

Thrilling Wonder Stories

August 1953

FLIGHT 18

PAUL A. TORAK

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Title: Flight 18

Date of first publication: 1953

Author: Paul A. Torak (1926-1970)

Date first posted: February 15, 2025

Date last updated: February 15, 2025

Faded Page eBook #20250211

This eBook was produced by: Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

FLIGHT 18

By PAUL A. TORAK

**[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from
Thrilling Wonder Stories August 1953.]**

Mr. Bradbury was angry. Fog or no fog, the airlines should stay on schedule. Lack of planning, foresight, sense of responsibility—that was the trouble. He felt like cursing.

“Damn!” said Mr. Bradbury.

But a voice on the public address system announced that Flight Eighteen for Chicago was ready to leave. He raised his considerable bulk from the chair in the dimly lit waiting room of the airfield and checked his watch. No way to run a business. He shook his head and snorted indignantly.

Such a snort is worthy of note. It was an utterance that could be made only by a corporation lawyer in the prime of life. It was a nasal explosion connoting wealth, confidence, and a singular lack of imagination. It was a snort fed on T-bone steaks, good Scotch whisky, and bicarbonate of soda.

Mr. Bradbury peered myopically around the waiting room. A few minutes ago, while washing his face in the men’s room, he had broken his glasses in the wash bowl. Although he hated to admit it to anyone, he could see next to nothing without those thick lenses. The room was an unpleasant blur, but he was able to determine that he was the only would-be passenger in the waiting room. The others were drinking coffee in the airfield’s restaurant.

“Flight Eighteen,” said the voice on the speaker. “Flight Eighteen.”

Mr. Bradbury shrugged his heavy shoulders, picked up his bag and briefcase, and stepped out the door into the fog.

The mist hung thick and low over the airfield, cloaking the damp night air in a morbid blanket of gloom. Mr. Bradbury blinked sullenly into the shroud-like vapor.

“What the hell!” he swore. Can’t even see the plane, and, he thought, floundering unhappily into a wire gate where in blazes are the rest of the passengers? Are they going to fly through this stuff?

“This way, sir,” said a feminine voice, and he saw a dim, uniformed figure in front of him.

The hostess. Glad someone knows where he’s going, he thought, and then he followed the girl toward the now visible lights of the plane.

“Watch your step, sir!” she said as he walked up the runway.

He grunted. Making these things steeper all the time, he thought.

The hostess was a pretty dark-eyed young thing, plump in the right sort of way. Mr. Bradbury leaned back in the soft, cushioned seat. It felt good.

“Fasten your safety belt, sir.” She helped him with it.

“And I do hope you’ll be comfortable,” she said in a soft, low voice. He caught the glint of black eyes, jet and sparkling.

He smiled at her appreciatively. “I’m sure I will,” he grinned resisting a sudden impulse to pinch her cheek. The girl walked down the aisle toward the door again, hips swaying provocatively.

A young blossom ready for the plucking, thought Mr. Bradbury. A succulent young partridge ready for the—Mr. Bradbury chuckled to himself happily on thinking of the many women he had known in his fifty years.

He looked around the plane. No passengers, except for a pleasant looking young man sitting across the aisle from him, a young man thoroughly engrossed in a small, paper-bound book, the title of which Mr. Bradbury could not discern.

He wished he had his glasses, for he was getting a slight headache. The lawyer leaned back in the soft seat and closed his eyes. Well, headache or no headache, life was good, and he was glad he was alive. Then Mr. Bradbury fell asleep.

When he awoke the plane was in flight, and looking out the window, he could see nothing but darkness broken only by an occasional cloud formation. The man across the aisle was staring into the blackness outside, the book he had been reading discarded and left lying on the floor.

Mr. Bradbury stretched himself and looked around him. The plane had been darkened and apparently only he and the young man were awake. He yawned. A great conversationalist, Mr. Bradbury craved discourse. But where was the opening wedge necessary to break the bond of silence between himself and the other passenger? Then his eyes fell on the book lying on the floor. He picked it up and held it close so that he could see.

The title had something to do with “flying saucers” and the cover illustration, a lurid affair, showed a green-skinned, globe-headed, tentacled creature equipped with a tiny rocket motor on its back, an expression of what was supposed to pass for lust in its face. The thing was carrying away a beautiful, thinly clad earthgirl, her face contorted with fear. In the background hung a disc-shaped spaceship hovering over a burning earth city.

“Rubbish!” said Mr. Bradbury in a loud voice so that the young man across the aisle could hear him.

“I beg your pardon?” asked the other passenger, turning away from the window, eyebrows raised in question.

“The book you’re reading,” answered the corporation lawyer. “Rubbish!”

The smooth-faced young man blushed and smiled apologetically. “Well, I suppose you’re right, but it’s sort of fun, you know, reading this sort of thing.”

The lawyer chuckled condescendingly and shook his head. He turned the book over in his hands almost fondly. He wished he had his glasses so that he could read it.

“It’s sort of refreshing, if you know what I mean,” continued the man as if feeling some further defense of his choice in literature were necessary.

“Rubbish!” chuckled Mr. Bradbury for the third time.

A shadow of annoyance registered on the young man’s face.

The lawyer put down the book and extended his hand across the aisle. “Bradbury is the name,” he said. “Represent the

Hotchkiss Oil Industries. Oil is my business!” he added impressively.

The young man hesitated for a moment and then accepted Mr. Bradbury’s hand. The lawyer reflected momentarily that for a frail-looking young fellow the chap showed an amazing strength in his handshake.

“Tarkas is my name,” said Mr. Bradbury’s new acquaintance. “Oswald Tarkas.”

“In business, Mr. Tarkas?”

“Well no,” laughed Mr. Tarkas nervously, “not exactly. I suppose you might say that I just sort of putter around. I work for a museum.”

Mr. Bradbury frowned. He had never known anyone who just sort of “puttered around” in museums. He wasn’t quite sure that he approved. Such an occupation seemed vaguely un-American, subversive, although he couldn’t quite say why.

“A museum? What museum?”

Oswald Tarkas hesitated, looked at the floor, and then answered almost timidly as if he expected some reprimand.

“Well, it’s probably not too well known—the Canal City Museum.”

“Ummm!” muttered the lawyer. “No, can’t say that I’ve heard of it. Where is it? New York? San Francisco?”

Oswald Tarkas had turned away for a moment and was staring out the window. The motors of the plane hummed pleasantly giving a sense of comforting power. The plane's cabin was dark except for the lights over Mr. Tarkas' and Mr. Bradbury's seats.

"Oh no!" replied Mr. Tarkas. "We do have our branches in those cities, but it's a bit difficult to pin us down. We're more or less a research outfit. Sort of an international organization, if you know what I mean."

Mr. Bradbury didn't, but he nodded his head agreeably. "And what do you do for the museum, Tarkas?" he asked.

"Well, I'm what you might call a collector—of sorts," he added. "Yes, I sort of collect things in a way—you might say."

The lawyer, a great student of human character noted that his new acquaintance wore a crew cut. His face was thin and looked clean-cut except for a slight weakness around the chin.

"Well now, Oswald," he said, "you don't mind my calling you Oswald, do you? I like to be friendly."

"Not at all," flushed Mr. Tarkas happily. "I like to be friendly too. When my work permits," he added.

"I have a lot of respect for museums," ventured Mr. Bradbury. He had never been in a museum. "Cultural institutions, that sort of thing," he went on waving his hand. "My company often makes contributions to worthy institutions. Maybe I can do something for your outfit."

Oswald Tarkas seemed appreciative. “Now that’s awfully kind, and, you know, we accept all contributions gratefully. We take what we can get.”

There was an embarrassed pause in the conversation. Then Mr. Bradbury remembered the book he held in his hand.

“This book!” he said holding it up in his hand. “Nonsense!” he scoffed shaking his head. “Know what the flying saucers really were?”

“Well—” started Oswald.

“Balloons!”

“Balloons?”

“Weather balloons!” assured Mr. Bradbury emphatically. “Weather balloons! That’s all they were!”

Oswald looked as if he were about to say something, but didn’t.

Mr. Bradbury, obviously enjoying himself, drew two expensive cigars from his coat pocket.

“Have one?” he offered.

Oswald hesitated and then accepted. He put the cigar in his breast pocket.

“But,” stammered Oswald. “What about the witnesses? The National Guard pilot, the airliner pilots, the army anti-aircraft observers?”

The lawyer drew in the rich tobacco fumes, and tilted his large, handsome head.

“Hallucinations!” he said. “Mass hysteria!” A smile of amused indulgence lit his large, florid face. “Oh, oh, what a world of fantastic notions was begun by that first atomic explosion. Now, for example, the notion that these so-called “flying saucers” are extra-terrestrial.” Mr. Bradbury waved the very idea away with a gesture of dismissal. “If there are intelligent beings from another planet in control of these hypothetical spaceships, why haven’t they contacted us by this time?”

“Well,” suggested Mr. Tarkas thoughtfully, “maybe they have their reasons. Maybe you can’t judge the actions of extra-terrestrial beings by terrestrial standards of conduct.”

“And the meteors,” continued Mr. Bradbury ignoring Oswald’s last remark. “The meteors make space travel impossible. Do you realize that every day our atmosphere is burning up thousands of those meteors? Do you know that just one of those meteors the size of a pea could smash right through the thickest armored plate and wreck any rocket?”

Something small and glowing smashed into the outside of Mr. Bradbury’s window and ricocheted off into space.

“What was that?” asked Mr. Bradbury half rising from his seat.

“I don’t know,” answered Oswald. And then he added jokingly, “Maybe it was a meteor.”

The lawyer stared out the window, but still he could see nothing but blackness. He settled back into his seat again, shrugging his shoulders.

“Well now,” he resumed, “as I said. The meteors. Can’t escape them.”

“But,” suggested Mr. Tarkas defensively. “Couldn’t the rocket sort of ‘scoot’ around them?” He simpered as if embarrassed by such a ridiculous notion and made a half-hearted gesture with his right hand that Mr. Bradbury assumed was a “scooting motion.”

Mr. Bradbury dismissed this contention with a wave of his cigar.

Just then the airliner gave a sickening lurch to the right and something big and luminous roared past the plane. Mr. Bradbury bellowed. “Roughest damned trip I’ve ever had.”

“It makes me nervous, too,” said Oswald.

“Now another thing,” said the lawyer. “This business about men from Mars.”

He looked uneasily out his window.

Oswald smiled. “No truth in it?”

“None! Anyone with even a token knowledge of science knows that the Earth is the only planet that can support human life.”

“But,” answered Oswald, “suppose that planets could be inhabited by something other than human life. Like that thing on the cover there.” He motioned toward the book Mr. Bradbury held.

Mr. Bradbury laughed, about to explode this fallacy with another barrage of devastating logic. He was interrupted.

“Say, Brad. You don’t mind my calling you Brad, do you?”

“Of course not,” smiled the lawyer affably.

“You say there’s no such thing as flying saucers?”

Mr. Bradbury inhaled from his cigar and shook his head.

“Hallucinations,” he said positively.

“You’re sure of that?”

“Stake my life on it!”

“Well I’m sure glad of that because for a long time now the damndest hallucination I’ve ever seen has been flying alongside of us.”

Mr. Bradbury rose from his seat, stepped across the aisle, and looked out Mr. Tarkas’ window. He squinted out into the darkness. It was there all right. No wings, disc shaped, rows of lighted windows, luminous vapor emanating from the rear.

[Illustration: He could see the flying disc outside the window.]

“Damn!” exclaimed Mr. Bradbury and pressed the button for the stewardess.

She came quickly down the darkened aisle.

“Flight Eighteen!” she said blankly. “Flight Eighteen!”

Mr. Bradbury stared.

“Did you ring, sir?” she asked.

“Good Lord yes!” said the lawyer. “Look!” He pointed to the window.

The stewardess, plump and pretty as ever, didn't look, but with amazing strength pushed him down into his seat.

"This way sir," she said smiling pleasantly.

"What's going on?" roared Mr. Bradbury starting to rise again from his seat.

"Watch your step, sir," answered the stewardess giving him another shove. "Fasten your safety belt, sir," she said, and before the lawyer could protest again, he found himself fastened down in his seat.

"And I do hope you'll be comfortable, sir," she said in a soft, low voice. He caught the glint of black eyes, jet and sparkling. She turned, took one step up the aisle and stopped.

"And I do hope you'll be comfortable, sir," she repeated. She stood there motionless, as if paralyzed in the middle of the aisle.

"And I do hope you'll be comfortable, sir," she said again. "And I do hope you'll be—"

Mr. Tarkas stifled a yawn, rose from his seat, and stepped over to the girl. He reached out and twisted her ear. Her voice stopped and her back slid open like a secret panel, revealing a maze of whirring, clicking machinery.

"What—what—" stuttered Mr. Bradbury. "She's a—"

"A robot," smiled Oswald Tarkas happily. He turned from his examination of the defective machinery. "She's not a very good robot. Her vocal mechanism jams now and then, but she serves the purpose. You'd be surprised how many of you we catch this way."

Then Oswald touched a wall switch. The darkened plane blazed into light. There were no passengers on the plane other than Oswald, Mr. Bradbury, and the robot stewardess that stood silently in the aisle.

Mr. Bradbury could still see the flying disc outside the window. Oswald saw the direction of his glance.

“Friend of mine,” he grinned.

The lawyer looked wildly around the empty plane. “Where—where are the passengers?” he croaked, a numbing suspicion growing in his mind.

“No other passengers,” answered Oswald standing there, still smiling. “You just got in the wrong boat, Brad, old fellow.”

The cabin of the airliner was changing. It was beginning to look like something very unlike an airliner cabin. The seats dissolved into walls which seemed to expand in the shape of a circular room, a large disc-shaped compartment lined with machinery, tanks and dials, glass cages of sleeping terrestrial animals. One large cage was empty. Mr. Bradbury stared at this unoccupied glass cylinder.

“Yes,” grinned Oswald, “for you! But don’t worry. Just pass it all off as a hallucination. Want to see where we are, Sport?”

A panel opened in the floor, and Mr. Bradbury looked out into the black void of outer space. And there in the center of that panel of darkness was the planet Earth, a tiny silver ball rapidly diminishing in size.

“What are you?” screamed Mr. Bradbury struggling against the belt that held him in his seat. “What are you?”

“A collector,” said Oswald Tarkas tearing off his head and revealing underneath the disguise a small globe of bone and flesh, two glowing eyes, a mouth filled with many white, sharp teeth. “A collector,” it repeated as the false arms and legs and torso were ripped away revealing a shapeless green body equipped with spindly tentacles that waved obscenely at Mr. Bradbury. “Of sorts,” it added as it moved toward the frightened lawyer.

Mr. Bradbury screamed.

“Rubbish,” it giggled. “Weather balloons, hallucinations,” it chirped gaily, and writhing, snakelike appendages reached out for the twisting, screaming hysterical figure of Mr. Bradbury.

And through the empty reaches of the cosmos two tiny discs hurtled toward Sol’s fourth planet.

[The end of *Flight 18* by Paul A. Torak]