurman, and who is the guy who knows all about drive equipment."

Pete grinned. "You see us hitting sky at two hundred feet per," he said, shaking McBride's hand.

Jimmy arrived, with Larry not far behind. "These are James Wilson and Lawrence Timkins, respectively. Jimmy is the

alphatron expert, and Larry knows all there is to know about electrical circuits and wiring."

"He's ribbing me about those relays," laughed Larry, while Jimmy was saying: "Y'smell that smell? That was my pride and joy."

"Tell me," asked McBride, "what does *he* do?"

"Who, Steve? Oh he's just the bird that wanted the things done that resulted in this mess. He's primarily responsible."

"Hm-m-m. That puts the fix on the whole thing," said McBride. "Well, fellow, you've heard about Enid. I've got to get home. If we can fake up something so that the *Haywire Queen* will cut loose with a couple of hundred feet per for long enough to get me to Station 1, I'll see that your ruined equipment is replaced so that you can make a safe landing. Say! How come you do not carry a spare alphatron?"

"Why doesn't man come with two hearts?" asked Jimmy. "That's because they're usually dependable. No one ever tried to run two brains off of one heart—that's why one heart stands up pretty well. I can imagine the trouble that would result if two involuntary control centers were running the same heart—it would be something like what happened when the mech-grav made the E-grav cut in—something would blow a fuse."

They laughed, and then Hammond explained about the program. "Right away quick we'll try the mech-grav along with the mag-grav. That sounds like our best bet for something that works. Also breach the lifeship and sabotage the little alphatron for the mech-grav. Might as well have it down here where it's needed." In an aside to McBride, he added: "Is this like your place? No fuses, no

safety devices, no spare equipment because some screwball is always filching something off of a bit of standard equipment to make an experimental set-up?"

"Anything but the running and operating gear of the Lens stations," said McBride, "is subject to change without notice. I've even seen a spare mech-grav generator used to counterbalance Jim Lear's teeter-totter. Jim's dad is on Station 3 and there isn't any kid of that size and age on Three. Did a good job, too, since Bob Lear fixed the mech-grav density control with a switch that urged the far end of the plank so that Jim was lifted and dropped at the right speed."

"Sort of expensive counterbalance, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so, but Bob said it was better than having to crank his son up and down by hand. Besides, we have lots of power out at the Lens." McBride paused. "Say. Do you run the *Haywire Queen* with this crew? Who's pilot?"

"Hannigan. But he got hurt when the works blew up. He ran us in all right, though any of us can take a trick at landing. But he's taking a rest cure to soothe his nerves; they got a scrambling from too much electricity."

"Too bad."

"Not so bad. Just made him jittery. He'll be all right in a week. But we won't have to run home without a pilot. I've got one coming out in a couple of hours. Drake. Ever heard of a pilot named Drake?"

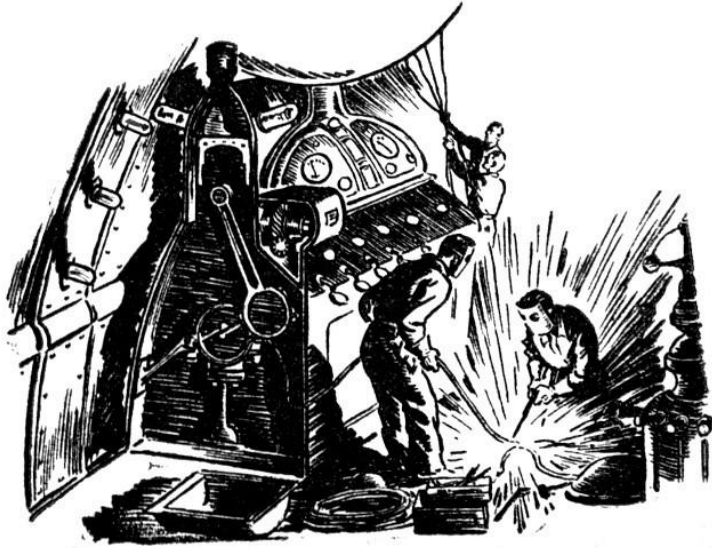
"Seems to me that the name is familiar," said McBride slowly. "But not too clear, I'll know him when I see him."

"I won't. Conducted the hiring by mail, and then gave him a call when the need came—your need, I mean. They told me that Drake was out of the building, but that he'd be at Hellsport as soon as they could find him. Has a pretty good record, too, save for one thing—"

"Steve," said one of the men, "can you give us a lift? The *Beetle's* alphasatron is somewhat heavier than we can handle around this corner."

"Sure. And the next time we're at Terra, have 'em fix the hoist rail, huh?"

Wires, bunched cables, and scraps were a tangled mess on the floor. Tools were strewn about in profusion. A box of nuts and bolts had overturned and cascaded the small parts across the floor below the workbench. But the work was progressing in fine shape in spite of the seeming confusion and messiness. To someone who knew these men, it was obvious that they knew their business and how to use their tools even though the place was ankle deep in junk. To someone who knew them not, the place looked like a junk shop.



"Is this the place where the finest brains in space work out the intricate problems?" asked a cool contralto with a cynical tone.

McBride, who had just finished welding a small angle bracket on the bottom of the mech-grav generator, looked up, blinked, did a double take, and then stood up. The torch burned the air in his limp fingers, wasting the canned gas.

"You! Drake! *Sandra* Drake!"

"Is there another?" asked the saucy voice.

"I thought that Sandy was a nickname," snapped Hammond.

"It's Sandra," said she, "and it looks to me that your friend McBride is always up to his ears in junk!"

John extinguished the torch and advanced upon the picturesque red-head. "Have you still got your license?" he asked. "After that stunt you pulled—"

"Your political pals took away my private license, but I'm still registered as a pilot. This, I've been told, is an emergency, and, therefore, I am compelled to run your junk-heap for you. I'm willing for no other reason than the fact that my assistance to you in your so-called time of need will be instrumental in getting my private license back. Are you ready to go—and where?"

"We're about ready to try," said Steve.

"Try?" scorned Sandra. The perfect features twisted in a sneer. "Aren't the best brains working today?"

"Look, Pilot Drake, this is an experimental crate from way back," snapped Hammond. "You're likely to find yourself drinking coffee out of a relay-shield. We blew out the only alphasatron this side of Jupiter by mishap, and John and we have been trying to gain the same effect by trusting to an experiment made several years ago but abandoned."

"I think I'll have none of it," snorted Drake. "I'd like to see a little more of the solar system before I die. You can get some other fool to run your patched-up ash can."

"Drake," said Steve Hammond, "if you do not run this crate for us—or at least try as hard as we are trying—I'll personally see that you are mentioned whenever skunks, lizards, and butyl mercaptan are talked about. This is an emergency."

"Mind telling me just what type of life-and-death run you're going for?" asked Sandra, loftily.

"Enid McBride is hurt and needs him," said Hammond, pointing at John. "There's a small matter involved—a small matter of a baby's life, possibly. If John can get there in time, his presence will give Enid the amount of lift she needs. Get me?"

"Baby?" sneered Sandra. "What woman in her right mind would have—"

"Your mother," snapped Hammond, "and she made a mistake. Now will you rectify her error and do something of value for once in your ill-used twenty-four years?"

"I've no choice," said Drake. "I'll do it. But—"

"No buts. You're under suspension right now, and how you handle the *Haywire Queen* marks your card. Take it—or take it!"

"Where's the pilot room?" asked Sandra in a cool tone.

"Below—where it usually is in a ship of this type. Your orders will be coming soon enough, I hope."

"And our destination will probably be Station 1?"

"Right. Will you need navigational details?"

"I can work them out."

Drake left, and the men put the finishing touches on the double-warp set-up. Hammond turned the equipment on, running them at test power while Jimmy and McBride adjusted the generators for maximum output.



Pete inspected the myriad of little glowing lights on the informer panel and said that the ship was working properly from dome to foot.

"Grab a rolling chair," said Hammond to McBride. Then he snapped the communicator and said: "Drake. Up at twenty feet per."

"Up at twenty feet per second per second acceleration," responded Sandra in that flat, personless voice.

"We hope," said Steve with a short laugh.

An alarm gong sounded through the open communicator, and directly afterward, the men in the power room could hear the relays closing. In the room above them, an oil switch closed with a crashing sound, its racket hardly muffled by the steel-grating floor. A rheostat whirred as it followed the impulses sent from the control board in the pilot's room; it whisked over a dozen contacts and came to rest. Four big pilot lights winked into brilliance above the informer panel, indicating that the ship was, 1.: Air-tight; 2.: Properly air-conditioned; 3.: Possessed of sufficient power for flight; and 4.: Ready to lift. Behind a two-foot dial, a diffused light glowed, illuminating the face which would indicate the acceleration in feet per second. A small dynamotor whined up the scale and into the region of inaudibility, and a series of safe lights went on; lights that would be on all the time regardless of what happened to the rest of the operating equipment. The meters of the alphasatron moved slightly, and then leaped toward the top peg, stopping before they hit as the meter-sensitivity was cut accordingly. The mag-grav generator meters followed suit, and then the mech-grav meters went through the same dance. Then, far

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