

HIS NERVES QUIVERED FROM THAT CASUAL, STUNNING ARRAY OF WORDS

by
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The pong emitted by Ace Double D-431, like that of all its brothers and sisters, is unmistakable: a sweet, dusty, vanilla-like odor which can instantly draw me back across the decades, to a time when my mental horizons were simultaneously infinite and limited, my literary tastes omnivorous and indiscriminate.

I'm a little too young to have read good old D-431 when it originally appeared in 1960, as I had just started first grade that year. I didn't really begin buying Ace Doubles and Singles until about four or five years later, when I discovered Andre Norton. And then, naturally, I went backwards as well as forwards, scouring used-book stores for all the Aces I could find. But I've chosen to let D-431 stand in for my whole experience of devouring Ace's books during the 1960's, as this volume is almost archetypically representative of the kind of pleasures they delivered, to me and thousands of others.

One side features A. E. van Vogt's *Earth's Last Fortress*, which is in reality a reprint of his "Recruiting Station" from a 1942 *Astounding*, when van Vogt was certainly at or ascending his peak. The great Emshwiller cover (an unbelievable 35 cents is the prize emblazoned in the upper right-hand corner) features a pastel-pink sky, an aerial battle, piles of dead soldiers and a rank of zombified spacemen. What more could one ask for? Inside we find a quintessentially dreamlike and recomplified van Vogt narrative. Norma Matheson is hired by a strange man named Dr. Lell to front a recruiting office, ostensibly for a foreign conflict on the order of the Spanish Civil War. Actually, Lell is pressganging soldiers for a war several millennia hence, and has enslaved poor Norma. When she calls for help from an old boyfriend, Professor Jack Garson, he's swiftly subdued and shipped to the future as cannon fodder. Both twentieth-century citizens will in due course become mutant superbeings who together will reshape the timestream. With plot twists every thousand words, lots of numinously omnipotent technology and stunning reversals, the book draws the reader along as if by rockets attached to his optic nerves. Jack Garson's reaction at one point, which forms the title of my anecdote, might very well stand for the general effect van Vogt had on his fervent fans, including this author.

The backing book is George O. Smith's *Lost in Space*, also on its second go-round, having had a magazine appearance in 1954. The competent but unexciting Valigursky cover depicts a rocketship in mid-space: a vessel which shares its curves with many a Detroit product of the era. The painting is a lot like the text inside, capable but not flashy. Smith's tale concerns executive assistant Alice Hemingway, her fiancé, Commodore Ted Wilson, and a fleet of alien conquistadors. (Alice and Ted are not yet married, because a "Commodore" in the space force doesn't make enough to support a family. Egads, what rank do you have to attain?) When the interstellar rocket Alice is riding on a business trip to "Castor Three and Pollux Four" blows up and she is cast adrift in a lifeboat, it falls to Ted to lead the rescue mission. Little does anyone except the reader know that the whole affair is being monitored by lurking aliens, who are seeking insights into the human race on which to base their first-contact approach. The threat of a sexual assault on Alice in the lifeboat, from two randy fellow castaways, forms the subplot. Smith's prose and approach are the opposite of van Vogt's. Lots of coherent and plausible engineering details--and some surprisingly apt predictions, such as the role of

computers--bulk out the linear, sensible action, and the reader always knows just what to expect. Nonetheless, Smith provides his own style of engagement and mild pleasure.

In contrast to all the fine original works commissioned for Ace Doubles, these reprints formed an equally important part of the Ace program, bringing classic and not-so-classic tales to a new generation, of which I was a member. The yoking together of two such different horses--Smith and van Vogt--was typical of the process, seeking to please a variety of tastes in one volume.

Like Norma Matheson and Jack Garson, we never knew what to expect behind the dos-a-dos doors, only that it would probably blow our minds!