

FICTION

Jim Harmon

Measure for a Loner

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

*You can measure everything these days--heat,
light, gravity, reflexes, force-fields, star-drives.
And now I know there even is a ...*

MEASURE FOR A LONER

By JIM HARMON

SO, GENERAL, I came in to tell you I've found the loneliest man in the world for the Space Force.

How am I supposed to rate his loneliness for you? In Megasorrows or Kilofears? I suspect I know quite a library on the subject, but you know more about stripes and bars. Don't try to stop me this time, General.

Now that you mention it, I'm not drunk. I had to have something to back me up so I stopped off at the dispensary and stole a needle.

I want you to get off my back with that kind of talk. I've got enough there--it bends me over like I had bad kidneys. It isn't any of King Kong's little brothers. They over rate the stuff. It isn't the way you've been riding me either. Never mind what I'm carrying. Whatever it is--and believe me, it *is*--I have to get rid of it.

Let me tell it, for God's sake.

Then for Security's sake? I thought you would let me tell it, General.

I've been coming in here and giving you pieces of it for months but now I want to let you be drenched in the whole thing. You're going to take it all.

There were the two of them, the two lonely men, and I found them for you.

You remember the way I found them for you.

The intercom on my blond desk made an electronic noise at me and the words I had been arranging in my mind for the morning letters splattered into alphabet soup like a printer dropping a prepared slug of type.

I made the proper motion to still the sound.

"Yes," I grunted.

My secretary cleared her throat on my time.

"Dr. Thorn," she said, "there's a Mr. Madison here to see you. He lays claim to be from the Star Project."

He could come in and file his claim, I told the girl.

I rummaged in the wastebasket and uncrumpled the morning's facsimile newspaper. It was full of material about the Star Project.

We were building Man's first interstellar spaceship.

A surprising number of people considered it important. Flipping from the rear to page one, Wild Bill Star in the comics who had been blasting all the way to forty-first sub-space universe for decades was harking back to the good old days of Man's first star flight (which he had made himself through the magic of time travel), the editor was calling the man to make the jaunt the Lindbergh of Space, and the staff photographer displayed a still of a Space Force pilot in pressure suit up front with his face blotted out by an air-brushed interrogation mark.

Who was going to be the Lindbergh of Space?

We had used up the Columbus of Space, the Magellan of Space, the Van Reck of Space. Now it was time for the Lone Eagle, one man who would wait out the light years to Alpha Centauri.

I remembered the first Lindbergh.

I rode a bus fifty miles to see him at an Air Force Day celebration when I was a dewy-eared kid. It's funny how kids still

worship heroes who did everything before they were even born. Uncle Max had told me about standing outside the hospital with a bunch of boys his own age the evening Babe Ruth died of cancer. Lindbergh seemed like an old man to me when I finally saw him, but still active. Nobody had forgotten him. When his speech was over I cheered him with the rest just as if I knew what he had been talking about.

But I probably knew more about what he meant then as a boy than I did feeling the reality of the newspaper in my hands. Grown-up, I could only smile at myself for wanting to go to the stars myself.

Madison rapped on my office door and breezed in efficiently.

I've always thought Madison was a rather irritating man. Likable but irritating. He's too good looking in an unassuming masculine way to dress so neatly--it makes him look like a mannequin. That polite way of his of using small words slowly and distinctly proves that he loves his fellow man--even if his fellow always does have less brains or authority than Madison himself. That belief would be forgivable in him if it wasn't so often true.

Madison folded himself into the canary yellow client's chair at my direction, and took a leather-bound pocket secretary from inside his almost-too-snug jacket.

"Dr. Thorn," he said expansively, "we need you to help us locate an atavism."

I flicked professional smile No. Three at him lightly.

"I'm a historical psychologist," I told him. "That sounds in my line. Which of your ancestors are you interested in having me analyze?"

"I used the word 'atavism' to mean a reversion to the primitive."

I made a pencil mark on my desk pad. I could make notes as well as he could read them.

"Yes, I see," I murmured. "We don't use the term that way. Perhaps you don't understand my work. It's been an honest way to make a living for a few generations but it's so specialized it might sound foolish to someone outside the psychological industry. I psychoanalyze historical figures for history books (of course), and scholars, interested descendants, what all, and that's *all* I do."

"All you *have* done," Madison admitted, "but your government is certain that you can do this new work for them--in fact, that you are one of the few men prepared to locate this esoteric--that is, this odd aberration since I understand you often have to deal with it in analyzing the past. Doctor, we want you to find us a lonely man."

I laid my chrome yellow pencil down carefully beside the cream-colored pad.

"History is full of loneliness--most of the so-called great men were rather neurotic--but I thought, Madison, that introspection was pretty much of a thing of the, well, past."

The government representative inhaled deeply and steepled his manicured fingers.

"Our system of childhood psycho-conditioning succeeds in burying loneliness in the subconscious so completely that even the records can't reveal if it was ever present."

I cleared my throat in order to stall, to think.

"I'm not acquainted with *contemporary* psychology, Madison. This comes as news to me. You mean people aren't really well-adjusted today, that they have just been conditioned to *act* as if they were?"

He nodded. "Yes, that's it. It's ironic. Now we need a lonely man and we can't find him."

"To pilot the interstellar spaceship?"

"For the *Evening Star*, yes," Madison agreed.

I picked up my pencil and held it between my two index fingers. I couldn't think of a damned thing to say.

"The whole problem," Madison was saying, "goes back to the early days of space travel. Men were confined in a small area facing infinite space for measureless periods in freefall. Men cracked--and ships, they cracked up. But as space travel advanced ships got larger, carried more people, more ties and reminders of human civilization. Pilots became more *normal*."

I made myself look up at the earnest young man.

"But now," I said, "now you want me to find you an abnormal pilot who is used to being alone, who can stand it, maybe even like it?"

"Right."

I constructed a genuine smile for him for the first time.

"Madison, do you really think *I* can find your man when evidently all the government agencies have failed?"

The government representative pocketed his notebook deftly and then spread his hands clumsily for an instant.

"At least, Doctor," he said, "you may *know* it if you do find him."

It was a lonely job to find a lonely man, General, and maybe it was a crooked job to walk a crooked mile to find a crooked man.

I had to do it alone. No one else had enough experience in primitive psychology to recognize the phenomenon of loneliness, even as Madison had said.

The working conditions suited me. I had to think by myself but I had a comfortable staff to carry out my ideas. I liked my new office and the executive apartment the government supplied me. I had authority and respect and I had security. The government assured me they would find further use for my services after I found them their man. I knew this was to keep me from dragging my tracks. But nevertheless I got right down to work.

I found Gordon Meyverik exactly five weeks from the day Madison first visited me in my old office.

"Of course, I planned the whole thing, Dr. Thorn," Gordon said crisply.

I knew what he meant although I hadn't guessed it before. He could tell it to me himself, I decided.

"Doesn't seem much to brag about," I said. "Anybody who can make up a grocery list should be able to figure out how to isolate himself on Seal Island."

He sat forward, a lean Viking with a hot Latin glance, very confident of himself.

"I reckoned on you locating me, on you hustling me back to pilot the *Evening Star*. That's why I holed in there."

"I can't accept your story," I lied cheerfully. "Nobody is going to maroon himself on an island for three years because of a wild possibility like that."

Meyverik smiled and his sureness swelled out until it almost jabbed me in the stomach.

"I took a broad gamble," he said, "but it hit the wire, didn't it?"

I didn't reply, but he had his answer.

Instead I scanned the report Madison had given me from Intelligence concerning the man's unorthodox behavior.

Meyverik had quit his post-graduate studies and passed by the secured job that had been waiting for him eighteen months in a genial government office to barricade himself in an old shelter on Seal Island. It was hard to know what to make of it. He had brought impressive stores of food with him, books, sound and vision tapes but not telephone or television. For the next three years he had had no contact with humanity at all.

And he said he had planned it all.

"Sure," he drawled. "I knew the government was looking for somebody to steer the interstellar ship that's been gossip for decades. That job," he said distinctly, "is one I would give a lot to settle into."

I looked at him across my unlittered brand new desk and accepted his irritating blond masculinity, disliked him, admired him, and continued to examine him to decide on my *final* evaluation.

"You've given three years already," I said, examining the sheets of the report with which I was thoroughly familiar.

He twitched. He didn't like that, not spending three years. It was spendthrift, even if a good buy. He was planning on winding up somewhere important and to do it he had to invest his years properly.

"You are trying to make me believe you deliberately extrapolated the government's need for a man who could stand being alone for long periods, and then tried to phoney up references for the work by staying on that island?"

"I don't like that word 'phoney'," Meyverik growled.

"No? You name your word for it."

Meyverik unhinged to his full height.

"It was *proof*," he said. "A test."

"A man can't test himself."

"A lot you know," the big blond snorted.

"I *know*," I told him drily. "A man who isn't a hopeless maniac depressive can't consciously create a test for himself that he knows he will fail. You proved you could stay alone on an island, buster. You didn't prove you could stay alone in a spaceship out in the middle of infinity for three years. Why didn't you rent a conventional rocket and try looking at some of our local space? It all looks much the same."

Meyverik sat down.

"I don't know why I didn't do that," he whispered.

Probably for the first time since he had got clever enough to beat up his big brother Meyverik was doubting himself, just a little, for just a time.

I don't know whether it was good or bad for him--contemporary psychology isn't in my line--but I knew I couldn't trust a cocky kid.

But I had to find out if he could still hit the target uncocked.

Stan Johnson was our second lonely man, remember, General?

He was stubborn.

I questioned him for a half hour the first day, two hours the second and on the third I turned him over to Madison.

Then as I was having my lunch I suddenly thought of something and made steps back to my office.

I got there just in time to grab Madison's bony wrist.

The thing in his fist was silver and sharp, a hypodermic needle. Johnson's forearm was tanned below the torn pastel sleeve. Two sad-faced young men were holding him politely by the shoulders in the canvas chair. Johnson met my glance expressionlessly.

I tugged on Madison's arm sharply.

"What's in that damned sticker?"

"Polypentium." Madison's face was as blank as Johnson's--only his body seemed at once tired and taut.

"What's it for?" I rasped.

"You're the psychologist," he said sharply.

I met his eyes and held on but it was impossible to stare him down.

"I don't know about physical methods, I told you. I've been dealing with people in books, films, tapes all my life, not living men up till now, can't you absorb that?"

"Apparently I've had more experience with these things than you then, Doctor. Shall I proceed?"

"You shall not," I cried omnisciently. "I know enough to understand we can't get the results the government wants by drugs. You going to put that away?"

Madison nodded once.

"All right," he said.

I unshackled my fingers and he put the shiny needle away in its case, in his suitcoat pocket.

"You understand, Thorn," he said, "that the general won't like this."

I turned around and looked at him.

"Did he order you to drug Johnson?"

The government agent shook his head.

"I didn't think so." I was beginning to understand government operations. "He only wanted it done. Get out."

Madison and his assistants marched out in orthodox Euclidian triangle formation.

The doors hissed shut.

"You know what?" The words jerked out from Johnson. "I think the bunch of you are crazy. *Crazy*."

I decided to treat him like a client. Maybe that was the way contemporary psychologists handled their men.

I sat on the edge of the desk jauntily, confidently, and tried to let the domino mask up a father image.

"You may as well get it straight, Stan. The government needs you and it's pointless for you to say that need is unconstitutional or anything. Bring it up and it won't be long. When survival is outside the rules, the rules change."

The eyes of Johnson were strikingly like Meyverik's, dark and unsettled. Only this boy, younger, smaller than the Nordic, had an appropriate skin tone, stained by the tropical sun somewhere in his ancestral past. He dropped his gaze, expelled his breath mightily and pounded one angular knee with a half-closed fist.

"I'm not complaining about conscription without representation, Doctor, but I can't make any sense out of these fool questions you keep firing at me. What in blazes are you trying to get at? What kind of reason are you after for my staying by myself? I just do it because *I like* it that way."

With a galvanic jolt, I realized he was telling the painfully simple truth. I groaned at the realization.

Meyverik had convinced all of us that in our well-adjusted or at any rate well-conditioned world somebody had to have some purposeful *reason* in loneliness, solitude, so on that one instance our thinking had already been patterned, discarding all the other evidence of generations that the lonely man was only a personality type, like Johnson.

I felt I had achieved at least the quantum state of a fool.

Johnson silently studied the half-cupped hands laying in his lap.

"The hunting lodge in the Andes seemed as good a place as any to live after mother and father were killed. You might think it was lonesome at night in the mountains, but it isn't at all. You aren't alone when you can watch the burning worlds shadow the bow of God...."

I cleared my throat. The poor kid sounded like he would begin spouting something akin to poetry next.

"So I believe you," I told him. "That doesn't finish it. We have to convince *them*. I don't like this, but the simplest way would be to volunteer for their hibitor injection. I've found out Madison and his crowd don't believe men awake, only assorted dopes."

Johnson deflated his area of the room with his breath intake.

"Okay," he said at last. "I guess so."

When Johnson gave us what we needed to clear the problem, it didn't take me long to finish processing the rest of the handful of possible loners we had located. Unlike Johnson, all the rest had *reasons* for their self-imposed loneliness. Unlike Meyverik none of their reasons were associated with the interstellar flight. They instead involved literary research, swindles, isolated paranoid insanity and other things in which the government had no interest.

Suddenly I found my job was done and that we had located only the two of them.

Madison read my final report braced on the edge of my desk, his hand comradely on my shoulder.

"Good job, Doc," he vouched replacing the papers on my blotter with a final rustle. "Now I've got news for you. The government wants you to *test* these boys for us now that you've found 'em for us."

I closed my jaw. "That's completely out of line--*my* line. I know you need a contemporary man for that job."

Madison punched me on the bicep, fast enough to hurt.

"Doc, after this project you know more about contemp' stuff than any professor who got his degree studying the textbooks *you* wrote."

It was impossible to dislike Madison except for practiced periods--that was probably one reason he had his job.

"All right," I growled. "Get your dirty pants off my clean desk and I'll get out the bottle. We'll--celebrate, huh?"

But you know how I felt, General? You remember how I tried to get out of it. I felt like I had led in the lambs and now I had to help shear them. As a part-time historian I can tell you there's a word for that--Judas goat. Give or take a word.

"It isn't the real thing, Doc," Madison spelled out for me, wearing a lemon twist of smile.

I looked at the twin banks of gauge-facings and circuit housings in which centered TV screens picturing either Meyverik or Johnson. Red and sea-green lights chased each other around the control boards, died, were born again. On the screens the three color negatives mixed to purple, shifted through a series of wrong combinations and settled to normal as the stereo-oscillation echoed, convexed insanely, and deepened to hold. Video reception is lousy from five hundred thousand miles out.

I was too eye-heavy to be surprised.

"Don't tell me this is *The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton* all over again?"

Madison clapped me on the shoulder and breathed mint at me, eyes on twittering round faces.

"Who wrote that? Poe? No, no mock-up to fake space conditions for them but calculate the cost of the *real* interstellar ship. We couldn't trust either of them with it yet. You didn't really think we could afford *two* ships. Why do you think we haven't told one man about his opposite in a second ship? No safety margin allowable in our appropriation, Doc. Or so they tell me. There's enough fuel and food to take Johnson and Meyverik a long way but not the distance."

He shook his lean head almost wistfully.

"Damn it, Madison, do you mean I've been beating my lobes out for weeks for *nothing*? I tested them. I checked them out. Either was capable of making the flight successfully--for their own different reasons."

Madison took his hand off my shoulder and made a fist of it.

"I'm not questioning your decision! Will you ram that through your obscene skull, Thom!"

"Who is?" I whispered.

"Not me. Not I, not I."

"The general," I announced.

"Just not me." Was he actually trembling? But it wasn't concern about what I thought of him. Somebody closer, maybe. Things were building up for him.

He jammed his nose almost up against the glass dial surfaces, swaying gently in his cups, staring slightly cross-eyed at the arrowed numbers.

"You'll continue your tests from here," Madison said. "Tell them they are going to die."

My face was at once cool and damp.

"That's a tough examination," I gasped.

"A lie," Madison told me. "The boys at Psychicentre worked out the problems."

"You told me you wanted me!" I screamed at him furiously.

"Control your passionate, dainty voice. You worked well with those two. The experts could work through you better."

"Right through me, like a razor blade through margarine," I said. "It's not fair."

"No, it's science. Psychology as a science, not an art. Don't damn me--I'm not the inventor," Madison continued.

"I'm one of them," I murmured, "but I'd just as rather you didn't blame me either."

Madison punched the button for me with a palsied, manicured thumb.

"Guess what, Meyverik?" I said viciously. "You're going to die."

"What the blazes are you babbling about?" the blond doll snapped at me from the box of the video screen.

I scanned the typed, stiff-backed Idiot Prompters Madison shoved into my fist. "It's--true. You can't get out alive."

"What's happened?" His face perfectly blank.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," I said. "They have just informed me it was planned this way. It wasn't possible to build a round-trip rocket yet. You need a lot of fuel to make course adjustments for the curvature of space, so forth. The radio will send back your reports on the Alpha Centaurian planets. Undoubtedly by all rules of probability they won't support life without a mass of equipment. They suckered me too, Meyverik, I swear. You turning back?"

"No," he said almost immediately.

"I thought you were after the rewards, trained to get them. You won't be able to enjoy them posthumously."

The video blanked. He had turned off his camera.

"I guess I thought so," Meyverik's voice said. "But I kind of like it out here--alone. I like people but back there there's no one to *touch*. They smother you but you can't reach them. I can't do anything better back there than I can do here."

Madison got a bottle and he and I got sloppily drunk, leaning on each other, singing innocently obscene songs of our youth. The technicians, good government men, were openly disgusted with us.

Two hours after we had contacted Meyverik, I left Madison snoring on the desk and lurched to the control board, bunching my soiled shirt at the throat with my hand.

I called Johnson.

"Going to die, Johnson. Tricked you. Can't get back, Johnson. Not ever. No fuel. Ha, you can't ever go home again, Johnson. Like that, you damned runny-nosed little poet?"

His dark face worked weakly.

Ha, he sure as thunderation *didn't* like it.

He asked for the bloody details and I fed them to him.

"Turning back, aren't you?" I jeered.

"I just wanted a place and a time for thinking," he said across the Solar System. "But I'll die and I don't know if you can dream in death."

"Just what I thought," I sneered.

"I'm not turning back," he said slowly. "People need me. I've got a job to do. Haven't I? Haven't I?"

"No," I screamed at him. "You're just using that as an excuse to kill yourself. Don't try to tell me you're not weak! Don't you try to make me think you're strong! Hear me, Johnson, hear me?"

But he couldn't hear me.

One of the government technicians had broken the contact before that last spurt.

"This is good," Madison said, pawing fuzzily at his pocket. "Really--*good*."

I studied the three or four watchdials wobbling up and down my elongated wrist. They seemed to say it was almost sunrise.

I leered at Madison. "Yeah, yeah, what is it? Huh, huh?"

He shoved a crumpled card into my lax fingers.

"Now," he said, "now tell them--"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Tell them the whole thing is useless."

My stomach retched drily, grinding the sober pills to dust between its ulcerating walls.

"Meyverik," I said to the empty video tube, "they made a mistake. They underestimated curvature. You can't reach Alpha Centauri. You can't correct enough. Free space is all you'll hit. Ever. You may as well come home."

The soft voice came out of nowhere, from nothing.

"I don't want to come back. I like it here. This is what I've always been trying to get and I never knew it."

Madison grabbed my arm with pronged fingers.

"Shut up, Doc. That's just the way the government wants him to be."

"Johnson," I said to the creased face in the screen, "they made a mistake. They underestimated curvature. You can't reach Alpha Centauri. You can't correct enough. Free space is all you'll hit. Ever. You may as well come--back."

Johnson sighed, a whisper of breath across the miles.

"I'll keep going. No one has ever been so far out before. I can report valuable things."

I stood there. The textbooks report it takes muscular effort to frown, more so than to smile. But my face seemed to flow into the lines of pain so hard it ached without any effort of my will. And I knew it would *hurt* to smile.

"They passed the final test," Madison said at my side. "Tell them it was a test."

I would do it for him. I didn't need to do it for myself.

I motioned the technician to open both channels.

"The ship you are in," I said, with no need to tell them of each other, "is not the real *Evening Star*. It will *not* take you to the stars. This has been only a *test* to credit your fitness to pilot the real interstellar craft of the Star Project. You must return to the Lunar Satellite. This is a direct order."

The two screens remained blank. Only the windless silence of space echoed over Johnson's channel, but the tapes later proved that I actually did hear a whispered laugh from Meyverik.

I faced Madison.

"They won't come back. They could have passed any test except the fact that what we put them through was only a test. For their own reasons, they will keep going. As far as they can."

Madison took out his notebook and seemed to look for vital information. Except that he never cracked the cover.

"Of course, we can't get them back if they won't come," he said. "If cybernetic remotes functioned operationally at this distance we wouldn't have to send men at all."

He replaced the pocket secretary and looked at me edgewise, speculatively.

I touched his arm.

"Let's find another bottle," I said.

He stepped back.

"You found them. You tested them. You killed them."

And the government man walked away and left me standing with a murderer.

You see it now, don't you, General?

What I'm carrying around on my back is guilt. Not guilt complex, not guilt fixation, just plain old Abel-Cain *guilt*.

In this nice, well-ordered age I'm a killer and everybody knows it.

You see our mistake, General.

We sent men with variable amounts of loneliness. These amounts could alter. But now we have a golden opportunity.

The *Evening Star* is waiting and I have found for you a man with the true measure of loneliness. It is impossible for this man to become any more or any less lonely. It isn't the Ultimate Possible Loneliness, understand that, General.

It's just that by himself or with others he is always in a crowd of three, no more, no less.

The interstellar ship is waiting.

So tell me, General, have you ever seen a lonelier man than me, your humble servitor, Dr. Thorn? No, I mean it. Have you?

THE END

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* March 1959. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.