# **Trends**

Isaac Asimov

John Harman was sitting at his desk, brooding, when I entered the office that day. It had become a common sight, by then, to see him staring out at the Hudson, head in hand, a scowl contorting his face-all too common. It seemed unfair for the little bantam to be eating his heart out like that day after day, when by rights he should have been receiving the praise and adulation of the world.

I flopped down into a chair. “Did you see the editorial in today’s Clarion, boss?”

He turned weary, bloodshot eyes to me. “No, I haven’t. What do they say? Are they calling the vengeance of God down upon me again?” His voice dripped with bitter sarcasm.

“They’re going a little farther now, boss,” I answered. “Listen to this:

“‘Tomorrow is the day of John Harman’s attempt at profaning the heavens. Tomorrow, in defiance of world opinion and world conscience, this man will defy God.

“’It is not given to man to go wheresoever ambition and desire lead him. There are things forever denied him, and aspiring to the stars is one of these. Like Eve, John Harman wishes to eat of the forbidden fruit, and like Eve he will suffer due punishment therefor.

“‘But it is not enough, this mere talk. If we allow him thus to brook the vengeance of God, the trespass is mankind’s and not Harman’s alone. In allowing him to carry out his evil designs, we make ourselves accessory to the crime, and Divine vengeance will fall on all alike.

“‘It is, therefore, essential that immediate steps be taken to prevent Harman from taking off in his so-called rocketship tomorrow. The government in refusing to take such steps may force violent action. If it will make no move to confiscate the rocketship, or to imprison Harman, our enraged citizenry may have to take matters into their own hands-’“

Harman sprang from his seat in a rage and, snatching the paper from my hands, threw it into the corner furiously. “It’s an open call to a lynching,” he raved. “Look at this!”

He cast five or six envelopes in my direction. One glance sufficed to tell what they were.

“More death threats?” I ‘asked.

“Yes, exactly that. I’ve had to arrange for another increase in the police patrol outside the building and for motorcycle police escort when I cross the river to the testing ground tomorrow.”

He marched up and down the room with agitated stride. “I don’t know what to do, Clifford. I’ve worked on the Prometheus almost ten years. I’ve slaved, spent a fortune of money, given up all that makes life worth while-and for what? So that a bunch of fool revivalists can whip up public sentiment against me until my very life isn’t safe.”

“You’re in advance of the times, boss,” I shrugged my shoulders in a resigned gesture which made him whirl upon me in a fury.

“What do you mean ‘in advance of the times’? This is 1973. The world has been ready for space travel for half a century now. Fifty years ago, people were talking, dreaming of the day when man could free himself of Earth and plumb the depths of space. For fifty years, science has inched toward , this goal, and now . . . now I finally have it, and behold! you say the world is not ready for me.”

“The ‘20s and ‘30s were years of anarchy, decadence, and misrule, if you remember your history,” I reminded him gently. “You cannot accept them as criteria.”

“I know, I know. You’re going to tell me of the First War of 1914, and the Second of 1940. It’s an old story to me; my father fought in the Second and my grandfather in the First. Nevertheless, those were the days when science flourished. Men were not afraid then; somehow they dreamed and dared. There was no such thing as conservatism when it came to matters mechanical and scientific. No theory was too radical to advance, no discovery too revolutionary to publish. Today, dry rot has seized the world when a great vision, such as space travel, is hailed as ‘defiance of God.’ “

His head sank slowly down, and he turned away to hide his trembling lips and the tears in his eyes. Then he suddenly straightened again, eyes blazing: “But I’ll show them. I’m going through with it, in spite of Hell, Heaven and Earth. I’ve put too much into it to quit now.”

“Take it easy, boss,” I advised. “This isn’t going to do you any good tomorrow, when you get into that ship. Your chances of coming out alive aren’t too good now, so what will they be if you start out worn to pieces with excitement and worry?”

“You’re right. Let’s not think of it any more. Where’s Shelton?”

“Over at the Institute arranging for the special photographic plates to be sent us.”

“He’s been gone a long time, hasn’t he?”

“Not especially; but listen, boss, there’s something wrong with him. I don’t like him.”

“Poppycock! He’s been with me two years, and I have no complaints.”

“All right.” I spread my hands in resignation. “If you won’t listen to me, you won’t. Just the same I caught him reading one of those infernal pamphlets Otis Eldredge puts out. You know the kind: ‘Beware, O mankind, for judgment draws near. Punishment for your sins is at hand. Repent and be saved.’ And all the rest of the time-honoured junk.”

Harman snorted in disgust. “Cheap tub-thumping revivalist! I suppose the world will never outgrow his type-not while sufficient morons exist. Still you can’t condemn Shelton just because he reads it. I’ve read them myself on occasion.”

“He says he picked it up on the sidewalk and read it in ‘idle curiosity,’ but I’m pretty sure that I saw him take it out of his wallet. Besides, he goes to church every Sunday.”

“Is that a crime? Everyone does, nowadays!”

“Yes, but not to the Twentieth Century Evangelical Society. That’s Eldredge’s.”

That jolted Harman. Evidently, it was the first he had heard of it. “Say, that is something, isn’t it? We’ll have to keep an eye on him, then.”

But after that, things started to happen, and we forgot all about Shelton-until it was too late.

There was nothing much left to do that last day before the test, and I wandered into the next room, where I went over Harman’s final report to the Institute. It was my job to correct any errors or mistakes that crept in, but I’m afraid I wasn’t very thorough. To tell the truth, I couldn’t concentrate. Every few minutes, I’d fall into a brown study.

It seemed queer, all this fuss over a space travel. When Harman had first announced the approaching perfection of the Prometheus, some six months before, scientific circles had been jubilant. Of course, they were cautious in their statements and qualified everything they said, but there was real enthusiasm.

However, the masses didn’t take it that way. It seems strange, perhaps, to you of the twenty-first century, but perhaps we should have expected it in those days of ‘73. People weren’t very progressive then. For years there had been a swing toward religion, and when the churches came out unanimously against Harman’s rocket-well, there you were.

At first, the opposition confined itself to the churches and we thought it might play itself out. But it didn’t The papers got hold of it, and literally spread the gospel. Poor Harman became an anathema to the world in a remarkably short time, and then his troubles began.

He received death threats, and warnings of divine vengeance every day. He couldn’t walk the streets in safety. Dozens of sects, to none of which he belonged-he was one of the very rare free-thinkers of the day, which was another count against him-excommunicated him and placed him under special interdict. And, worst of all, Otis Eldredge and his Evangelical Society began stirring up the populace.

Eldredge was a queer character-one of those geniuses, in their way, that arise every so often. Gifted with a golden tongue and a sulphurous vocabulary, he could fairly hypnotize a crowd. Twenty thousand people were so much putty in his hands, could he only bring them within earshot And for four months, he thundered against Harman; for four months, a pouring stream of denunciation rolled forth in oratorical frenzy. And for four months, the temper of the world rose.

But Harman was not to be daunted. In his tiny, five-foot-two body, he had enough spirit for five six-footers. The more the wolves howled, the firmer he held his ground. With almost divine-his enemies said, diabolical-obstinacy, he refused to yield an inch. Yet his outward firmness was to me, who knew him, but an imperfect concealment of the great sorrow and bitter disappointment within.

The ring of the doorbell interrupted my thoughts at that point and brought me to my feet in surprise. Visitors were very few those days.

I looked out the window and saw a tall, portly figure talking with Police Sergeant Cassidy. I recognized him at once as Howard Winstead, head of the Institute. Harman was hurrying out to greet him, and after a short exchange of phrases, the two entered the office. I followed them in, being rather curious as to what could have brought Winstead, who was more politician than scientist, here.

Winstead didn’t seem very comfortable, at first; not his usual suave self. He avoided Harman’s eyes in an embarrassed manner and mumbled a few conventionalities concerning the weather. Then he came to the point with direct, undiplomatic bluntness.

“John,” he said, “how about postponing the trial for a time?”

“You really mean abandoning it altogether, don’t you? Well, I won’t, and that’s final.”

Winstead lifted his hand. “Wait now, John, don’t get excited. Let me state my case. I know the Institute agreed to give you a free hand, and I know that you paid at least half the expenses out of your own pocket, but-you can’t go through with it.”

“Oh, can’t I, though?” Herman snorted derisively.

“Now listen, John, you know your science, but you don’t know your human nature, and I do. This is not the world of the ‘Mad Decades,’ whether you realize it or not. There have been profound changes since 1940.” He swung into what was evidently a carefully prepared speech.

“After the First World War, you know, the world as a whole swung away from religion and toward freedom from convention. People were disgusted and disillusioned, cynical and sophisticated. Eldredge calls them ‘wicked and sinful.’ In spite of that, science flourished-some say it always fares best in such an unconventional period. From its standpoint it was a ‘Golden Age.’

“However, you know the political and economic history of the period. It was a time of political chaos and international anarchy; a suicidal, brainless, insane period-and it culminated in the Second World War. And just as the First War led to a period of sophistication, so the Second initiated a return to religion.

“People were disgusted with the ‘Mad Decades.” They had had enough of it, and feared, beyond all else, a return to it To remove that possibility, they put the ways of those decades behind them. Their motives, you see, were understandable and laudable. All the freedom, all the sophistication, all the lack of convention were gone-swept away clean. We are living now in a second Victorian age; and naturally so, because human history goes by swings of the pendulum and this is the swing toward religion and convention.

“One thing only is left over since those days of half a century ago. That one thing is the respect of humanity for science. We have prohibition; smoking for women is outlawed; cosmetics are forbidden; low dresses and short skirts are unheard of; divorce is frowned upon. But science has not been confined-as yet.

“It behoves science, then, to be circumspect, to refrain from arousing the people. It will be very easy to make them believe-and Otis Eldredge has come perilously close to doing it in some of his speeches-that it was science that brought about the horrors of the Second World War. Science outstripped culture, they will say, technology outstripped sociology, and it was that unbalance that came so near to destroying the world. Somehow, I am inclined to believe they are not so far wrong, at that.

“But do you know what would happen, if it ever did come to that? Scientific research may be forbidden; or, if they don’t go that far, it will certainly be so strictly regulated as to stifle in its own decay. It will be a calamity from which humanity would not recover for a millennium.

“And it is your trial flight that may precipitate all this. You are arousing the public to a stage where it will be difficult to calm them. I warn you, John. The consequences will be on your head.”

There was absolute silence for a moment and then Harman forced a smile. “Come, Howard, you’re letting yourself be frightened by shadows on the wall. Are you trying to tell me that it is your serious belief that the world as a whole is ready to plunge into a second Dark Ages? After all, the intelligent men are on the side of science, aren’t they?”

“If they are, there aren’t many of them left from what I see.” Winstead drew a pipe from his pocket and filled it slowly with tobacco as he continued: “Eldredge formed a League of the Righteous two months ago-they call it the L. R.-and it has grown unbelievably. Twenty million is its membership in the United States alone. Eldredge boasts that after the next election Congress will be his; and there seems to be more truth than bluff in that. Already there has been strenuous lobbying in favour of a bill outlawing rocket experiments, and laws of that type have been enacted in Poland, Portugal and Rumania. Yes, John, we are perilously close to open persecution of science.” He was smoking now in rapid, nervous puffs.

“But if I succeed, Howard, if I succeed! What then?”

“Bah! You know the chances for that. Your own estimate gives you only one chance in ten of coming out alive.”

“What does that signify? The next experimenter will learn by my mistakes, and the odds will improve. That’s the scientific method.”

“The mob doesn’t know anything about the scientific method; and they don’t want to know. Well, what do you say? Will you call it off?”

Harman sprang to his feet, his chair tumbling over with a crash. “Do you know what you ask? Do you want me to give up my life’s work, my dream, just like that? Do you think I’m going to sit back and wait for your dear public to become benevolent? Do you think they’ll change in my lifetime?

“Here’s my answer: I have an inalienable right to pursue knowledge. Science has an inalienable right to progress and develop without interference. The world, in interfering with me, is wrong; I am right. And it shall go hard; but I -will not abandon my rights.”

Winstead shook his head sorrowfully. “You’re wrong, John, when you speak of ‘inalienable’ rights. What you call a ‘right’ is merely a privilege, generally agreed upon. What society accepts, is right; what it does not, is wrong.”

“Would your friend, Eldredge, agree to such a definition of his ‘righteousness’?” questioned Harman bitterly.

“No, he would not, but that’s irrelevant. Take the case of those African tribes who used to be cannibals. They were brought up as cannibals, have the long tradition of cannibalism, and their society accepts the practice. To them, cannibalism is right, and why shouldn’t it be? So you see how relative the whole notion is, and how inane your conception of ‘inalienable’ rights to perform experiments is.”

“You know, Howard, you missed your calling when you didn’t become a lawyer.” Harman was really growing angry. “You’ve been bringing out every moth-eaten argument you can think of. For God’s sake, man, are you trying to pretend that it is a crime to refuse to run with the crowd? Do you stand for absolute uniformity, ordinariness, orthodoxy, commonplaceness? Science would die far sooner under the programme you outline than under governmental prohibition.”

Harman stood up and pointed an accusing finger at the other. “You’re betraying science and the tradition of those glorious rebels: Galileo, Darwin, Einstein and their kind. My rocket leaves tomorrow on schedule in spite of you and every other stuffed shirt in the United States. That’s that, and I refuse to listen to you any longer. So you can just get out.”

The head of the Institute, red in the face, turned to me. “You’re my witness, young man, that I warned this obstinate nitwit, this . . . this hare-brained fanatic.” He spluttered a bit, and then strode out, the picture of fiery indignation.

Harman turned to me when he had” gone: “Well, what do you think? I suppose you agree with him.”

There was only one possible answer and I made it: “You’re not paying me to do anything else but follow orders, boss. I’m sticking with you.”

Just then Shelton came in and Harman packed us both off to go over the calculations of the orbit of flight for the umpteenth time, while he himself went off to bed.

The next day, July 15th, dawned in matchless splendour, and Harman, Shelton, and myself were in an almost gay mood as we crossed the Hudson to where the Prometheus-surrounded by an adequate police guard-lay in gleaming grandeur.

Around it, roped off at an apparently safe distance, rolled a crowd of gigantic proportions. Most of them were hostile, raucously so. In fact, for one fleeting moment, as our motorcycle police escort parted the crowds for us, the shouts and imprecations that reached our ears almost convinced me that we should have listened to Winstead.

But Harman paid no attention to them at all, after one supercilious sneer at a shout of: “There goes John Harman, son of Belial.” Calmly, he directed us about our task of inspection. I tested the foot-thick outer walls and the air locks for leaks, then made sure the air purifier worked. Shelton checked up on the repellent screen and the fuel tanks. Finally, Hal-man tried on the clumsy spacesuit, found it suitable, and announced himself ready.

The crowd stirred. Upon a hastily erected platform of wooden planks piled in confusion by some in the mob, there rose up a striking figure. Tall and lean; with thin, ascetic countenance; deep-set, burning eyes, peering and half closed; a thick, white mane crowning all-it was Otis Eldredge. The crowd recognized him at once and many cheered. Enthusiasm waxed and soon the entire turbulent mass of people shouted themselves hoarse over him.

He raised a hand for silence, turned to Harman, who regarded him with surprise and distaste, and pointed a long, bony finger at him:

“John, Harman, son of the devil, spawn of Satan, you are here for an evil purpose. You are about to set out upon a blasphemous attempt to pierce the veil beyond which man is forbidden to go. You are tasting of the forbidden fruit of Eden and beware that you taste not of the fruits of sin.”

The crowd cheered him to the echo and he continued: “The finger of God is upon you, John Harman. He shall not allow His works to be defiled. You die today, John Harman.” His voice rose in intensity and his last words were uttered in truly prophetlike fervour.

Harman turned away in disdain. In a loud, clear voice, he addressed the police sergeant: “Is there any way, officer, of removing these spectators. The trial flight may be attended by some destruction because of the rocket blasts, and they’re crowding too close.”

The policeman answered in a crisp, unfriendly tone: “If you’re afraid of being mobbed, say so, Mr. Harman. You don’t have to worry, though, we’ll hold them back. And as for danger-from that contraption-” He sniffed loudly in the direction of the Prometheus, evoking a torrent of jeers and yells.

Harman said nothing further, but climbed into the ship in silence. And when he did so, a queer sort of stillness fell over the mob; a palpable tension. There was no attempt at rushing the ship, an attempt I had thought inevitable. On the contrary, Otis Eldredge himself shouted to everyone to move back.

“Leave the sinner to his sins,” he shouted. “ ‘Vengeance is mine,’ saith the Lord.”

As the moment approached, Shelton nudged me. “Let’s get out of here,” he whispered in a strained voice. “Those rocket blasts are poison.” Saying this, he broke into a run, beckoning anxiously for me to follow.

We had not yet reached the fringes of the crowd when there was a terrific roar behind me. A wave of heated air swept over me. There was the frightening hiss of some speeding object past my ear, and I was thrown violently to the ground. For a few moments I lay dazed, my ears ringing and my head reeling.

When I staggered drunkenly to my feet again, it was to view a dreadful sight. Evidently, the entire fuel supply of the Prometheus had exploded at once, and where it had lain a moment ago there was now only a yawning hole. The ground was strewn with wreckage. The cries of the hurt were heartrending, and the mangled bodies-but I won’t try to describe those.

A weak groan at my feet attracted my attention. One look, and I gasped in horror, for it was Shelton, the back of his head a bloody mass.

“I did it.” His voice was hoarse and triumphant but withal so low that I could scarcely hear it. “I did it. I broke open the liquid-oxygen compartments and when the spark went through the acetylide mixture the whole cursed thing exploded.” He gasped a bit and tried to move but failed. “A piece of wreckage must have hit me, but I don’t care. I’ll die knowing that-”

His voice was nothing more than a rasping rattle, and on his face was the ecstatic look of martyr. He died then, and I could not find it in my heart to condemn him.

It was then I first thought of Harman. Ambulances from Manhattan and from Jersey City were on the scene, and one had sped to a wooden patch some five hundred yards distant, where, caught in the treetops, lay a splintered fragment of the Prometheus’ forward compartment. I limped there as fast as I could, but they had dragged out Harman and clanged away long before I could reach them.

After that, I didn’t stay. The disorganized crowd had no thought but for the dead and wounded now, but when they recovered, and bent their thoughts to revenge, my life would not be worth a straw. I followed the dictates of the better part of valour and quietly disappeared.

The next week was a hectic one for me. During that time, I lay in hiding at the home of a friend, for it would have been more than my life was worth to allow myself to be seen and recognized. Harman, himself, lay in a Jersey City hospital, with nothing more than superficial cuts and bruises-thanks to the backward force of the explosion and the saving clump of trees which cushioned the fall of the Prometheus. It was on him that the brunt of the world’s wrath fell.

New York, and the rest of the world also, just about went crazy. Every last paper in the city came out with gigantic headlines, “28 Killed, 73 Wounded-the Price of Sin,” printed in blood-red letters. The editorials howled for Harman’s life, demanding he be arrested and tried for first-degree murder.

The dreaded cry of “Lynch him!” was raised throughout the five boroughs, and milling thousands crossed the river and converged on Jersey City. At their head was Otis Eldredge, both legs in splints, addressing the crowd from an open automobile as they marched. It was a veritable army.

Mayor Carson of Jersey City called out every available policeman and phoned frantically to Trenton for the State militia. New York clamped down on every bridge and tunnel leaving the city-but not till after many thousands had left.

There were pitched battles on the Jersey coast that sixteenth of July. The vastly outnumbered police clubbed indiscriminately but were gradually pushed back and back. Mounties rode down upon the mob relentlessly but were swallowed up and pulled down by sheer force of numbers. Not until tear gas was used, did the crowd halt-and even then they did not retreat.

The next day, martial law was declared, and the State militia entered Jersey City. That was the end for the lynchers. Eldredge was called to confer with the mayor, and after the conferences ordered his followers to disperse.

In a statement to the newspapers. Mayor Carson said: “John Harman must needs suffer for his crime, but it is essential that he do so legally. Justice must take its course, and the State of New Jersey will take all necessary measures.”

By the end of the week, normality of a sort had returned and Harman slipped out of the public spotlight. Two more weeks and there was scarcely a word about him in the newspapers, excepting such casual references to him in the discussion of the new Zittman antirocketry bill that had just passed both houses of Congress by unanimous votes.

Yet he remained in the hospital still. No legal action had been taken against him, but it began to appear that a sort of indefinite imprisonment “for his own protection” might be his eventual fate. Therefore, I bestirred myself to action.

Temple Hospital is situated in a lonely and outlying district of Jersey City, and on a dark, moonless night I experienced no difficulty at all in invading the grounds unobserved. With a facility that surprised me, I sneaked in through a basement window, slugged a sleepy interne into insensibility and proceeded to Room 15E, which was listed in the books as Harman’s.

“Who’s there?” Harman’s surprised shout was music in my ears.

“Sh! Quiet! It’s I, Cliff McKenny.”

“You! What are you doing here?”

“Trying to get you out. If I don’t, you’re liable to stay here the rest of your life. Come on, let’s go.”

I was hustling him into his clothes while we were speaking, and in no time at all we were sneaking down the corridor. We were out safely and into my waiting car before Harman collected his scattered wits sufficiently to begin asking questions.

“What’s happened since that day?” was the first question. “I don’t remember a thing after starting the rocket blasts until I woke up in the hospital.”

“Didn’t they tell you anything?”

“Not a damn thing,” he swore. “I asked until I was hoarse.”

So I told him the whole story from the explosion on. His eyes were wide with shocked surprise when I told of the dead and wounded, and filled with wild rage when he heard of Shelton’s treachery. The story of the riots and attempted lynching evoked a muffled curse from between set lips.

“Of course, the papers howled ‘murder,’ “ I concluded, “but they couldn’t pin that on you. They tried manslaughter, but there were too many eye-witnesses that had heard your request for the removal of the crowd and the police sergeant’s absolute refusal to do so. That, of course, absolved you from all blame. The police sergeant himself died in the explosion, and they couldn’t make him the goat.

“Still, with Eldredge yelling for your hide, you’re never safe. It would be best to leave while able.”

Harman nodded his head in agreement “Eldredge survived the explosion, did he?”

“Yes, worse luck. He broke both legs, but it takes more than that to shut his mouth.”

Another week had passed before I reached our future haven-my uncle’s farm in Minnesota. There, in a lonely and out-of-the-way rural community, we stayed while the hullabaloo over Harman’s disappearance gradually died down and the perfunctory search for us faded away. The search, by the way, was short indeed, for the authorities seemed more relieved than concerned over the disappearance.

Peace and quiet did wonders with Harman. In six months he seemed a new man-quite ready to consider a second attempt at space travel. Not all the misfortunes in the world could stop him, it seemed, once he had his heart set on something.

“My mistake the first time,” he told me one winter’s day, “lay in announcing the experiment. I should have taken the temper of the people into account, as Winstead said. This time, however”-he rubbed his hands and gazed thoughtfully into the distance-”I’ll steal a march on them. The experiment will he performed in secrecy-absolute secrecy.”

I laughed grimly, “It would have to be. Do you know that all future experiment in rocketry, even entirely theoretical research is a crime punishable by death?”

“Are you afraid, then?”

“Of course not, boss. I’m merely stating a fact. And here’s another plain fact. We two can’t build a ship all by ourselves, you know.”

“I’ve thought of that and figured a way out, Cliff. What’s more, I can take care of the money angle, too. You’ll have to do some traveling, though.

“First, you’ll have to go to Chicago and look up the firm of Roberts & Scranton and withdraw everything that’s left of my father’s inheritance, which,” he added in a rueful aside, “is more than half gone on the first ship. Then, locate as many of the old crowd as you can: Harry Jenkins, Joe O’Brien, Neil Stanton-all of them. And get back as quickly as you can. I am tired of delay.”

Two days later, I left for Chicago. Obtaining my uncle’s consent to the entire business was a simple affair. “Might as well be strung up for a herd of sheep as for a lamb,” he grunted, “so go ahead. I’m in enough of a mess now and can afford a bit more, I guess.”

It took quite a bit of travelling and even more smooth talk and persuasion before I managed to get four men to come: the three mentioned by Harman and one other, a Saul Simonoff. With that skeleton force and with the half million’ still left Harman out of the reputed millions left him by his father, we began work.

The building of the New Prometheus is a story in itself-a long story of five years of discouragement and insecurity. Little by little, buying girders in Chicago, beryl-steel plates in New York, a vanadium cell in San Francisco, miscellaneous items in scattered comers of the nation, we constructed the sister ship to the ill-fated Prometheus.

The difficulties in the way were all but insuperable. To prevent drawing suspicion down upon us, we had to spread our purchases over periods of time, and to see to it, as well, that the orders were made out to various places. For this we required the co-operation of various friends, who, to be sure, did not know at the time for exactly what purpose the purchases were being used.

We had to synthesize our own fuel, ten tons of it, and that was perhaps the hardest job of all; certainly it took the most time. And finally, as Harman’s money dwindled, we came up against our biggest problem-the necessity of economizing. From the beginning we had known that we could never make the New Prometheus as large or as elaborate as the first ship had been, but it soon developed that we would have to reduce its equipment to a point perilously close to the danger line. The repulsion screen was barely satisfactory and all attempts at radio communication were perforce abandoned.

And as we labored through the years, there in the backwoods of northern Minnesota, the world moved on, and Winstead’s prophecies proved to have hit amazingly near the mark.

The events of those five years-from 1973 to 1978-are well known to the schoolboys of today, the period being the climax of what we now call the “Neo-Victorian Age.” The happenings of those years seem well-nigh unbelievable as we look back upon them now.

The outlawing of all research on space travel came in the very beginning, but was a bare start compared to the antiscientific measures taken in the ensuing years. The next congressional elections, those of 1974, resulted in a Congress in which Eldredge controlled the House and held the balance of power in the Senate.

Hence, no time was lost. At the first session of the ninety-third Congress, the famous Stonely-Carter bill was passed. It established the Federal Scientific Research Investigatory Bureau-the FSRIB-which was given full power to pass on the legality of all research in the country. Every laboratory, industrial or scholastic, was required to file information, in advance, on all projected research before this new bureau, which could, and did, ban absolutely all such as it disapproved of.

The inevitable appeal to the supreme court came on November 9, 1974, in the case of Westly vs. Simmons, in which Joseph Westly of Stanford upheld his right to continue his investigations on atomic power on the grounds that the StonelyCarter act was unconstitutional.

How we five, isolated amid the snowdrifts of the Middle West, followed that case! We had all the Minneapolis and St. Paul papers sent to us-always reaching us two days late- and devoured every word of print concerning it. For the two months of suspense work ceased entirely on the New Prometheus.

It was rumoured at first that the court would declare the act unconstitutional, and monster parades were held in every large town against this eventuality. The League of the Righteous brought its powerful influence to bear-and even the supreme court submitted. It was five to four for constitutionality. Science strangled by the vote of one man.

And it was strangled beyond a doubt. The members of the bureau were Eldredge men, heart and soul, and nothing that would not have immediate industrial use was passed.

“Science has gone too far,” said Eldredge in a famous speech at about that time. “We must halt it indefinitely, and allow the world to catch up. Only through that and trust in God may we hope to achieve universal and permanent prosperity.”

But this was one of Eldridge’s last statements. He had never fully recovered from the broken legs he received that fateful day in July of ‘73, and his strenuous life since then had strained his constitution past the breaking point. On February 2, 1976, he passed away amid a burst of mourning unequalled since Lincoln’s assassination.

His death had no immediate effect on the course of events. The rules of the FSRIB grew, in fact, in stringency as the years passed. So starved and choked did science become, that once more colleges found themselves forced to reinstate philosophy and the classics as the chief studies-and at that the student body fell to the lowest point since the beginning of the twentieth century.

These conditions prevailed more or less throughout the civilized world, reaching even lower depths in England, and perhaps least depressing in Germany, which was the last to fall under the “Neo-Victorian” influence.

The nadir of science came in the spring of 1978, a bare month before the completion of the New Prometheus, with the passing of the “Easter Edict”-it was issued the day before Easter. By it, all independent research or experimentation was absolutely forbidden. The FSRIB thereafter reserved the right to allow only such research as it specifically requested.

John Harman and I stood before the gleaming metal of the New Prometheus that Easter Sunday; I in the deepest gloom, and he in an almost jovial mood.

“Well, Clifford, my boy,” said he, “the last ton of fuel, a few polishing touches, and I am ready for my second attempt. This time there will be no Sheltons among us.” He hummed a hymn. That was all the radio played those days, and even we rebels sang them from sheer frequency of repetition.

I grunted sourly: “It’s no use, boss. Ten to one, you end up somewhere in space, and even if you come back, you’ll most likely be hung by the neck. We can’t win.” My head shook dolefully from side to side.

“Bah! This state of affairs can’t last, Cliff.”

“I think it will. Winstead was right that time. The pendulum swings, and since 1945 it’s been swinging against us. We’re ahead of the times-or behind them.”

“Don’t speak of that fool, Winstead. You’re making the same mistake he did. Trends are things of centuries and millenniums, not years or decades. For five hundred years we have been moving toward science. You can’t reverse that in thirty years.”

“Then what are we doing?” I asked sarcastically.

“We’re going through a momentary reaction following a period of too-rapid advance in the Mad Decades. Just such a reaction took place in the Romantic Age-the first Victorian Period-following the too-rapid advance of the eighteenth century Age of Reason.”

“Do you really think so?” I was shaken by his evident self-assurance.

“Of course. This period has a perfect analogy in the spasmodic ‘revivals’ that used to hit the small towns in America’s Bible Belt a century or so ago. For a week, perhaps everyone would get religion, and virtue would reign triumphant. Then, one by one, they would backslide and the Devil would resume his sway.

“In fact, there are symptoms of backsliding even now. The L. R. has indulged in one squabble after another since Eldredge’s death. There have been half a dozen schisms already. The very extremities to which those in power are going are helping us, for the country is rapidly tiring of it.”

And that ended the argument-I in total defeat, as usual.

A month later, the New Prometheus was complete. It was nowhere near as glittering and as beautiful as the original, and bore many a trace of makeshift workmanship, but we were proud of it-proud and triumphant.

“I’m going to try again, men”-Harman’s voice was husky, and his little frame vibrant with happiness-”and I may not make it, but for that I don’t care.” His eyes shone in anticipation. “I’ll be shooting through the void at last, and the dream of mankind will come true. Out around the Moon and back; the first to see the other side. It’s worth the chance,”

“You won’t have fuel enough to land on the Moon, boss, which is a pity,” I said.

At that a pessimistic whisper ran through the little group surrounding him, to which he paid no attention.

“Good-bye,” he said. “I’ll be seeing you.” And with a cheerful grin he climbed into the ship.

Fifteen minutes later, the five of us sat about the living room table, frowning, lost in thought, eyes gazing out of the building at the spot where a burned section of soil marked the spot where a few minutes earlier the New Prometheus had lain.

Simonoff voiced the thought that was in the mind of each one of us: “Maybe it would be better for him not to come back. He won’t be treated very well if he does, I think.” And we all nodded in gloomy assent.

How foolish that prediction seems to me now from the hindsight of three decades.

The rest of the story is really not mine, for I did not see Harman again until a month after his eventful trip ended in a safe landing.

It was almost thirty-six hours after the take-off that a screaming projectile shot its way over Washington and buried itself in the mud just across the Potomac.

Investigators were at the scene of the landing within fifteen minutes, and in another fifteen minutes the police were there, for it was found that the projectile was a rocketship. They stared in involuntary awe at the tired, dishevelled man who staggered out in near-collapse.

There was utter silence while he shook his fist at the staring spectators and shouted: “Go ahead, hang me, fools. But I’ve reached the Moon, and you can’t hang that. Get the FSRIB. Maybe they’ll declare the flight illegal and, therefore, nonexistent.” He laughed weakly and suddenly collapsed.

Someone shouted: “Take him to a hospital. He’s sick.” In stiff unconsciousness Harman was bundled into a police car and carried away, while the police formed a guard about the rocketship.

Government officials arrived and investigated the ship, read the log, inspected the drawings and photographs he had taken of the Moon, and finally departed in silence. The crowd grew and the word spread that a man had reached the Moon.

Curiously enough, there was little resentment of the fact. Men were impressed and awed; the crowd whispered and cast inquisitive glances at the dim crescent of Luna, scarcely seen in the bright sunlight. Over all, an uneasy pall of silence, the silence of indecision, lay.

Then, at the hospital, Harman revealed his identity, and the fickle world went wild. Even Harman himself was stunned in surprise at the rapid change in the world’s temper. It seemed almost incredible, and yet it was true. Secret discontent, combined with a heroic tale of man against overwhelming odds- the sort of tale that had stirred man’s soul since the beginning of time-served to sweep everyone into an ever-swelling current of anti-Victorianism. And Eldredge was dead-no other could replace him.

I saw Harman at the hospital shortly after that. He was propped up and still half buried with papers, telegrams and letters. He grinned at me and nodded. “Well, Cliff,” he whispered, “the pendulum swung back again.”