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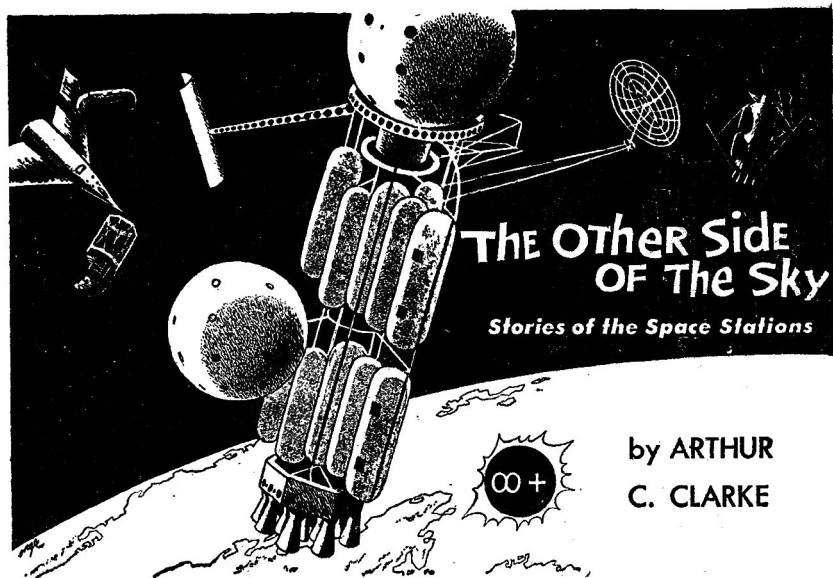
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an Infinity-plus feature

The space stations will, we have often heard, serve as stepping stones on our journey into space. But it takes a writer of the caliber of Arthur C. Clarke to show exactly how it will happen. In the last three stories of a complete set of six, presented on the following pages, he shows us both the human and the scientific aspects of this great adventure.

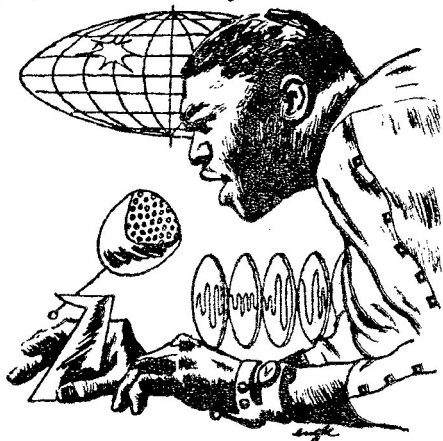


Freedom Of Space

It was the greatest

TV show of all time—

the star was Earth



NOT MANY of you, I suppose, can imagine the time before the Satellite Relays gave us our present world communications system. When I was a boy, it was impossible to send TV programs across the oceans, or even to establish reliable radio contact around the curve of the earth without picking up a fine assortment of crackles and bangs on the way. Yet now we take interference-free circuits for granted, and think nothing of seeing our friends on the other side of the globe as clearly as if we were standing face to face. Indeed, it's a simple fact that without the Satellite Relays, the whole structure of world commerce and industry would collapse. Unless we were up here on the space stations to bounce

their messages round the globe, how do you think any of the world's big business organizations could keep their widely-scattered electronic brains in touch with each other?

But all this was still in the future, back in the late '70's, when we were finishing work on the Relay Chain. I've already told you about some of our problems and near-disasters; they were serious enough at the time, but in the end we overcame them all. The three stations spaced around Earth were no longer piles of girders, air-cylinders and plastic pressure-chambers. Their assembly had been completed, we had moved aboard and could now work in comfort, unhampered by space-suits. And we had gravity again,

now that the stations had been set slowly spinning. Not real gravity, of course; but centrifugal force feels exactly the same when you're out in space. It was pleasant being able to pour drinks and to sit down without drifting away on the first air current.

Once the three stations had been built, there was still a year's solid work to be done installing all the radio and TV equipment that would lift the world's communication networks into space. It was a great day when we established the first TV link between England and Australia. The signal was beamed up to us in Relay Two, as we sat above the center of Africa, we flashed it across to Three—poised over New Guinea—and they shot it down to Earth again, clear and clean after its 90,000-mile journey.

These, however, were the engineers' private tests. The official opening of the system would be the biggest event in the history of world communication—an elaborate global telecast, in which every nation would take part. It would be a three-hour show, as for the first time the live TV camera roamed around the world, proclaiming to mankind that the last barrier of distance was down.

The program planning, it was cynically believed, had taken as

much effort as the building of the space stations in the first place, and of all the problems the planners had to solve, the most difficult was that of choosing a master of ceremonies to introduce the items in the elaborate global show that would be watched by half the human race.

Heaven knows how much convincing, blackmail and downright character assassination went on behind the scenes. All we knew is that a week before the great day, a non-scheduled rocket came up to orbit with Gregory Wendell aboard. This was quite a surprise, since Gregory wasn't as big a TV personality as, say, Jeffers Jackson in the U. S., or Vince Clifford in Britain. However, it seemed that the big boys had canceled each other out, and Gregg had got the coveted job through one of those compromises so well-known to politicians.

Gregg had started his career as a disc-jockey on a university radio station in the American Midwest, and had worked his way up through the Hollywood and Manhattan night-club circuits until he had a daily, nationwide program of his own. Apart from his cynical yet relaxed personality, his biggest asset was his deep velvet voice, for which he could probably thank his Negro blood. Even when you flatly disagreed with what he was saying

—even, indeed, when he was tearing you to pieces in an interview—it was still a pleasure to listen to him.

WE GAVE HIM the Grand Tour of the station, and even (strictly against regulations) took him out through the airlock in a spacesuit. He loved it all, but there were two things he liked in particular. "This air you make," he said. "It beats the stuff we have to breathe down in New York. This is the first time my sinus trouble has gone since I went into TV." He also relished the low gravity; at the station's rim, a man had half his normal, Earth weight—and at the axis he had no weight at all.

However, the novelty of his surroundings didn't distract Gregg from his job. He spent hours at communications central, polishing his script and getting his cues right, and studying the dozens of monitor screens that would be his windows on the world. I came across him once while he was running through his introduction to Queen Elizabeth, who would be speaking from Buckingham Palace at the very end of the program. He was so intent on his rehearsal that he never even noticed I was standing beside him.

Well, that telecast is now part of history. For the first time a

billion human beings watched a single program that came "live" from every corner of the Earth, and was a roll-call of the world's greatest citizens. Hundreds of cameras on land and sea and air looked inquiringly at the turning globe; and at the end there was that wonderful shot of the earth through a zoom-lens on the space station, making the whole planet recede until it was lost among the stars. . . .

There were a few hitches, of course. One camera on the bed of the Atlantic wasn't ready on cue, and we had to spend some extra time looking at the Taj Mahal. And owing to a switching error Russian sub-titles were superimposed on the South American transmission, while half the U.S.S.R. found itself trying to read Spanish. But this was nothing to what *might* have happened.

Through the entire three hours, introducing the famous and the unknown with equal ease, was the mellow yet never orotund flow of Gregg's voice. He did a magnificent job; congratulations came pouring up the beam the moment the broadcast finished. But he didn't hear them; he made one short, private call to his agent, and then went to bed.

Next morning, the Earth-bound ferry was waiting to take

him back to any job he cared to accept. But it left without Gregg Wendell, now Junior Station Announcer of Satellite Two.

"They'll think I'm crazy," he said, beaming happily, "but why should I go back to that rat-race down there? I've all the Universe to look at, I can breathe smog-free air, the low gravity makes me feel a Hercules, and my three darling ex-wives can't get at me." He kissed his hand to the departing rocket. "So long, Earth," he called, "I'll be back when I start pining for Broadway traffic jams and bleary pent-

house dawns. And if I get homesick, I can look at anywhere on the planet just by turning a switch. Why, I'm more in the middle of things here than I could ever be on Earth, yet I can cut myself off from the human race whenever I want to."

He was still smiling as he watched the ferry begin the long fall back to Earth, towards the fame and fortune that could have been his. And then, whistling cheerfully, he left the observation lounge in eight-foot strides to read the weather forecast for Lower Patagonia. ∞