
DEATH AND THE SENATOR

A Short Story

ARTHUR C. CLARKE

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Death and the Senator

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This dark novelette, first published in *Analog Science Fiction/Fact* for May, 1961 shows Clarke in ruminative and elegiac mode and is perhaps the best embodiment at shorter lengths of his sad and visionary spirit. Martin Steelman, a US Senator, is dying of heart disease. Knowing this, he has reconciled with his ex-wife and his daughter, whom he had sacrificed to his career and he has also begun to become close to his grandchildren. Steelman's condition, seemingly irreversible, may respond to innovative treatment in a low-gravity, Moon-based space installation. That installation is administered by the Soviet Union; ironically, decades earlier a similar project planned by the USA had been vetoed by the Senator himself, while he was the influential Chairman of the funding committee ... too expensive, too speculative, the younger Steelman had said. Now the Russians have offered him the possibility of extended life. An extended life for Steelman will mean the likelihood of the Presidency which has long obsessed him. Steelman, however, knows that the Russians are doing this as a PR tactic. He knows also that accepting this chance at life will make him appear a rank hypocrite and will attack that very sense of reconciliation he has at last found.

Sir Arthur Clarke (1917 -), a British subject knighted by the Queen in 1998 and resident for decades in Sri Lanka, is regarded with the late Isaac Asimov and Robert A. Heinlein as one of the three most important writers of science fiction in the 20th century. He is best known for his novel and screenplay (the latter in collaboration with Stanley Kubrick) of the famous film *2001*, perhaps the first great science fiction film, but he is also the author of novels such as *Childhood's End*, *Against The Fall Of Night*, *Rendezvous With Rama* which are of equal stature. A speculative essay for a small British technical publication in 1945 sculpted in detail plans for a working communications satellite (the technology Clarke outlined was indeed used in Telstar but a famous decision held that it was not possible to patent an idea whose technology did not at that time exist). Clarke's *The Star* (1955) won the second Hugo Award for best short story and he won the Hugo again for his novella *A Meeting With Medusa* (1972) and novels *Rendezvous With Rama* and *The Fountains Of Paradise* (1979). *The Fountains Of Paradise*, *A Meeting With Medusa* and *Rendezvous With Rama* were also winners of the Nebula Award and Clarke was subsequently awarded the SFFWA Grand Master.

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Death and the Senator

Washington had never looked lovelier in the spring; and this was the last spring, thought Senator Steelman bleakly, that he would ever see. Even now, despite all that Dr. Jordan had told him, he could not fully accept the truth. In the past there had always been a way of escape; no defeat had been final. When men had betrayed him, he had discarded them — even ruined them as a warning to others. But now the betrayal was within himself; already, it seemed, he could feel the labored beating of the heart that would soon be stilled. No point in planning now for the Presidential election of 1976; he might not even live to see the nominations. . . .

It was an end of dreams and ambition, and he could not console himself with the knowledge that for all men these must end some day. For him it was too soon; he thought of Cecil Rhodes, who had always been one of his heroes, crying “So much to do — so little time to do it in!” as he died before his fiftieth birthday. He was already older than Rhodes, and had done far less.

The car was taking him away from the Capitol; there was symbolism in that, and he tried not to dwell upon it. Now he was abreast of the New Smithsonian — that vast complex of museums he had never had time to visit, though he had watched it spread along the Mall throughout the years he had been in Washington. How much he had missed, he told himself bitterly, in his relentless pursuit of power! The whole universe of art and culture had remained almost closed to him, and that was only part of the price that he had paid. He had become a stranger to his family and to those who were once his friends. Love had been sacrificed on the altar of ambition, and the sacrifice had been in vain. Was there anyone in all the world who would weep at his departure?

Yes, there was. The feeling of utter desolation relaxed its grip upon his soul. As he reached for the phone, he felt ashamed that he had to call the office to get this number, when his mind was cluttered with memories of so many less important things.

(There was the White House, almost dazzling in the spring sunshine. For the first time in his life he did not give it a second glance. Already it belonged to another world — a world that would never concern him again.)

The car circuit had no vision, but he did not need it to sense Irene’s mild surprise — and her still milder pleasure.

“Hello, Renee — how are you all?”

“Fine, Dad. When are we going to see you?”

It was the polite formula his daughter always used on the rare occasions when he called. And invariably, except at Christmas or birthdays, his answer was a vague promise to drop around at some indefinite

future date.

“I was wondering,” he said slowly, almost apologetically, “if I could borrow the children for an afternoon. It’s a long time since I’ve taken them out, and I felt like getting away from the office.”

“But of course,” Irene answered, her voice warming with pleasure. “They’ll love it. When would you like them?”

“Tomorrow would be fine. I could call around twelve, and take them to the Zoo or the Smithsonian, or anywhere else they felt like visiting.”

Now she was really startled, for she knew well enough that he was one of the busiest men in Washington, with a schedule planned weeks in advance. She would be wondering what had happened; he hoped she would not guess the truth. No reason why she should, for not even his secretary knew of the stabbing pains that had driven him to seek this long-overdue medical check-up.

“That would be wonderful. They were talking about you only yesterday.”

His eyes misted, and he was glad that Renee could not see him.

“I’ll be there at noon,” he said hastily, trying to keep the emotion out of his voice. “My love to you all.” He switched off before she could answer, and relaxed against the upholstery with a sigh of relief. Almost upon impulse, without conscious planning, he had taken the first step in the reshaping of his life. Though his own children were lost to him, a bridge across the generations remained intact. If he did nothing else, he must guard and strengthen it in the months that were left.

Taking two lively and inquisitive children through the Natural History Building was not what the doctor would have ordered, but it was what he wanted to do. Joey and Susan had grown so much since their last meeting, and it required both physical and mental alertness to keep up with them. No sooner had they entered the rotunda than they broke away from him, and scampered towards the enormous elephant dominating the marble hall.

“What’s that?” cried Joey.

“It’s an elephant, stupid,” answered Susan with all the crushing superiority of her seven years.

“I know it’s an effelant,” retorted Joey. “But what’s its name?”

Senator Steelman scanned the label, but found no assistance there. This was one occasion when the risky adage “Sometimes wrong, never uncertain” was a safe guide to conduct.

“He was called . . . er . . . Jumbo,” he said hastily. “Just look at those tusks!”

“Did he ever get a toothache?”

“Oh no.”

“How did he clean his teeth? Ma says that if I don’t clean mine —”

Steelman saw where the logic of this was leading, and thought it best to change the subject.

“There’s a lot more to see inside. Where do you want to start — birds, snakes, fish, mammals?”

“Snakes!” clamored Susan. “I wanted to keep one in a box, but Daddy said no. Do you think he’d change his mind if you asked him?”

“What’s a mammal?” asked Joey, before Steelman could work out an answer to that.

“Come along,” he said firmly. “I’ll show you.”

As they moved through the halls and galleries the children darting from one exhibit to another, he felt at peace with the world. There was nothing like a museum for calming the mind, for putting the problems of everyday life in their true perspective. Here, surrounded by the infinite variety and wonder of Nature, he was reminded of truths he had forgotten. He was only one of a million million creatures that shared this planet Earth. The entire human race, with its hopes and fears, its triumphs and its follies, might be no more than an incident in the history of the world. As he stood before the monstrous bones of *Diplodocus* — the children for once awed and silent — he felt the winds of Eternity blowing through his soul. He could no longer take so seriously the gnawing of ambition, the belief that he was the man the nation needed. *What* nation, if it came to that? A mere two centuries ago this summer, the Declaration of Independence had been signed; but this old American had lain in the Utah rocks for a hundred million years —

He was tired when they reached the Hall of Oceanic Life, with its dramatic reminder that Earth still possessed animals greater than any that the past could show. The ninety-foot blue whale plunging into the ocean, and all the other swift hunters of the sea, brought back memories of hours he had once spent on a tiny, glistening deck with a white sail billowing above him. That was another time when he had known contentment, listening to the swish of water past the prow, and the sighing of the wind through the rigging. He had not sailed for thirty years; this was another of the world’s pleasures he had put aside.

“I don’t like fish,” complained Susan. “When do we get to the snakes?”

“Presently,” he said. “But what’s the hurry? There’s plenty of time.”

The words slipped out before he realized it. He checked his step, while the children ran on ahead. Then he smiled, without bitterness. For in a sense, it was true enough. There *was* plenty of time. Each day, each hour could be a universe of experience, if one used it properly. In the last weeks of his life, he would begin to live.

As yet, no one at the office suspected anything. Even his outing with the children had not caused much surprise; he had done such things before, suddenly canceling his appointments and leaving his staff to pick up the pieces. The pattern of his behavior had not yet changed, but in a few days it would be obvious to all his associates that something had happened. He owed it to them — and to the Party — to break the news as soon as possible; there were, however, many personal decisions he had to make first, and which he wished to settle in his own mind before unwinding his affairs.

There was another reason for his hesitancy. During his career, he had seldom lost a fight, and in the cut and thrust of political life he had given quarter to none. Now, facing his ultimate defeat, he dreaded the sympathy and the condolences that his many enemies would hasten to shower upon him. The attitude, he knew, was a foolish one — a remnant of his stubborn pride which was too much a part of his personality to vanish even under the immediate shadow of death.

He carried his secret from committee room to White House to Capitol, and through all the labyrinths

of Washington society, for more than two weeks. It was the finest performance of his career, but there was no one to appreciate it. At the end of that time he had completed his plan of action; it remained only to dispatch a few letters he had written in his own hand, and to call his wife.

The office located her, not without difficulty, in Rome. She was still beautiful, he thought, as her features swam on to the screen; she would have made a fine First Lady, and that would have been some compensation for the lost years. As far as he knew, she had looked forward to the prospect; but had he ever really understood what she wanted?

“Hello, Martin,” she said, “I was expecting to hear from you. I suppose you want me to come back.”

“Are you willing to?” he asked quietly. The gentleness of his voice obviously surprised her.

“I’d be a fool to say no, wouldn’t I? But if they don’t elect you, I want to go my own way again. You must agree to that.”

“They won’t elect me. They won’t even nominate me. You’re the first to know this, Diana. In six months, I shall be dead.”

The directness was brutal, but it had a purpose. That fraction of a second delay while the radio waves flashed up to the communication satellites and back again to Earth had never seemed so long. For once, he had broken through the beautiful mask. Her eyes widened with disbelief, her hand flew to her lips.

“You’re joking!”

“About *this*? It’s true enough. My heart’s worn out. Dr. Jordan told me, a couple of weeks ago. It’s my own fault, of course, but let’s not go into that.”

“So that’s why you’ve been taking out the children: I wondered what had happened.”

He might have guessed that Irene would have talked with her mother. It was a sad reflection on Martin Steelman, if so commonplace a fact as showing an interest in his own grandchildren could cause curiosity.

“Yes,” he admitted frankly. “I’m afraid I left it a little late. Now I’m trying to make up for lost time. Nothing else seems very important.”

In silence, they looked into each other’s eyes across the curve of the earth, and across the empty desert of the dividing years. Then Diana answered, a little unsteadily, “I’ll start packing right away.”

Now that the news was out, he felt a great sense of relief. Even the sympathy of his enemies was not as hard to accept as he had feared. For overnight, indeed, he had no enemies. Men who had not spoken to him in years, except with invective, sent messages whose sincerity could not be doubted. Ancient quarrels evaporated, or turned out to be founded on misunderstandings. It was a pity that one had to die to learn these things.

He also learned that, for a man of affairs, dying was a full-time job. There were successors to appoint, legal and financial mazes to untangle, Committee and State business to wind up. The work of an energetic lifetime could not be terminated suddenly, as one switches off an electric light. It was astonishing how many responsibilities he had acquired, and how difficult it was to divest himself of them. He had never found it easy to delegate power — a fatal flaw, many critics had said, in a man who hoped to be Chief Executive — but now he must do so.

It was as if a great clock was running down, and there was no one to rewind it. As he gave away his books, read and destroyed old letters, closed useless accounts and files, dictated final instructions, and wrote farewell notes, he sometimes felt a sense of complete unreality. There was no pain; he could never have guessed that he did not have years of active life ahead of him. Only a few lines on a cardiogram lay like a roadblock across his future — or like a curse, written in some strange language the doctors alone could read.

Almost every day now Diana, Irene or her husband brought the children to see him. In the past he had never felt at ease with Bill, but that, he knew, had been his own fault. You could not expect a son-in-law to replace a son, and it was unfair to blame Bill because he had not been cast in the image of Martin Steelman II. Bill was a person in his own right; he had looked after Irene, made her happy, and fathered her children. That he lacked ambition was a flaw — if flaw indeed it was — that the senator could at last forgive.

He could even think, without pain or bitterness, of his own son, who had traveled this road before him and now lay, one cross among many, in the United Nations cemetery at Capetown. He had never visited Martin's grave; in the days when he had the time, white men were not popular in what was left of South Africa. Now he could go if he wished, but he was uncertain if it would be fair to harrow Diana with such a mission. His own memories would not trouble him much longer, but she would be left with hers.

Yet he would like to go, and felt it was his duty. Moreover, it would be a last treat for the children. To them it would be only a holiday in a strange land, without any tinge of sorrow for an uncle they had never known. He had started to make the arrangements when, for the second time within a month, his whole world was turned upside down.

Even now, a dozen or more visitors would be waiting for him each morning when he arrived at his office. Not as many as in the old days, but still a sizable crowd. He had never imagined, however, that Dr. Harkness would be among them.

The sight of that thin, gangling figure made him momentarily break his stride. He felt his cheeks flush, his pulse quicken at the memory of ancient battles across committee-room tables, of angry exchanges that had reverberated along the myriad channels of the ether. Then he relaxed; as far as he was concerned, all that was over.

Harkness rose to his feet, a little awkwardly, as he approached. Senator Steelman knew that initial embarrassment — he had seen it so often in the last few weeks. Everyone he now met was automatically at a disadvantage, always on the alert to avoid the one subject that was taboo.

“Well, Doctor,” he said. “This is a surprise — I never expected to see *you* here.”

He could not resist that little jab, and derived some satisfaction at watching it go home. But it was free from bitterness, as the other's smile acknowledged.

“Senator,” replied Harkness, in a voice that was pitched so low that he had to lean forward to hear it. “I've some extremely important information for you. Can we speak alone for a few minutes? It won't take long.”

Steeleman nodded; he had his own ideas of what was important now, and felt only a mild curiosity as to why the scientist had come to see him. The man seemed to have changed a good deal since their last encounter, seven years ago. He was much more assured and self-confident, and had lost the nervous

mannerisms that had helped to make him such an unconvincing witness.

“Senator,” he began, when they were alone in the private office. “I’ve some news that may be quite a shock to you. I believe that you can be cured.”

Steelman slumped heavily in his chair. This was the one thing he had never expected; from the first, he had not encumbered himself with the burden of vain hopes. Only a fool fought against the inevitable, and he had accepted his fate.

For a moment he could not speak; then he looked up at his old adversary and gasped: “Who told you that? All my doctors —”

“Never mind them; it’s not their fault they’re ten years behind the times. Look at this.”

“What does it mean? I can’t read Russian.”

“It’s the latest issue of the U.S.S.R. *Journal of Space Medicine*. It arrived a few days ago, and we did the usual routine translation. This note here — the one I’ve marked — refers to some recent work at the Mechnikov Station.”

“What’s that?”

“You don’t *know*? Why, that’s their Satellite Hospital, the one they’ve built just below the Great Radiation Belt.”

“Go on,” said Steelman, in a voice that was suddenly dry and constricted. “I’d forgotten they’d called it that.” He had hoped to end his life in peace, but now the past had come back to haunt him.

“Well, the note itself doesn’t say much, but you can read a lot between the lines. It’s one of those advance hints that scientists put out before they have time to write a full-fledged paper, so they can claim priority later. The title is: *Therapeutic Effects of Zero Gravity on Circulatory Diseases*. What they’ve done is to induce heart disease artificially in rabbits and hamsters, and then take them up to the space station. In orbit, of course, nothing has any weight; the heart and muscles have practically no work to do. And the result is exactly what I tried to tell you, years ago. Even extreme cases can be arrested, and many can be cured.”

The tiny, paneled office that had been the center of his world, the scene of so many conferences, the birthplace of so many plans, became suddenly unreal. Memory was much more vivid: he was back again at those hearings, in the fall of 1969, when the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s first decade of activity had been under review — and, frequently, under fire.

He had never been Chairman of the Senate Committee on Astronautics, but he had been its most vocal and effective member. It was here that he had made his reputation as a guardian of the public purse, as a hard-headed man who could not be bamboozled by utopian scientific dreamers. He had done a good job; from that moment, he had never been far from the headlines. It was not that he had any particular feeling for space and science, but he knew a live issue when he saw one. Like a tape recorder unrolling in his mind, it all came back —

“Dr. Harkness, you are Technical Director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration?”

“That is correct.”

“I have here the figures for NASA’s expenditure over the period 1959-69; they are quite impressive. At the moment the total is \$22,547,450,000, and the estimate for Fiscal 69/70 is well over three billions. Perhaps you could give us some indication of the return we can expect from all this.”

“I’ll be glad to do so, Senator.”

That was how it had started, on a firm but not unfriendly note. The hostility had crept in later. That it was unjustified, he had known at the time; any big organization had weaknesses and failures, and one which literally aimed at the stars could never hope for more than partial success. From the beginning, it had been realized that the conquest of space would be at least as costly in lives and treasure as the conquest of the air. In ten years, almost a hundred men had died — on Earth, in space, and upon the barren surface of the Moon. Now that the urgency of the early ’60’s was over, the public was asking “Why?” Steelman was shrewd enough to see himself as mouthpiece for those questioning voices. His performance had been cold and calculated; it was convenient to have a scapegoat, and Dr. Harkness was unlucky enough to be cast for the role.

“Yes, Doctor, I understand all the benefits we’ve received from space research in the way of improved communications and weather forecasting, and I’m sure everyone appreciates them. But almost all this work has been done with automatic, unmanned vehicles. What I’m worried about — what many people are worried about — is the mounting expense of the Man-in-Space program, and its very marginal utility. Since the original Mercury and X-15 projects, more than a decade ago, we’ve shot billions of dollars into space. And with what result? So that a mere handful of men can spend a few uncomfortable hours outside the atmosphere, achieving nothing that television cameras and automatic equipment couldn’t do — much better and cheaper. And the lives that have been lost! None of us will forget those screams we heard coming over the radio, when the X-21 burned up on re-entry. What right have we to send men to such deaths?”

He could still remember the hushed silence in the committee chamber when he had finished. His questions were very reasonable ones, and deserved to be answered. What was unfair was the rhetorical manner in which he had framed them and, above all, the fact that they were aimed at a man who could not answer them effectively. Steelman would not have tried such tactics on a Von Braun or a Rickover; they would have given him at least as good as they received. But Harkness was no orator; if he had deep personal feelings, he kept them to himself. He was a good scientist, an able administrator — and a poor witness. It had been like shooting fish in a barrel. The reporters had loved it; he never knew which of them coined the nickname “Hapless Harkness .”

“Now this plan of yours, Doctor, for a fifty-man space laboratory —*how* much did you say it would cost?”

“Just under one and a half billions.”

“And the annual maintenance?”

“Not more than \$250,000,000.”

“When we consider what’s happened to previous estimates, you will forgive us if we look upon these figures with some skepticism . But even assuming that they are right, what will we get for the money?”

“We will be able to establish our first large-scale research station in space. So far, we have had to do our experimenting in cramped quarters aboard unsuitable vehicles, usually when they were engaged on

some other mission. A permanent, manned satellite laboratory is essential. Without it, further progress is out of the question. Astrobiology can hardly get started —”

“Astrowhat?”

“Astrobiology — the study of living organisms in space. The Russians really started it when they sent up the dog Laika in Sputnik II and they’re still ahead of us in this field. But no one’s done any serious work on insects or invertebrates — in fact, on any animals except dogs, mice and monkeys.”

“I see. Would I be correct in saying that you would like funds for building a zoo in space?”

The laughter in the committee room had helped to kill the project. And it had helped, Senator Steelman now realized, to kill him.

He had only himself to blame, for Dr. Harkness had tried, in his ineffectual way, to outline the benefits which a space laboratory might bring. He had particularly stressed the medical aspects, promising nothing but pointing out the possibilities. Surgeons, he had suggested, would be able to develop new techniques in an environment where the organs had no weight; men might live longer, freed from the wear and tear of gravity, for the strain on heart and muscles would be enormously reduced. Yes, he had mentioned the heart; but that had been of no interest to Senator Steelman — healthy, and ambitious, and anxious to make good copy.

“Why have you come to tell me this?” he said dully. “Couldn’t you let me die in peace?”

“That’s the point,” said Harkness impatiently. “There’s no need to give up hope.”

“Because the Russians have cured some hamsters and rabbits?”

“They’ve done much more than that. The paper I showed you only quoted the preliminary results; it’s already a year out of date. They don’t want to raise false hopes, so they are keeping as quiet as possible.”

“How do you know this?”

Harkness looked surprised.

“Why, I called Professor Stanyukovitch, my opposite number. It turned out that he was up on the Mechnikov Station, which proves how important they consider this work. He’s an old friend of mine, and I took the liberty of mentioning your case.”

The dawn of hope, after its long absence, can be as painful as its departure. Steelman found it hard to breathe and for a dreadful moment he wondered if the final attack had come. But it was only excitement; the constriction in his chest relaxed, the ringing in his ears faded away, and he heard Dr. Harkness’ voice saying: “He wanted to know if you could come to Astrograd right away, so I said I’d ask you. If you can make it, there’s a flight from New York at 10:30 tomorrow morning.”

Tomorrow he had promised to take the children to the Zoo; it would be the first time he had let them down. The thought gave him a sharp stab of guilt, and it required almost an effort of will to answer: “I can make it.”

He saw nothing of Moscow during the few minutes that the big intercontinental ramjet fell down from the

stratosphere. The viewscreens were switched off during the descent, for the sight of the ground coming straight up as a ship fell vertically on its sustaining jets was highly disconcerting to passengers.

At Moscow he changed to a comfortable but old-fashioned turboprop, and as he flew eastwards into the night he had his first real opportunity for reflection. It was a very strange question to ask himself, but was he altogether glad that the future was no longer wholly certain? His life, which a few hours ago had seemed so simple, had suddenly become complex again, as it opened out once more into possibilities he had learned to put aside. Dr. Johnson had been right, when he said that nothing settles a man's mind more wonderfully than the knowledge that he will be hanged in the morning. For the converse was certainly true — nothing unsettled it so much as the thought of a reprieve.

He was asleep when they touched down at Astrograd, the Space capital of the U.S.S.R. When the gentle impact of the landing shook him awake, for a moment he could not imagine where he was. Had he dreamed that he was flying halfway round the world in search of life? No; it was not a dream, but it might well be a wild-goose chase.

Twelve hours later, he was still waiting for the answer. The last instrument reading had been taken; the spots of light on the cardiograph display had ceased their fateful dance. The familiar routine of the medical examination and the gentle, competent voices of the doctors and nurses, had done much to relax his mind. And it was very restful in the softly-lit reception room, where the specialists had asked him to wait while they conferred together. Only the Russian magazines, and a few portraits of somewhat hirsute pioneers of Soviet medicine, reminded him that he was no longer in his own country.

He was not the only patient. About a dozen men and women, of all ages, were sitting around the wall, reading magazines and trying to appear at ease. There was no conversation, no attempt to catch anyone's eye. Every soul in this room was in his private limbo, suspended between life and death. Though they were linked together by a common misfortune, the link did not extend to communication. Each seemed as cut off from the rest of the human race as if he were already speeding through the cosmic gulfs where lay his only hope.

But in the far corner of the room, there was an exception. A young couple — neither could have been more than twenty-five — were huddling together in such desperate misery that at first Steelman found the spectacle annoying. No matter how bad their own problems, he told himself severely, people should be more considerate. They should hide their emotions — especially in a place like this, where they might upset others.

His annoyance quickly turned to pity, for no heart can remain untouched for long at the sight of simple, unselfish love in deep distress. As the minutes dripped away in a silence broken only by the rustling of papers and the scraping of chairs, his pity grew almost to an obsession.

What was their story, he wondered? The boy had sensitive, intelligent features; he might have been an artist, a scientist, a musician — there was no way of telling. The girl was pregnant; she had one of those homely, peasant faces so common among Russian women. She was far from beautiful, but sorrow and love had given her features a luminous sweetness. Steelman found it hard to take his eyes from her — for somehow, though there was not the slightest physical resemblance, she reminded him of Diana. Thirty years ago, as they had walked from the church together, he had seen that same glow in the eyes of his wife. He had almost forgotten it; was the fault his, or hers, that it had faded so soon?

Without any warning, his chair vibrated beneath him. A swift sudden tremor had swept through the building, as if a giant hammer had smashed against the ground, many miles away. An earthquake? Steelman wondered; then he remembered where he was, and started counting seconds.

He gave up when he reached sixty; presumably the soundproofing was so good that the slower, airborne noise had not reached him, and only the shock wave through the ground recorded the fact that a thousand tons had just leapt into the sky. Another minute passed before he heard, distant but clear, a sound as of a thunderstorm raging below the edge of the world. It was even more miles away than he had dreamed; what the noise must be like at the launching site was beyond imagination.

Yet that thunder would not trouble him, he knew, when he also rose into the sky; the speeding rocket would leave it far behind. Nor would the thrust of acceleration be able to touch his body, as it rested in its bath of warm water — more comfortable even, than this deeply-padded chair.

That distant rumble was still rolling back from the edge of space when the door of the waiting room opened and the nurse beckoned to him. Though he felt many eyes following him, he did not look back as he walked out to receive his sentence.

The news services tried to contact him all the way back from Moscow, but he refused to accept the calls. “Say I’m sleeping and mustn’t be disturbed,” he told the stewardess. He wondered who had tipped them off, and felt annoyed at this invasion of his privacy. Yet privacy was something he had avoided for years, and had learned to appreciate only in the last few weeks. He could not blame the reporters and commentators if they assumed that he had reverted to type.

They were waiting for him when the ramjet touched down at Washington. He knew most of them by name, and some were old friends, genuinely glad to hear the news that had raced ahead of him.

“What does it feel like, Senator,” said Macauley of the *Times*, “to know you’re back in harness? I take it that it’s true — the Russians can cure you?”

“They think they can,” he answered cautiously. “This is a new field of medicine, and no one can promise anything.”

“When do you leave for space?”

“Within the week, as soon as I’ve settled some affairs here.”

“And when will you be back — if it works?”

“That’s hard to say. Even if everything goes smoothly, I’ll be up there at least six months.”

Involuntarily, he glanced at the sky. At dawn or sunset—even during the daytime, if one knew where to look — the Mechnikov Station was a spectacular sight, more brilliant than any of the stars. But there were now so many satellites of which this was true, that only an expert could tell one from another.

“Six months,” said a newsman thoughtfully. “That means you’ll be out of the picture for ’76.”

“But nicely in it for 1980,” said another.

“And 1984,” added a third. There was a general laugh; people were already making jokes about 1984, which had once seemed so far in the future, but would soon be a date no different from any other — it was hoped.

The ears and the microphones were waiting for his reply. As he stood at the foot of the ramp, once more

the focus of attention and curiosity, he felt the old excitement stirring in his veins. What a comeback it would be, to return from space a new man! It would give him a glamour that no other candidate could match; there was something Olympian, almost godlike, about the prospect. Already he found himself trying to work it into his election slogans —

“Give me time to make my plans,” he said. “It’s going to take me a while to get used to this. But I promise you a statement before I leave Earth.”

Before I leave Earth. Now, there was a fine, dramatic phrase. He was still savoring its rhythm with his mind when he saw Diana coming towards him.

Already she had changed, as he himself was changing; in her eyes was a wariness and reserve that had not been there two days ago. It said, as clearly as any words: “Is it going to happen, all over again?” Though the day was warm, he felt suddenly cold, as if he had caught a chill on those far Siberian plains.

But Joey and Susan were unchanged, as they ran to greet him. He caught them up in his arms, and buried his face in their hair, so that the cameras would not see the tears that had started from his eyes. As they clung to him in the innocent, unselfconscious love of childhood, he knew what his choice would have to be.

They alone had known him when he was free from the itch for power; that was the way they must remember him, if they remembered him at all.

“Your conference call, Mr. Steelman ,” said his secretary. “I’m routing it on to your private screen.”

He swiveled round in his chair and faced the gray panel on the wall. As he did so, it split into two vertical sections. On the right half was a view of an office much like his own, and only a few miles away. But on the left —

Professor Stanyukovitch , lightly dressed in shorts and singlet, was floating in midair a good foot above his seat. He grabbed it when he saw that he had company, pulled himself down, and fastened a webbed belt round his waist. Behind him were ranged banks of communications equipment; and behind those, Steelman knew, was Space.

Dr. Harkness spoke first, from the right-hand screen.

“We were expecting to hear from you, Senator. Professor Stanyukovitch tells me that everything is ready.”

“The next supply ship,” said the Russian, “comes up in two days. It will be taking me back to Earth, but I hope to see you before I leave the Station.”

His voice was curiously high-pitched, owing to the thin oxyhelium atmosphere he was breathing. Apart from that, there was no sense of distance, no background of interference. Though Stanyukovitch was thousands of miles away, and racing through space at five miles a second, he might have been in the same office. Steelman could even hear the faint whirring of electric motors from the equipment racks behind him.

“Professor,” answered Steelman , “there are a few things I’d like to ask before I go.”

“Certainly.”

Now he could tell that Stanyukovitch was a long way off. There was an appreciable time-lag before his reply arrived; the Station must be above the far side of the Earth.

“When I was at Astrograd , I noticed many other patients at the clinic. I was wondering — on what basis do you select those for treatment?”

This time the pause was much greater than the delay due to the sluggish speed of radio waves. Then Stanyukovitch answered: “Why, those with the best chance of responding.”

“But your accommodation must be very limited. You must have many other candidates besides myself .”

“I don’t quite see the point —” interrupted Dr. Harkness , a little too anxiously.

Stelmanswung his eyes to the right-hand screen. It was quite difficult to recognize, in the man staring back at him, the witness who had squirmed beneath his needling only a few years ago. That experience had tempered Harkness , had given him his baptism in the art of politics. Steelman had taught him much, and he had applied his hard-won knowledge.

His motives had been obvious from the first. Harkness would have been less than human if he did not relish this sweetest of revenges, this triumphant vindication of his faith. And as Space Administration Director, he was well aware that half his budget battles would be over, when all the world knew that a potential Present of the United States was in a Russian space hospital — because his own country did not possess one.

“Dr. Harkness ,” said Steelman gently, “this is *my* affair. I’m still waiting for your answer, Professor —”

Despite the issues involved he was quite enjoying this. The two scientists, of course were playing for identical stakes. Stanyukovitch had his problems, too; Steelman could guess the discussions that had taken place at Astrograd and Moscow , and the eagerness with which the Soviet astronauts had grasped this opportunity — which it must be admitted, they had richly earned.

It was an ironic situation, unimaginable only a dozen years before. Here were NASA and the USSR Commission of Astronautics working hand in hand, using him as a pawn for their mutual advantage. He did not resent this, for in their place he would have done the same. But he had no wish to be pawn; he was an individual who still had some control of his own destiny.

“It’s quite true,” said Stanyukovitch , very reluctantly, “that we can only take a limited number of patients here in Mechnikov . In any case, the station’s a research laboratory, not a hospital.”

“How many?” asked Steelman relentlessly.

“Well — less than ten,” admitted Stanyukovitch , still more unwillingly.

It was an old problem, of course, though he had never imagined that it would apply to him. From the depths of memory there flashed a newspaper item he had come across, long ago. When penicillin had been first discovered, it was so rare that if both Churchill and Roosevelt had been dying for lack of it, only one could have been treated.

Less than ten. He had seen a dozen waiting at Astrograd , and how many were there in the whole world? Once again, as it had done so often in the last few days, the memory of those desolate lovers in

the reception room came back to haunt him. Perhaps they were beyond his aid; he would never know.

But one thing he did know. He bore a responsibility which he could not escape. It was true that no man could foresee the future, and the endless consequences of his actions. Yet if it had not been for him, by this time his own country might have had a space hospital circling beyond the atmosphere. How many American lives were upon his conscience? Could he accept the help he had denied to others? Once he might have done so — but not now.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I can speak frankly with you both, for I know your interests are identical.” (His mild irony, he saw, did not escape them.) “I appreciate your help and the trouble you have taken; I am sorry it has been wasted. No — don’t protest; this isn’t a sudden, quixotic decision on my part. If I were ten years younger, it might be different. Now I feel that this opportunity should be given to someone else — especially in view of my record.” He glanced at Dr. Harkness, who gave an embarrassed smile. “I also have other, personal reasons, and there’s no chance that I will change my mind. Please don’t think me rude or ungrateful, but I don’t wish to discuss the matter any further. Thank you again, and good-by.”

He broke the circuit; and as the image of the two astonished scientists faded, peace came flooding back into his soul.

Imperceptibly, spring merged into summer. The eagerly awaited Bicentenary celebrations came and went; for the first time in years, he was able to enjoy Independence Day as a private citizen. Now he could sit back and watch the others perform — or he could ignore them, if he wished.

Because the ties of a lifetime were too strong to break, and it would be his last opportunity of seeing many old friends, he spent hours looking-in on both conventions and listening to the commentators. Now that he saw the whole world beneath the light of eternity, his emotions were no longer involved; he understood the issues, and appreciated the arguments, but already he was as detached as an observer from another planet. The tiny, shouting figures on the screen were amusing marionettes, acting out roles in a play that was entertaining, but no longer important — at least, to him.

But it was important to his grandchildren, who would one day move out on to this same stage. He had not forgotten that; they were his share of the future, whatever strange form it might take. And to understand the future, it was necessary to know the past.

He was taking them into that past, as the car swept along Memorial Drive. Diana was at the wheel, with Irene beside her, while he sat with the children, pointing out the familiar sights along the highway. Familiar to him, but not to them; even if they were not old enough to understand all that they were seeing, he hoped they would remember.

Past the marble stillness of Arlington — he thought again of Martin, sleeping on the other side of the world — and up into the hills the car wound its effortless way. Behind them, like a city seen through a mirage, Washington danced and trembled in the summer haze, until the curve of the road hid it from view.

It was quiet at Mount Vernon; there were few visitors so early in the week. As they left the car and walked towards the house, Steelman wondered what the First President of the United States would have thought, could he have seen his home as it was today. He could never have dreamed that it would enter its second century still perfectly preserved, a changeless island in the hurrying river of time.

They walked slowly through the beautifully-proportioned rooms, doing their best to answer the children’s endless questions, trying to assimilate the flavor of an infinitely simpler, infinitely more leisurely mode of life. (But had it seemed simple or leisurely to those who lived it?) It was so hard to imagine a

world without electricity, without radio, without any power save that of muscle, wind or water. A world where nothing moved faster than a runninghorse, and most men died within a few miles of the place where they were born.

The heat, the walking, and the incessant questions proved more tiring than Steelman had expected. When they had reached the Music Room, he decided to rest. There were some attractive benches out on the porch, where he could sit in the fresh air and feast his eyes upon the green grass of the lawn.

“Meet me outside,” he explained to Diana, “when you’ve done the kitchen and the stables. I’d like to sit down for a while.”

“You’re sure you’re quite all right?” she said anxiously.

“I never felt better, but I don’t want to overdo it. Besides, the kids have drained me dry — I can’t think of any more answers. You’ll have to invent some; the kitchen’s your department, anyway.”

Diana smiled.

“I was never much good in it, was I? But I’ll do my best. . . . I don’t suppose well be more than thirty minutes.”

When they had left him, he walked slowly out to the lawn. Here Washington must have stood, two centuries ago, watching the Potomac wind its way to the sea, thinking of past wars and future problems. And here Martin Steelman, thirty-eighth President of the United States, might have stood a few months hence, had the fates ruled otherwise.

He could not pretend that he had no regrets, but they were very few. Some men could achieve both power and happiness, but that gift was not for him. Sooner or later, his ambition would have consumed him. In the last few weeks he had known contentment, and for that no price was too great.

He was still marveling at the narrowness of his escape, when his time ran out and Death fell softly from the summer sky.

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