

When Parkhurst heard the announcement that climaxed the science fiction convention, he found that he'd been right, years ago when he had faith in science-fictionists' dreams. But, in another way, he'd been wrong . . .

COMEBACK

by Philip Latham



H. GAYLORD PARKHURST strolled across the lobby with an air of elaborate nonchalance, keeping his eyes carefully averted from the group at the entrance to the coffee shop. He knew that Bill Conway was holding forth in the center of the group and he didn't particularly care for Bill Conway. Bill had been voted the guest

of honor that year at the Pasadena Science Fiction Convention, better known as the Pasadelicon. Bill sold not only to the science fiction magazines but to the big slicks as well—although just what the editors could see in his stuff Parkhurst had never been able to understand. But then editors were funny people.

“Hi, there, Parky!” Conway hailed him genially from his station by the door. “Where you headed?”

Parkhurst started slightly, as if caught unawares.

“Oh, hello, Conway.” His features relaxed into a grin. “Didn’t see you in the crush. Arnold Swope asked me up for cocktails.”

“Say, I heard Hellman’s coming up, too. Swope says he’s got big news for us.”

“Who’s Hellman anyhow?”

“You know . . . that big wind tunnel fellow from Tech.”

“Oh, yes.” Parkhurst’s eyes were vague. “Wonder what Swope calls big news?”

“Don’t know; he didn’t seem to know himself.”

“Hope it’s better than that junk he’s been printing in *Zodiac* lately.”

“What does he care so long as people read it?” Conway chuckled. He turned back to his public. “I’ll be up in a minute myself. Tell Swope to save a drink.”

“Better hurry,” Parkhurst warned.

He had only taken a few steps when his progress was halted by a youth who emerged suddenly from behind one of the imitation marble pillars that disfigured the lobby. Alvin Winters had an uncanny faculty for showing up unexpectedly when you least wanted to see him. There were times when H. Gaylord Parkhurst felt that he belonged more to Alvin Winters than he belonged to himself. Still Alvin was his most faithful fan—and he didn’t have so many that he could brush them off lightly these days.

“Hello, Mr. Parkhurst. How are you?”

“Fine, Alvin, fine.”

“Did you receive my last letter?”

“Yes, I did.”

“What did you think of my remarks, Mr. Parkhurst?”

Alvin had outlined his remarks in three single-spaced typewritten pages using the red ribbon throughout.

“Well, to tell the truth, Alvin, I’m afraid I don’t altogether agree with you. I seriously doubt if the future holds anything so really new and wonderful for us. I mean *really* new and wonderful. Maybe we science fiction people have been kidding ourselves all these years. Whistling in the dark so to speak.”

“But that was the whole underlying philosophy of your *New Worlds of Science*, Mr. Parkhurst,” Alvin protested. “Why you’re the one who

practically invented it.”

“I know, Alvin, but that was twenty years ago. Doubtless science has plenty to show us yet—but somehow I’m losing faith in this bright new world of the future. Growing old, I guess.”

HE LEFT Alvin staring after him disconsolately. Perhaps he had been too abrupt with young Winters. After all, he was becoming something of a legend to many of these youngsters. F. Scott Fitzgerald had been the spokesman for the Jazz Age. Hemingway had owned the Roaring Twenties. And he—H. Gaylord Parkhurst—had also had his little hour back in the depressing Thirties. Ah, youth . . .

Confound it! He hadn’t wired his mother yet. He knew she wouldn’t sleep a wink all night unless she knew he had driven the entire two hundred miles from San Diego to Pasadena without being robbed or hitting a fencepost. After a moment’s deliberation he wrote on the yellow pad: DEAR MOM. ARRIVED SAFELY ROME HOTEL FIVE P.M. FEELING FINE. HOME SUNDAY NIGHT. MUCH LOVE. GAYLORD.

“Send that right away,” he instructed the clerk.

He started for the elevators again, feeling guilty that he had almost forgotten to wire his mother. Conway was still over by the coffee shop surrounded by his worshipful fans. What was it the man had anyhow? Didn’t know a thing about science. His characters were pretty good but that just about let him out.

He reached for the UP button, jerked back his hand when he found himself pressing a brilliant red fingernail.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Didn’t notice what I was doing as usual.”

The fingernail belonged to a dark-eyed girl in a smartly tailored white suit. She wore a convention-card pinned to her lapel, like the one he was wearing. *Barbara Winfield*. The name failed to ring anything. Just a fan probably. Good-looking, though.

“It almost takes two people to get an elevator in this place,” she said, pressing the button again.

Gaylord smiled and mumbled something unintelligible. He never felt at ease around girls—especially girls as attractive as this one. He had always regretted that women had managed to infiltrate into science fiction to such an extent. Female fans were either exceptionally smart—or

exceptionally dumb; in either case he avoided them whenever possible. Why didn't they read articles in the women's magazines on "How to Test Your Sex-Appeal Quotient" or "Making Marriage Work" instead of getting all fired up about two-headed mutants on Venus, or dubious projects for turning the sun into a recurrent nova?

"I see you're at the convention, too," she remarked, glancing at his card. "Are you in business here, Mr. Parkhurst?"

"Not exactly," Parkhurst replied a bit stiffly. Good heavens! Was it possible that his name was entirely unknown to her? Must be a newcomer to science fiction— Although, somehow, she didn't look quite like a typical fan. Much too well-dressed to fit in the picture. It suddenly struck him that the trouble with most of the women who came to these affairs was that they didn't know how to get themselves together.

"I live in San Diego," he explained. "Seldom get up this way, as a matter-of-fact."

"San Diego?" Her glance was puzzled. "Are you the Parkhurst that's opened up that new tract down by Laguna?"

"I'm afraid not," he murmured.

"Aren't you in real estate?"

Gaylord favored her with one of his rare smiles. Ordinarily he would not have encouraged conversation with a strange young woman, but then she looked like a nice girl. Besides . . . he was almost old enough to be her father.

"I've dabbled a little," he admitted. "I own the exclusive development rights to the *Sinus Roris* and the *Mare Frigoris*. I also hold an option on three craters that may be discovered on the backside of the moon within the next ten years; a rather speculative investment, I'm afraid."

SHE STARED at him uncomprehending for a moment. Suddenly her eyes went wide. "I know what's the matter," she exclaimed; "I'll bet we're at two different conventions. Which one are you at?"

"I'm with this science fiction bunch," Gaylord confessed. "The Pasadelicon we call it in our curious nomenclature."

"I'm with the Women's Escrow Club," she said. "We throw a party every year and invite our bosses."

They both laughed.

"There's always some kind of a convention

going on at this hotel," Gaylord said. "They hand out the same badges to everybody."

A door slid back in the side of the wall disclosing a venerable elevator boy.

"Well, here's our elevator at last," Gaylord murmured. "I could have walked up to that cocktail party by this time."

The girl's eyebrows went up. "Are you headed for a cocktail party, too? That's right where I was going; all the big Los Angeles real estate dealers are supposed to be there."

For some reason which he did not in the least understand, Gaylord felt annoyed at the idea of this charming young woman drinking with a lot of big Los Angeles real estate dealers.

"Er . . . Miss Winfield . . . I wonder if we could have a little convention of our own? I wonder if you would care to join me in a cocktail in the Iridium Room?"

Gaylord heard the words issuing from his mouth so that presumably he must be the one who was speaking them—but otherwise he was sure they could have no connection with himself. Quite evidently they originated in some wholly-strange personality that had invaded the frame until recently occupied by H. Gaylord Parkhurst. For H. Gaylord Parkhurst could never conceivably have asked a girl—especially a girl as gorgeous as this one—to join him in a cocktail. The idea would have scared him to death.

"The Iridium Room?" Miss Winfield's lovely dark eyes swept the lobby. "Is there a place by that name around here?"

"Every hotel like this one has an Iridium Room," Gaylord assured her. He was amazed at the ease with which he was carrying on the conversation. "If it isn't the Iridium Room, then it's the Terrace Room or the Emerald Room or the Venetian Room."

AFTER A brief search they discovered a cavern downstairs with the sign over the door, Zircon Room. A waiter guided them through the smoke and gloom to a little bench by the wall. After some debate, Gaylord ordered two stingers. He had never had a stinger before but this seemed like a good time to begin. He paid for the drinks with a twenty-dollar bill which he casually tossed on the tray. He had grown very fond of that twenty-dollar bill, but now he parted from it without a pang. What if he hadn't made a sale in weeks? He would get going

again afterwards . . . when he got over this confounded writing slump.

Miss Winfield was smiling at him over the rim of her glass. She looked exactly like the models in the fashion magazines now. "Tell me—what do you do?"

Gaylord allowed just the right time to elapse before replying. "I . . . write."

"Really? I've always wanted to meet a real writer. What do you write?"

"Oh, lots of things," he replied, keeping his eyes modestly lowered. "You wouldn't believe it to look at me but I've destroyed the earth five times, wrecked the solar system twice, and once I turned the whole universe inside out."

"Do people actually read stories like that?"

"The people who come to science fiction conventions do. Or at least they used to," he added.

"But those people I saw upstairs looked practically normal."

"Oh, they're normal enough," he shrugged. "But they've got a queer streak in their personality so that they don't give a hoot for the stories in the big circulation magazines . . . routine mysteries . . . domestic problems . . . young love . . . stuff like that. They have to get their escape by ducking into a kink in space, or going to a new world entirely. It's getting so there aren't any new worlds left anymore."

"I supposed you're asked this question all the time, but do you think we'll ever go to the moon or Mars?"

Gaylord shook his head slowly. "I used to think so, but that was way back when I believed everything I wrote. I said the greatest thrill that a man could have would be when he first set foot on another planet. I also made the flat prediction that we would reach the moon in twenty years. Hadn't the faintest idea how we'd do it but I was sure we'd manage it somehow. Funniest part is that I convinced a lot of other people, too; it's my one claim to fame." He chuckled. "I'm afraid time's running out fast."

She was watching him steadily. "Don't you find it so thrilling anymore?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Touching a new world would still be the supreme thrill all right." He looked around him restlessly. "Trouble is I've been thinking and writing about it for so long; it's all getting flat and stale."

He sat pensively contemplating his empty glass.

Strange how that drink had hardly affected him at all.

"I've got a girlfriend whose husband is an engineer in an airplane plant," Miss Winfield said. "He thinks space travel is almost here; he claims we could go to the moon now if we had the money."

"Don't you believe it."

"But he says it's true."

"I've been hearing about that engineer in an airplane plant who says we could go to the moon for years. I only wish I could meet him someday."

"Haven't you read those articles telling how it's all been planned in detail?" Miss Winfield asked.

"You can't tell me anything about those articles."

"Well, then—"

"Listen, my dear young woman," Gaylord said impressively. "It doesn't make the slightest difference whether we can go to the moon or not. So long as we can make money by making people *think* we can go to the moon."

IT STRUCK them both as being very funny. The thought of all those poor deluded people trying to get to the moon when they could be so much more comfortable in the Zircon Room of the Hotel Rome. Probably be impossible to get any stingers on the moon, too. It seemed like a good time to order another round.

After they had finished with the moon Miss Winfield told him about her job in the escrow department of the Security First National. The office was underground, so that you never saw outdoors all day long. There was just enough window space to see people's feet moving along the sidewalk. The work was interesting but it got tiresome afterwards like any other job. Sometimes people got mad when their escrow was slow going through and blamed it on you. There were days when you got so tired hearing their complaints and watching those feet that you wanted to scream. She had been looking after her mother who was sick until recently so that she hadn't really had a vacation in three years.

Gaylord sat listening sympathetically, uttering little exclamations of surprise or regret at appropriate moments. He was very conscious of Barbara's presence so close beside him. (They had gotten on a first-name basis after the third drink.) Occasionally their knees touched under the table.

Somebody was playing *Cocktails for Two* on the piano. Gosh, that had been popular about the time he was writing *The New Worlds of Science*. Boy! If he could only write like that again.

It was evening when they finally emerged from the Zircon Room. Gaylord gazed with disdain upon the commonplace people parked around the lobby. He was in a lofty and exalted mood, and he wanted to hang on to it. If possible he wanted to go on getting more and more lofty and exalted.

He followed Barbara into the elevator and stood sedately beside her behind a fat woman with three sticky children and an elderly gentleman with a hearing aid. Barbara's party was on the fourth floor. They walked down the dimly-lit hall that was a replica of all the halls in all the other old second-rate hotels in the country. She paused by the fire escape.

"Well . . . it was nice to meet you." She seemed suddenly rather shy as she gave him her hand. "The cocktails were nice."

He looked down at her awkwardly. His heart was thumping wildly and he could feel the sweat trickling down under his arms. "Barbara . . . I want to see you again tonight," he whispered hoarsely.

She hesitated keeping her eyes from his. "There is a meeting of the finance committee tonight—"

"The heck with the finance committee," he interrupted impatiently. "I've got my car here; we'll go for a drive."

The elevator discharged a load of passengers. There was the sound of voices approaching down the hall.

"I'll meet you at nine," he told her. "No—let's make it eight-thirty. Down in the lobby by the table with the jigsaw puzzle."

"All right."

She gave his hand a quick squeeze and hurried around the corner, just as a group of middle-aged men hove in sight. Big real estate dealers from Los Angeles, Gaylord mused; his smile was distinctly condescending.

"ANOTHER one for you, Parkhurst?"
"Well . . . just a little one maybe."

To his intense chagrin, Arnold Swope took him at his word and poured him just a little one. Unquestionably a small soul. Above the din of voices he realized that the editor of *Zodiac* was trying to tell him something.

"Sorry to have to turn down that last story of

yours, Parkhurst, but it's not what I'm after now. I'm trying to get away from the trick science and gadgetry type of yarn."

"That so?" Gaylord asked, indifferently. His head throbbed and his cheeks were burning.

"I'm trying to get stories of the future, in which the motivation springs mainly from the reactions of real honest-to-god people," Swope went on. "You know—the sort of folks you bump into every day in lunchrooms and busses. I hope you don't mind my saying so, Parkhurst, but your characters are about as lifelike as a petrified robot. Your women are all such splendid cold sort of females. As Somerset Maugham said, the kind of women who never have to go to the bathroom. I'm convinced if science fiction is going to progress, we've got to get a new point of view . . . a new outlook."

"Something new!" Gaylord exploded. His voice rose over the crowd. Arnold Swope was trying to tell him how to write science fiction. Why he was writing science fiction when this miserable little man didn't know Hiawatha from Superman.

"So you want something new, eh? You'll never find anything really new; it'll always be the same old world we've got right now."

"We're all entitled to our opinion," Swope replied calmly. "Look, Gaylord, why don't you come over here and sit down for awhile?"

Parkhurst shook him roughly aside. He waved one arm in a tragic gesture. "*That which hath been is that which shall be; and that which hath been done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there a thing whereof men say, 'See, this is new?'*" "Gaylord shook his head and laughed bitterly. "*'It hath been already, in the ages which were before us.'*"

"Wouldn't be too sure about that if I were you."

Hellman came striding briskly into the room beaming geniality. He was a stout, middle-aged man with a bright eye and an alert manner who resembled a high-pressure salesman more than a scientist.

Parkhurst was forgotten immediately.

Swope clapped for silence. "Attention, everybody. Dr. Hellman says he's got some news for us."

Hellman drew a gold watch from his vest pocket and stood for a full minute staring at it in silence. Then he snapped shut the case and returned it to his pocket.

"That was the deadline, folks. Now I can talk.

Believe me, I've got some news that really is news."

"Then let's have it!" Swope pleaded.

"Everybody ready?" Hellman cried. "Hold your breath now, for here it comes. *We've reached the moon!*"

There was a stunned silence. Swope grunted and lit a cigarette. "You don't expect us to fall for that, do you?"

"Sounds like a gag," Conway remarked. "Something they cooked up to put some pep in the convention."

"I'll swear it's no gag," Hellman was suddenly serious. "The newspapers have had the story for a week, but they couldn't break it till now. It ought to hit the street any minute; it's probably on the radio now."

Swope's face was pale. "Do you mean to tell us there are human beings on the moon?" he demanded.

"Probably not actually on it yet," Hellman replied. "I'd say they're still about two hours out yet. Depends on how long it takes to set the ships down."

SUDDENLY he let out a whoop and waved his arms wildly. "Lord, it's good to be able to talk again. I've been living with that secret inside of me for weeks but I couldn't let out a peep. The military sure had us sewed up tight." He glared at the faces staring at him from around the room. "What's the matter with you guys anyhow? Now you can quit *reading* science fiction and begin *living* it. And why doesn't somebody give me a drink?"

Everybody went into action at once. Some dived for the radio. Others made for the door. A few like Gaylord slipped quietly to the floor.

They had the radio going now.

". . . ships have passed the neutral point and are maneuvering to land. According to latest reports they're twenty thousand miles above the lunar surface over a region in the northern hemisphere called the . . . er . . . *Mare Imbrium*. That means Sea of Showers, folks, in case you didn't know. Now I think we have another flash coming in from Commander Zeitlin in charge of the expedition . . ."

Gaylord sat propped against the bedpost, listening but only half hearing. People were dashing in and out waving papers with black banner headlines. The telephone was ringing incessantly.

"Hey, Gay, telephone," Conway shouted from across the room. "It's the Universal Press. They sound all hopped up."

Parkhurst regarded him dully. "You mean they want to talk to me?"

"They sure do. Why . . . don't you remember? You predicted this twenty years ago; hit it right on the nose."

Gaylord struggled to his feet. He was still in a dense fog but there was a rift shining through.

"Take my advice and ask 'em for plenty," Conway whispered. "You're big stuff now."

Gaylord took the receiver. "This is Parkhurst. That's right. Oh, I just figured it would take about that long. What do you mean—lucky? You want a series, eh? I guess so. Okay. 'Bye."

He walked over to the window and threw it open. The quarter-moon was sailing serenely through a thin tissue of cirrus cloud. He drew the cool air into his lungs in great gulps.

Conway was calling him again. "Gay . . . telephone."

"Who is it this time?" he called back.

"Some TV outfit. They want you for some comments before the broadcast from the moon comes in."

"Broadcast from the moon . . .? When's that?"

"About midnight near as they know. This TV thing's for ten. They'll send over a car."

Parkhurst turned quickly. "What time is it now?"

"About eight-thirty."

"Oh, Lord, let me out of here!"

HE STARTED to fight his way across the room when Alvin Winters materialized in the doorway. Winters' bright young face was glowing with joy. Gaylord tried to duck into the bathroom, but already he could feel Alvin's hot breath on his neck.

"There're some reporters down in the lobby want to see you, Mr. Parkhurst. Some photographers, too. I told them I thought the best photograph would be one of you with *The New Worlds of Science* open to page 137 where you make the prediction. I've got a copy in my suitcase. We could have the reporters up at my room and get the pictures there."

"Listen, Alvin." Gaylord fixed him with his glittering eye. "You're the world's greatest authority on my life. Go downstairs and invite

those reporters up to your room. Tell 'em anything about me they want to know; but if they want any pictures they'll have to wait till after that moon broadcast."

A shade of doubt darkened Alvin Winters' countenance. "I don't know whether they'll like that or not, Mr. Parkhurst, but I'll see what we can do."

Gaylord waited in the hall until he heard the elevator wheezing up the shaft. Then he darted over to the stairs and went bounding down three at a time. He began talking to himself as he always did when he was excited. He was a success! Not a piddling little success but a great big success. He was alive and young again. He'd be rich . . . famous. He could do anything now.

He peered cautiously around the lobby from behind the shelter of the newsstand. For an agonizing moment, he thought Barbara wasn't there. But she was; she was. Now he was talking to himself like something from D.H. Lawrence. D. H. Lawrence—pooh. Who was *he*?

"Barbara, I'm so sorry to keep you waiting, but honest I couldn't get away."

She laid down the paper she had been reading. Her eyes were glowing as she gazed up into his. She had changed to another dress with some frilly stuff around the neck that made her look enchantingly young and girlish.

"I've been reading about you," she told him. "They've got your picture on the front page looking out of the moon."

"Let's get out of here before somebody recognizes me." He seized her arm and began steering her toward the door. "My car's right around the corner."

Gaylord took a winding road leading into the mountains that lay along the northern edge of the city. After climbing for half an hour he turned out at a wide place along the highway overlooking the valley. The hills were black under the pale moon but far in the distance the lights of Los Angeles

formed a luminous carpet. They sat quietly listening to the breeze murmuring through the pines.

Presently Parkhurst cleared his throat. "I think maybe you could see the moon if you came over this way a little."

She edged over a few inches. Gaylord slipped an exploring arm around her. When she yielded, he leaned over and brushed her cheek with his lips. She was soft and fragrant and feminine and mysterious . . .

PARKHURST entered the room so silently that the group waiting around the radio scarcely heard him.

"Gay, we've been looking all over for you," Swope cried. "Here—take my chair. How about a drink?"

"No, thanks; I feel fine just as I am."

"Not even a little one?"

"Not even a little one."

There was a clatter from the radio. "Stand by, ladies and gentlemen." The announcer's voice was tense . . . husky. "The next voice you hear will be that of Commander Zeitlin speaking to you from the moon."

Alvin Winters appeared from somewhere. His face was screwed up tight. He was fighting back the tears. "Oh, gee, Mr. Parkhurst, this is it. This is that time you wrote about. The time when we first reached out to touch another planet. You said that would be the greatest thrill a man could ever know."

"I was wrong about that, Alvin."

"Wrong?"

"Dead wrong." Gaylord's eyes were brooding as he dabbed at a streak of lipstick on his shirt. "The hell of it is it took me twenty years to find it out."

