

One Against the Moon

by DONALD A. WOLLHEIM



The first rocket to the moon!
A thrilling science-fiction adventure

One Against the Moon

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

The World Publishing Company
CLEVELAND AND NEW YORK

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 56-9261

FIRST EDITION

HC856

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

To
WILLIAM BALTER
A fixed star in a fickle sky

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

HAS WRITTEN

The Secret of Saturn's Rings

The Secret of the Martian Moons

HAS EDITED

Terror in the Modern Vein

Every Boy's Book of Science-Fiction

The Portable Novels of Science

Flight into Space

Adventures on Other Planets

The Pocket Book of Science-Fiction

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One Against the Moon

1. To Dream of Stars

That morning began like all the preceding mornings of the past two years with the tinny jangling of the little alarm clock on Robin Carew's bureau. Opening his black eyes, he struggled into a sitting position on the narrow bed, reached out his hand and turned off the alarm. He yawned, swung his feet to the floor, rubbed his eyes. It was half past seven again of another workday morning.

There was no inkling that this day would be any different from others. It was Monday again, which meant the start of the next five and a half days' stretch of work. Sunday had come and gone, now just a memory of a walk in the city's small park and sitting on a bench under the afternoon sun reading a library book on astronomy.

Well, there was no getting around it, Robin thought. The stars, the glory of the heavens—for him perhaps they would always be just a daydream of his idle hours, never to be more than a vision of the imagination, a thrill to be shared only by the printed words of other men's observations and doings.

He got up, yawned his entire five foot three, stared in the tarnished mirror over the worn bureau. He looked blankly at himself, then suddenly winked. Ah, he thought, while there's life there's hope—and besides, he had to get to work. He ran a brush through his tousled brown hair, took off his pajamas, and climbed into his work clothes. Grabbing his towel and his toothbrush, he opened the door and went out into the hall toward the washroom.

The facilities at the Y were always clean at least, and maybe in a few more months he would be promoted out of the apprentice class at the factory. Then he could afford to get a bigger room on the floor above with his own washstand and shower.

After he had returned and finished dressing, he glanced out the narrow window. He could just make out a slit of sky and spot the sidewalk below. It

was a sunny day, he saw, and a warm one. Putting on his jacket, he left his cap behind and went out, locking the door of his little room behind him.

Not waiting for the creaky elevator, he skipped down the iron stairs to the lobby. Waving hello to a couple of his fellow boarders, he made his way over to the newsstand. There he paused to glance at the headlines, to scan the racks of magazines to see if there were any he might think of buying that he hadn't seen before. He didn't notice any. His eye, rapidly discarding the featured stories in the papers about the usual crimes and politics, was caught by a small heading:

ROCKET PROGRAM AHEAD OF SCHEDULE—PROJECT CHIEF REPORTS TESTS ARE MANY MONTHS ADVANCED!

Robin stopped, rapidly glanced over the story. He wished he had the time to read the whole story, but he knew he hadn't. Anyway, he could probably borrow a copy during lunch hour from one of the fellows. But it was stories like that which fascinated him.

As he went into the cafeteria at the Y and sat eating a quick breakfast, he thought about the story. He'd always been fascinated by rockets and the stars. Even when still a kid at the orphanage, he'd read everything he could get on the subject. He'd never stopped doing so. Now that he was out of the school, out on his own the past three years, he still had the bug.

The White Sands and Redstone rocket experiments were making headlines more and more. The first dozen little satellites had been thrilling reading—the discussions of the permanent artificial satellite program, now under way, was even more so, for it promised to be the beginning of the long-projected Space Platform, from which in turn would come the first real space flight.

Robin wished he knew more of the things that were going on. Somewhere out there in the West, on the deserts and sands of New Mexico a couple of thousand miles away, history was being made. Many of the fellows working there couldn't be much older than he.

But fate was a grim and arbitrary thing. For others, a college education could bring to a fine point the talent for mathematics and chemistry and physics that was needed for this work. For an orphan boy, however, the world reserved less glamorous and more immediately practical objectives. Oh, sure, he'd had

a chance at a scholarship, but somehow he just hadn't made it. The manual training programs stressed at the State Home had just not allowed him the extra time to study for a scholarship. Even though his instructors had given him the chance, he simply hadn't been able to make it.

For him, the study of abstract science was to be a matter of home reading. He'd devoured all the books in the library on the stars. And he still dreamed, even while working in the carpentry shop of the factory here, of flying through space on wings of flame.

Perhaps, if he'd had a mother and father like most fellows, he'd have gone to college, might even now be on his way to help the rocket men conquer the universe. But his folks had died somewhere in the holocaust of war, back during the fall of Hitler's Germany, back when he was just a frightened and helpless kid of seven.

As he had agreed a thousand times since then, Robin reflected, as he spooned cereal to his mouth, he was lucky even so. For somehow the GI's had found a battered, dirty envelope sewn into his worn internment-camp jacket with identification that proved him the American-born son of American parents, who had been interned in the enemy country. But where his parents were ... well, there had been some terrible bombing in those days. There was never any trace of the Carews. Robin had only a vague memory of his people, somewhere lost amid a nightmare of terror.

As most of the kids in the orphanage had, Robin dreamed of someday finding his folks, of finding them rich. But it was, as always, a dream. The American army had brought him home, had sought to trace his folks, and had failed. Well, Robin still was lucky. It was no shame to be a workingman in a democratic country.

Time was passing. Robin hastily gulped down the glass of milk he knew he needed for his daily labors, and, paying his check, dashed out. He caught the bus at the corner, crowding in with others on their way, and rode it for fifteen minutes out to the edge of town where the big plant stood.

He jumped off and headed for the main gates. He noticed a large crowd of men standing in front of them. Why were they standing, he thought, why didn't they go on in, punch their cards? He came up to them, saw them standing around talking uneasily, some milling around, holding their lunch

pails idly in their hands. Robin pushed through to the main gate. He saw a knot of men staring at a sign tacked on the post. He got closer and read it.

It was a statement from the management. It seemed that the plant was closed for six weeks, due to a combination of circumstances. There was a shortage in the raw materials because of the heavy floods in the mining areas that spring, and so the management had decided to take advantage of that shortage to retool and recondition the works. Men in several departments would be called in during the next few days, the rest would be laid off temporarily. Another notice tacked below that stated that the company had arranged with the union for compensation during the period.

Robin stared at the notice numbly for a minute. He himself had not yet been admitted to the union, for he was only a learning apprentice. For him there would possibly be only a period of six barren, workless weeks. He wandered away from the gates, drifted around idly, listening to the groups of men talking.

Most of them seemed to be taking it calmly enough. Several of them were talking with growing enthusiasm of organizing a hunting-and-fishing trip upstate for the next week or so. One was talking of going home to visit the old folks back at the farm. Most of them seemed to be looking forward more or less to a period of loafing around at home with their families.

Suddenly Robin felt more alone than usual. For him, there was no family. Even at its best an orphanage has a certain coldness, a certain impersonal precision that can never make up for the warmth of family life. He had friends there, but surely by this time they, too, had left, having gone into business or into the armed forces.

The cold halls of the Y offered no particular relaxation. Even utilizing the city library to burrow deep into his favorite imaginative studies of science seemed a barren prospect for six whole weeks.

He wandered away from the men, walked along the great factory wall, hands in his pockets, strolling slowly away from the city, along the road to the open country, beyond the end of the bus lines. He thought about himself. He took stock of himself.

Nearly twenty now, he was a good mechanic, a pretty good carpenter, handy.

He'd always be able to get a job somewhere in which he could work with his hands. He'd never thought too much though about the future. He would be taken sooner or later by the armed forces. They hadn't needed him and he hadn't thought about volunteering first. He was always a little sensitive about his height, for he was short for his age. This had probably operated subconsciously to keep him from joining up.

I could sign up now, he thought. This might be the time. Besides, he went on in his reasoning, if I volunteered I could pick my own branch of the service. I could pick the Air Force and maybe get to see some rockets and jets in action. I couldn't rate a pilot's commission because I'm no college man, but I bet I could qualify as a mechanic, get to work on the rocket planes. Why, maybe I could even manage to get sent to White Sands, work on the Space Platform and the Artificial Satellites. Maybe someday I'll be one of the guys who help tool up the first rocket to the moon!

He found himself growing excited at the thought. But, he reminded himself, my chances are slim of getting what I want. There are so many good guys in the Air Force, my own chance of being sent to one particular place is small, really small.

Somehow, he knew if he couldn't be around the rockets, he wouldn't be happy under discipline. He'd had enough barracks life in the orphanage, more didn't appeal to him without some special compensation—something like White Sands.

So—he had six weeks with nothing to do. He walked on, beyond the town now, alongside the highway, the morning sun shining down, the blue sky beaming overhead, and he began to feel himself swelling with energy, glowing with ambition.

Six weeks ... six weeks. He was young, he had no ties. Maybe he could hitchhike to White Sands in time to look around, maybe spot a rocket go winging off into the sky, then hitchhike back in time for the factory's reopening.

The idea blazed into his mind, he felt his pulse beating uncontrollably. Maybe, maybe, his mind added to the picture, maybe you could get a job in White Sands, near the field. Maybe they hire civilian workers? Or—maybe if you enlist there they'll let you serve there?

Abruptly he turned around, started walking rapidly back to the city. He'd do it, he told himself excitedly. He'd do it. He'd go back to the Y now, today, collect what he needed, take the few dollars he'd saved up, and go.

His mind repeated a rhythm as he walked. Do it now, if you don't do it now, you'll never do it. This is your chance. Go. The West is calling. The rockets are calling. Make a break for yourself. Go!

He reached the end of the bus line, hopped on the bus, vibrated in tune to his racing thoughts all the way back.

But an hour and a half later, when he was standing in the bus terminal, the first flush of excitement had drained away. Now he felt a cold chill running through him. He had made the break, packed a few necessities, drew his small reserve of cash from the bank, paid his room rent six weeks in advance, and bought a ticket on the bus going westward.

He couldn't afford the entire trip to New Mexico, so he bought passage for a few hundred miles. After that he'd hike and thumb rides the rest of the way. He didn't want to resort to charity so he had kept enough funds to keep him in food and lodgings if necessary and maybe take him part way home again.

For a moment before boarding the bus, Robin hesitated. Was it after all but a daydream that he was pursuing? Was the cold reality too indifferent to the hopes of just an ordinary young fellow? Would White Sands prove a disappointment? Was this a mistake he would regret?

For just a second he hesitated and then, shaking his head angrily as if to drive out such thoughts, he stepped aboard the bus, slung his lightly packed valise onto the rack over an empty seat, and sat down. He would refuse to give up his vision. He would see this through.

The horn honked, two or three more passengers swung aboard, the driver threw in the clutch, and the bus drove out of the terminal, along the long, dusty road west.

2. White Sands or Red?

From Missouri where the bus ride had ended, the time had passed with difficulty. There had been two hot days through Kansas, standing by lonely roadsides while cars whizzed by without stopping, the strong sun beating down over the flat green plains, the insects alive with the fever of the endless wheat. Robin had to keep heading south, south and west always, driving down when cars were going that way. Down through Oklahoma, thumbing his way, sometimes with an Eastern tourist on his way to California, sometimes with a tired rancher or oil worker on a short haul to his home or town, sometimes with a bored truck driver anxious to have someone to talk to on the long trip.

The closer he drew to his objective, the more excited he became. When the oil fields and gray lands of Oklahoma began to turn to the green flatness of the Texas Panhandle he grew silent, more intense. And finally, one morning when he sped out of Amarillo sharing the high front seat of a giant trailer truck bound for El Paso, he was almost speechless for miles and miles. Then, suddenly, as the road clicked across the invisible border of New Mexico, he began to talk. A sudden calm invaded his nerves. He talked with the driver about things back home, exchanged comments on the affairs in the news, his eyes taking stock of this land all the time.

It was barren—for vast stretches dry desert and flat rock with only sparse clumps of desert green—now and then a stretch of good grasslands where cattle could be seen grazing. In the distance, gaunt mountain chains rose and fell; and the air was getting clear and thin as the road gradually rose in altitude.

After a bite in Roswell, when he piled back into the truck, Robin knew he was on his last stretch. After the next stop, Alamogordo, he would reach his destination, Las Cruces. Mention of Alamogordo, though, set the driver talking about the atom bomb, for that had been the town that had first seen the birth of that eerie fire which seemed so destined to transform the world.

"Did you ever see one of those blasts?" asked Robin quietly.

"Yeah," said the driver slowly. "Guess you could say so. Didn't actually see the thing itself, but I seen the glare one morning while putting over in Alamogordo. Quite a sight. You know the blast was plenty far away too; they don't fire them things off anywhere near where they can hurt anybody. Wisht I'd get to see one of them rockets go up they're always firing off at White Sands too. But I guess you gotta be on the grounds for that, and they don't let visitors hang around."

"No visitors?" asked Robin, a little uneasily.

"Nope. That's all top-secret stuff out there. Now that they got those man-made satellite projects in operation, it's even more so. Maybe they let a few reporters in on special occasions, or some high brass with clearance from Washington, but nobody else can get in. Can't even get the GI's who are out there to talk much about it. You'll see a lot of them around Las Cruces Saturday nights on furlough but they just don't discuss it."

"How far is White Sands from Las Cruces?" asked Robin.

"Oh, not too far, maybe thirty miles. The proving grounds are out on the desert though, part of the Holloman Air Development Center that is taking up a lot of this here Tularosa Basin these years. Without a pass, you can't even get in sight of it. But, heck, you wouldn't want to, I hope. Might get conked when one of those whacking big rockets come down. They're always shooting 'em up on tests, making them bigger and bigger. You can't tell me they always know where they're going to come down!"

They passed Alamogordo, drove an hour more through the stillness of the desert, and suddenly they were in Las Cruces. The truck drew to a halt, and Robin dropped off, his valise in his hand. The city didn't seem aware of its unique position on the map of world history.

Robin trudged along the main street until he found a small hotel within his means. He got a room, washed from the trip, brushed his clothes. He had not taken any pants to spare, having put on a strong pair of khaki work trousers, figuring correctly that they were more the thing for hitchhiking than his one good Sunday suit. By the time he went downstairs night had fallen.

He got a bite to eat, walked around the town a bit, went back and to bed. He

was dog-tired from the long day's ride.

Next day he walked the town, looking it over, asking questions about how to get to White Sands. He found that the truck driver's advice had been right. There simply was no way a visitor could just go and watch. It was all top-secret stuff, barred to any but legitimate personnel.

He found an Air Force recruiting office, went in, and talked with the sergeant in charge. Robin had begun to dread the thought that in the end he might have to go back to his home city and back to work in the factory. He had so fixed his mind on the rockets, he couldn't bring himself to admit defeat now.

The Air Force man confirmed the usual information. Robin pressed him to say whether if he signed up for the service in Las Cruces he wouldn't stand a good chance of being assigned there. The sergeant laughed.

"Well, it's possible, but it might take a little doing. You get in the Air Force, let us train you for a good job, say you work to be a mechanic for jets and rockets, then maybe you might be assigned here. But there are lots of stations for men, and you might not. Still, if you were to work for it, say after a year in service, you might apply for a transfer to White Sands; it could be that you could get it. But there's no guarantee, none at all. If the force needs you more somewhere else, that'll have to be it. Why not sign up and try for it?"

But Robin shook his head. "Not yet. I want to see if maybe I can get a civilian job there first, or maybe just visit it once."

The sergeant nodded. "You can try. After that, come around and see me again." Robin nodded, and left.

He thought about that as he walked the streets. It might be a good alternative. It did offer at least a chance at the work he dreamed of, at being near the rockets. Yet—to be so near *now* and be stopped. A year, even in the Air Force, still seemed a mighty long time to wait.

He found the civilian employment office for the White Sands Proving Grounds, but it was not only closed, it being Saturday afternoon, but there was a sign saying, *No Help Wanted*.

That night he began to notice men in Air Force dress blues, others in GI khaki, and even some in ordinary olive-drab fatigues appearing in the streets. He realized it was Saturday night and the streets were beginning to show the

signs of life for the men's one night a week in town. Ranchers were driving in, their cars lining the curbs. Buses bearing the name of White Sands would come in, unload their pleasure-hungry men, and park somewhere or else go back. White-capped MP's were appearing at corners to augment the local police.

Nevertheless, there was mighty little disturbance. There weren't the noisy carryings-on that usually marked towns near army bases when soldiers had a night off. These were picked men, and they behaved themselves.

Robin was not a drinker and not a roisterer, yet that evening he wondered if he oughtn't to have been. For if he could have learned to hang around some of the livelier bars, he might have been able to strike up conversations with the men of White Sands. After a while, he did indeed enter one, sat nursing a lone beer while listening to the men.

But they did not talk business. They talked the talk that soldiers on leave talk everywhere. Their girl friends, their pals, their latest jokes, gossip, but never a word about rockets, never a word about satellites, never a whisper about their work.

Robin drifted with the crowd in the streets for several hours, finally again found another corner in a dim tavern where he sat, by this time a little tired, a little confused, wondering whether he had not made a mistake in coming here at all. The whole day had been frustration and his spirits were at low ebb.

Two men in fatigue denims were seated near him, arguing. One was plainly far gone under the influence of liquor. He was bleary-eyed, nodding and mumbling. The other, trying to hold him, shaking him, was actually almost as far gone. He was mumbling something about getting up and going; they had to make the last truck to camp.

Finally the two got up, staggered to the men's room, and disappeared inside. Robin resumed his meditations, noting that the place was nearly empty now, that the streets were silent. Obviously time had run out for the men, and they were on their way back to camp. Suddenly it occurred to him that the two soldiers had failed to come out of the lavatory.

Robin slipped out of his seat, opened the door of the washroom, and went in. The two men were there, together on the floor, sound asleep.

Hastily Robin knelt down, shook them. "Wake up, you got to go back to camp!" he called. But he couldn't budge them. One mumbled something without opening his eyes, slumped back, and began to snore. The other didn't even respond that much.

For a moment Robin stood beside them, thinking that he ought to go and tell the proprietor. Then he heard a voice call loudly outside in the bar:

"Any of youse guys going back tonight better step on it! Bus's leaving in two minutes!"

An MP rounding up the stragglers, Robin thought. And in that moment, a sudden chill ran through him, a sudden wild thought leaped into his head. He stood transfixed for an instant. For an instant which seemed to last an eternity, an instant in which all his training, all his instincts and ambitions fought and struggled together in a mad hysteria. Here was an opportunity, here was a chance—yet a trickery, an illegality.

If he borrowed one of the unconscious men's jackets, borrowed his pass, he could ride back to White Sands that very night, and in the dark and confusion, who would know?

Nobody, he felt sure. The next day—well, he'd be surely found, arrested. But—in the meantime, for a blessed hour or so, he would see the rockets in their gaunt glory, in their towering eminences, see an assault against the skies, watch the hissing blue flame ascend to the heavens, see a sight he would remember with joy the rest of his life.

What then if he spent some bad hours under arrest? What even if he went to jail? Actually what could they do to him? He was no spy, he was no saboteur. No matter how exhaustive the investigation, it would prove nothing evil against him.

He remembered a sermon that had once been given at the orphanage. He remembered the minister dwelling on the opportunities of life. He remembered that which had sparked his imagination then, the minister's depiction of the various roads each man must choose. "There comes a time," the speaker had said, "in every man's life when various roads open out before him, each leading in a different direction. If, at that moment, he makes his choice, then his entire life may be forever set upon a channel, and the other

possible lives will vanish."

Was not this then such a crossroads? Robin could go back, be a factory hand, be a contented mechanic or carpenter, marry, settle down, and live his life without ever seeing rockets. Or he could take the road that now, for a brief flicker, seemed open to him.

He bent down, removed the khaki work jacket the smaller of the two men was wearing, shrugged his own shoulders into it, felt in its pocket, pulled out a folded piece of paper, glanced at it. *Pass*, it read. *Seven hours. Red Sands Station.*

He shoved it into his pocket, pushed open the washroom door, and walked rapidly to the street, his head down.

As he emerged onto the street, he was grabbed roughly by an MP. "Hurry, feller," the man said. "What station?"

"Red Sands," muttered Robin in a low voice, and was instantly whirled around bodily and given a push. "Up the street and around the corner. The second bus. Run!"

Robin broke into a run, dashed around the corner. In the darkened side street, three buses were warming up, the first already beginning to roll. Robin ran for the second, and just as it was pulling away from the curb, several hands reached out of the door, took hold of Robin's hands, and heaved him aboard.

He found a seat in the back of the crowded bus, kept his head down to avoid having anybody realize he was a stranger, and caught his breath.

The bus gathered speed, roared down the quiet side streets, and turned onto the highway beyond the town. Robin was on his way to the rockets, to the famous White Sands Proving Grounds ... or was he? What was the Red Sands Station anyway? *Red Sands?* Why had he never heard of it?