

THE FIRST

By EDWARD LUDWIG

*"Man will need signposts to
guide the way to infinity." That's
a quotation from—and a description
of—this inspiring story*



The city was enchanted. It was a colossal music box blaring forth a thousand chants of victory. It was a rainbow torn down from the sky and poured over the earth. It was a magic nursery through which eager-eyed children swarmed to behold a sparkling new toy.

Three spacemen, three conquerors-to-be, sat stiffly in the back seat of a blue-bannered convertible. The car moved snail-like toward the Capitol steps, escorted by a hundred bands, eight hundred flowered floats, and ten thousand marching men.

In its front seat, standing, waving to the crowd, was Captain George Everson. Everson—the legless man. Everson—the bronzed giant whose first rocketship had exploded at take-off, and yet who had lived to walk on artificial legs, to build a second rocket, and to infect all the world with his square-jawed determination.

It was barely eight o'clock on this April morning of the year 1982, yet the onslaught against the spacemen had begun. Confetti rained on them. Breeze-filled flags dazzled them. Band music deafened them. The flow of shouting spectators dizzied them. It was a day when holiday hats and mathematicians' formulae, roasted peanuts and ancient dreams were blended in a fury of joy.

The magic wand that had enchanted the city was Everson's *Lunar Lady*. And it *was* like a wand—1,000 tons of it, poised on the take-off field on the outskirts of the city, its needle-point nose turned skyward and shining silver in the morning sunlight.

Tonight, at sunset, when the city was saturated with speeches and music and popcorn and prayer, the great rocket would rumble and belch flame and rise. Mankind would begin its first flight to the moon!

So it seemed that the people of all the earth were basking in joy and hope, every man, woman and child—with one exception.

Jeffrey Simon rose from his bed, awakened by the rhythm of march music outside his small apartment. He shuffled sleepily to a window. He blinked at the array of flags and bunting that lined the street.

The music became louder.

He ran a shaky, withered hand over his wizened face, brushed stringy white hair back from his forehead. His lips curved in a grim half-smile.

"It's starting," he murmured, "—the day that should have been yours."

He realized that he was talking to himself again. But although he was only fifty-six, talking aloud seemed natural to him. It not only eased his loneliness; it also helped him to clarify his muddled thoughts.

"Today is your last chance. Not tomorrow or the next day. It *has* to be today."

The thump-thump of a base drum was like a gigantic heart-beat shaking all the land. The blare of trumpets was a victory song, strong enough to live in the mind of a man forever, strong

enough to silence forever the voices of fear and loneliness that might haunt a spaceman.

"That's the music," Jeffrey Simon muttered, "that should have been yours."

A crimson-lettered banner said: EVERSON—THE FIRST.

What a mockery those words were! It was like worshipping an evil, false-faced goddess. The illusion should and must be destroyed.

He jerked erect. He must move quickly. He must put an end to this cosmic lie.

He dressed in a freshly-cleaned, single-breasted tweed suit. His tie was hastily knotted. There was no time for breakfast.

He strode to a drawer of his bureau, yanked it open, dug away a layer of under-clothing. He smiled as he beheld two objects.

His hands moved gently. His hands were like those of a florist arranging a garland of delicate blossoms. They were like the hands of a surgeon fearful of a fatal error. They were like the hands of a father upon his first-born.

He picked up the stone.

It was a bright, phosphorescent green, mottled with flecks of gold and no larger than an apple. Its glow seemed to fill all the room. Jeffrey remembered the cave at the base of Luna's Mount Pico from where he'd chipped it. The cave's eerie glow had almost seemed alive, quivering and pulsing with alien energy. Jeffrey, in his space-suit and half blinded, had staggered when he left with his specimen.

Next, he touched the photograph.

It was a moment of eternity captured long ago and still imprisoned in a wrinkled, yellowed paper. On it was the rocket, the *Marilyn*, which had been his home for fifteen years. Behind it, on a rise in the pock-marked Lunar terrain, was one of the launching stations which had never been used. In the background loomed the nightmarish Tenerife Mountains. And hovering above all in a sky of black velvet was a shining, blue-green ball—the earth.

Carefully, Jeffrey placed the photograph in a large envelope and slid it, with the stone, into his coat's inner pocket.

"They'll believe now," he murmured. "They ignored the letters, the telegrams. Now, with proof, they'll believe. They'll learn what is a lie and what is the truth. They'll learn who was *really* first."

A moment later he was on the street, struggling to filter through the crowd. For a few seconds he knew terror, because those in the crowd had surrendered all individuality. They had become a single, automatic entity, hypnotized by the tapestry of color and sound and responding to it alone. The crowd closed in upon him like the tentacles of an octopus, imprisoning him and thrusting him forward and back.

At last, panting, he broke free. He found a side street—one that would not be invaded by the parade. He walked swiftly. Then, although breath came hard, he ran.

Carved above the entrance of the huge stone building were the words:

UNITED STATES BUREAU
OF INTERPLANETARY
RESEARCH

Jeffrey stopped to catch his breath. How many of his letters had passed over that mountainous series of steps? How many, like those to Congress, to the Pentagon and to the President, had been crumpled, torn, tossed into waste baskets?

It didn't matter. He was doing now what he should have done a month ago—appearing in person with his proof.

He lumbered up the stone steps. His watery eyes widened at the bright murals in the vast foyer—murals of stars and planets, of rockets and spacemen, all centered about a gigantic and symbolic pair of human hands reaching upward.

Jeffrey squinted down the white, clean, cool halls.

So this was where spacemen of today lived, studied, worked, experimented. How different from that battered quonset hut in the hot, wind-burnt New Mexican desert.

"May I help you, sir?"

The voice snapped him back to reality.

He turned and saw a young man seated at a desk a short distance away. The man was sleepy-eyed, with black, close-cropped hair and ears that were too big. On the desk was a placard that said: *Officer of The Day: Lieutenant Andrews.*

The lieutenant drummed his fingers on the desk. "Speak up, old timer. What is it? If you want information on today's flight, just help yourself to these folders."

"No, no." Jeffrey walked up to the desk, brushed away the folders. "I—I want to see someone in authority. There's something I have to tell them."

"I'm in charge. Go ahead and tell it to me."

Jeffrey trembled. "It's going to sound crazy. You might not believe—"

"Go ahead and tell it. Then I'll decide whether to believe."

Confidence came to Jeffrey. He touched the reassuring bulge of the stone and the photograph in his pocket. Then he began to speak.

"Well, you've read how things were back in 1957. The world cut in half. Communism on one side, Democracy on the other. Both sides threatening the other. Both building faster and faster jets and bigger and bigger H-bombs. People felt like they were walking on tight-ropes.

"In August of '57 the Russians announced that they had the biggest H-bomb ever made. The President and his cabinet and the top brass met. The Army Chief of Staff was already on record in saying there was no perfect defense against an H-bomb attack. Radar nets, anti-aircraft and fighter planes would take care of a lot of attacking bombers or missiles, but some would probably get through. There had to be something else—something as daring as the first A-bomb project back in World War II.

"The answer was obvious: a *manned* artificial satellite."

The lieutenant stiffened. He made a sucking noise with his lips.

"Yep," Jeffrey continued, "a manned satellite. Our scientists had developed the tiny, unmanned 'mouse.' A full-scale version was tougher—but possible.

"And a nation in control of such a satellite would watch over all the world. From its near-zero gravity it could launch guided atomic missiles to any point on the earth."

Jeffrey cleared his throat. His listener was still attentive.

"So Project Pandora began. Like the Manhattan Project, it was top secret, because we didn't want the Russians to start like crazy on their own Project. I never learned how many men were involved—probably about 100,000. But all except maybe a hundred or so thought they were working on new types of jets or fuels.

"A new town—Pandora City—sprang up in New Mexico for general research. Really top secret stuff, like the construction of our rockets, was handled in Hell Canyon, which probably still isn't on your maps. You couldn't get there except by cargo-carrying helicopter.

"I was a guided missile man transferred from Point Mugu to the Canyon. Entering that hell-hole was like being sentenced for life. We had our movies and beer, but the sun and mountains were still there. I used to look at those mountains

and wonder if I dared try to escape. Then I thought of the desert on the other side. There *was* no escape—except through death or by finishing the damn project.

"By the fall of '58 we had our fuel. Dilute monatomic hydrogen—powerful as the guts of an H-bomb, but controllable, suitable for atomic engines. Powered with that fuel, a rocket could rip through the old seven-mile-a-second barrier like a knife cutting through tissue paper.

"Then a new question came up. Was the artificial satellite the ideal solution to our problem? Even at a height of a thousand miles, it could be visible to Russian astronomers. Russian knowledge of our secret could start off a Third World War. And, if the Russians developed their own guided missile program, the satellite might be vulnerable.

"We'd developed an alloy of rare earths for our jet tubes, so there was no reason why we couldn't hit the moon direct. A Lunar station could be camouflaged, and launching platforms for missiles could be scattered. Most important, the moon would give us utter secrecy."

Jeffrey's voice trailed. A cloud of memory seemed to drift before his vision. "And—and I guess there was something else, too. We didn't want to stop with just a satellite. We had the power to take space by the nose and pull it around like a

whipped dog. The first men to leave our planet—think of those words. The first, the very first. The thought makes you a little drunk."

He smiled. "The President, his cabinet, the top brass okayed our ideas. So the moon it was!"

Lieutenant Andrews rose, his mouth a tight, white line.

"Afraid we'll have to call it a day," he muttered. "It's time for me to go off duty. Sorry."

"But—but your relief isn't here. You can't—"

"Sorry." The man's gaze avoided Jeffrey's face.

He moved swiftly, his tall body easing around the desk, then striding down the hall.

Jeffrey was like a statue, an absurd, bulging-eyed statue with right hand still raised in a climactic, melodramatic gesture.

"But I haven't finished!" he cried. "You haven't heard—"

The lieutenant marched away, oblivious to Jeffrey's pleading voice. Abruptly, his bright uniform disappeared into one of the labyrinth's many rooms.

Jeffrey was a fragile leaf mauled by winds of desperation. He dug furiously into his coat's inner pocket.

"You haven't seen my proof!" he screamed.

There was no reply save the cold, hollow, hundred-tongued echo of his own words.

Jeffrey looked down at his outstretched hands. They were holding the faded photograph and the shining stone, offering them to the silence.

Outside, the city was like a merry-go-round whirling faster and faster. Music had swelled to a dizzying crescendo. Colors were brighter in the noon sunlight. Voices were louder, prayers stronger.

"Ten to one they don't make it," said a rat-faced man. "I'll take *all* bets."

"They will not be alone," the solemn man in the black robe intoned to his congregation. "For yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...."

"Why must Daddy go up into the sky, Mama? Why?" asked the child.

"He's going to be a pioneer, dear. He's going to be one of the first to go to the moon."

"But why, Mama? Why?"

The bearded man shouted, "The wrath of God will fall upon us and upon our children and our children's children. Man was not meant—"

"We have our Marco Polo, our Columbus, our Wright Brothers and our Lindbergh. Now, by the grace of God, we have our George Everson!"

"Step right up, folks! Get your souvenir programs here! And don't forget your dark glasses for the take-off. Special today—only one dollar!"

A clock struck one.

"No," said the stiffly polite girl, "the city editor isn't in. No, our reporters are covering the flight. Sorry."

A clock struck two.

"Sorry."

Jeffrey sighed. What else was there? The Research Bureau. The Department of Defense, the Pentagon. *The Times*, *The Herald*, *The Post*. He hadn't wanted to take his story to the newspapers, but they had given him a last, futile hope. Now, even they had refused to listen.

There was still *The Mirror*. The twilight news. The love nests, the exposés, the screaming headlines that most papers were saving for the second coming of Christ.

Jeffrey found himself walking up dark, thinly carpeted stairs, pushing a faded swinging door. Then someone was leading him forward. Sounds of clacking typewriters and rustling papers filled the air.

The photograph and the moon-stone were in his hands. He was thrusting them forward.

"This is my proof," he mumbled automatically.

For a long time his surroundings were like the terrain in a dimly remembered dream. Then hands helped him into a chair.

A deep voice grunted at him. "Okay, proof of what?"

Jeffrey blinked. His brain fought to break through the wall of weariness that enclosed it. He saw that the man before him was middle-aged, balding, small-eyed. His trace of a smile was not unpleasant.

"What's it all about, fellow?" the man asked, leaning back in his chair.

Thank you, God, thought Jeffrey, that I have another chance.

He began again. 1957, the H-bomb, Project Pandora. Lord, if he could only show this man the images that still hung in his memory!

But how could you capture the dizzying blackness of space, the hypnotic silver of stars, and recreate their magic in mere words? How feeble were words. They were like broken fingers trying to carry sand.

Nevertheless, the man listened. Jeffrey came to the words, "So the moon it was!" And even then the man said nothing. Jeffrey went on:

"Our first rocket was ready by the summer of '59. We named it the *Marilyn*—after Marilyn Monroe, the top glamour gal of those days. And I was in the ship's first crew.

"Our take-off wasn't like this circus today. No music, no speeches, no parades. We had a shot of brandy in the morning. We shook hands with our friends and puffed on cigarettes and the C.O. said a prayer. Then we took off."

Jeffrey weighed words and memories in his mind. "It'd take me a year to tell about how space looks and how the moon is; and how you feel when all the things you love are in a cloud-wrapped ball 240,000 miles away. Or how it feels to see your buddies slip through the paper-thin crust that covers parts of

the moon and go down into nothingness, just as if the hand of God wiped them out of the universe.

"Anyway, we hit the moon. The ship stayed long enough for us to build a dome. Then we split the crew in half. Five stayed, the rest shuttled back to Earth for more supplies. Three months later the second rocket, the *June Randy*, was ready, and life got a little easier. We began to get an occasional case of beer and mail from home. Our families thought they were writing to Pandora City. To think that those little three-cent letters would go all the way to Luna would have seemed a lunatic's dream to them.

"By the summer of '61 Project Pandora was completed. We had two domes and four launching stations, each a hundred miles apart. The missiles on the launching platforms were like those beds of nails the yogis are supposed to lie on—only a hundred times bigger. And each nail was a uranium-lithium-tritium-headed rocket.

"1961 slipped by, and '62 and '63. There were a few aborted revolutions on earth, a few moments of tension, but no war."

A veil of loneliness seemed to fall over his vision, separating him from his listener.

"Go ahead," the man prompted him.

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