

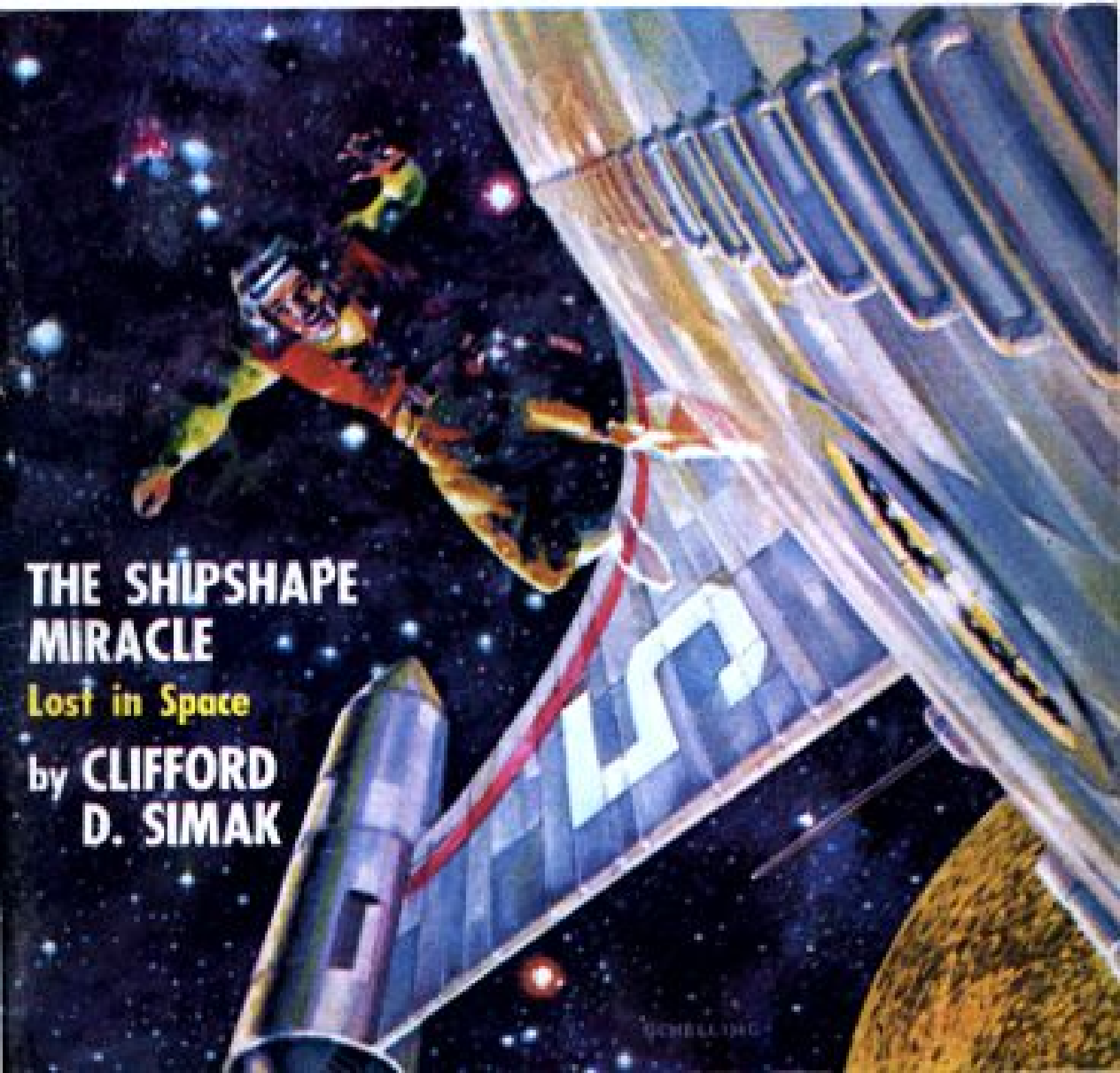
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SCIENCE FICTION

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Podkayne of Mars by **ROBERT A. HEINLEIN**

A vibrant, colorful illustration of a futuristic spaceship in space. The ship is a large, complex structure with various sections, including a prominent blue and white section with a large white 'Z' or 'S' shaped pattern. A man in a red and yellow spacesuit is floating in the foreground, looking towards the ship. The background is a deep blue space filled with stars and a large, textured planet or moon in the lower right corner.

THE SHIPSHAPE MIRACLE

Lost in Space

by **CLIFFORD
D. SIMAK**

SCHELLING

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ROAD STOP ***

ROAD STOP

by David Mason

**It was like any other car on the road. It
was automatic, self-contained—and eternal!**

**[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from
Worlds of If Science Fiction, January 1963.
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The highway stretched away in ruler-straight perspective toward both horizons, black and shining in the sun like a river of ink. Beside it, the bright pastel buildings of Rest Stop 25 stood among the green trees. Occasionally a car shot past, a flash of metal and a hiss of split wind; but the road was one which was used more often at night, and was nearly empty in the afternoon.

Sam was the only attendant on duty. Stop 25 needed only two human attendants, even at its busiest hours. He sat, staring out at the highway, his elbows on the lunch counter, his round face blank, but his mouth set tightly. The phone at his elbow emitted a small grunting noise.

"You still there?" the phone voice said inquiringly.

"Yeah." Sam said, still staring at the highway.

"Well...." The voice paused. "Look, it might not come your way. It usually turns west at the New Britain intersection."

"Not always." Sam said. "It went by here once before."

"It almost never stops, anyway," the voice said firmly. "It won't stop."

"Some times it does," Sam said.

"It doesn't have to."

Sam shrugged and said nothing.

"Okay, then," the voice said. "I called you about it, anyway."

"Thanks."

Sam turned away, still watching the road.

Far off a speck of metal gleamed, growing larger. The distant high sound of brakes began, as a car decelerated, coming toward the Stop.

It was just an ordinary car, Sam told himself. That other car was still hundreds of miles away. But his hands were damp as he watched it grow larger.

It was an ordinary Talman sedan, with two people in it. It swung into the Stop's parking area, and its doors slid open smoothly. A small red light

flashed on its arched front. The repair signal. In response the doors of the Repair shop opened. The Talman waited, as a man and a woman emerged from its padded interior and moved slowly into the Repair shop. The doors closed behind it.

The couple came toward the restaurant, where Sam stood waiting.

"Hi," the man said to Sam.

"Afternoon." Sam moved to the counter. "Something to eat while you're waiting, folks?"

The tall, dark girl glanced out at the closed doors of the Repair shop.

"How long's that car going to take?" she asked in a tired voice. "I wanted to get home tonight."

"Not long," Sam said. "It didn't look like anything complicated."

"How can you tell?" the man asked, sitting down. "It could take all night."

"Like something to eat while you're waiting?" Sam asked.

The woman stared at the lunch racks critically.

"I never like these places to eat in," the woman said, curling her lip. "You never know how long the food's been stored in the robot."

"Oh, hell, Grace," the man said wearily. To Sam he gave an apologetic shrug. "Just coffee."

"Well, you don't know," the woman insisted. "I mean...." She watched Sam drawing the coffee into a cup. "I used to cook a lot, by hand, till Jack had the autokitchen put in. He never had any stomach trouble till then. It's getting so everything's ... oh, I don't know. It's all out of reach. You don't know what's happening any more. Like the car."

"I wish I knew what she's talking about half the time," Jack said, blowing on his coffee. Sam leaned on the counter, looking past the couple toward the empty road.

"I know what the lady means," Sam said, almost to himself. "You get to thinking ... well, I can remember when people used to drive their own cars. Themselves. Steering and everything, except on the biggest highways. And

everything got done with people. People made things, and cooked food, and grew plants. Everybody was busy all the time. It was better then."

The man called Jack shrugged. "Sure, sure. Everybody always talks about the good old days. But I don't see many of 'em going to live in the woods. Like Grace—she says she doesn't like the autokitchen, but she uses it."

"It saves time," Grace said. "I guess I will have coffee, too, mister."

"It saves time, she says," Jack said. "For what? She's got too much time now."

"I wonder what it must have been like in the old days, here," Grace said vaguely, staring around the lunchroom. "Everybody running in and out. All the drivers—trucks, with men in them, the way you read about it in the historical novels. Men that drove their own cars, in all kinds of weather ... gee."

"Just like on TV," Sam said, grinning.

"I hope we get the car out of there pretty soon," Jack said anxiously. He glanced out toward the silent garage. "I always wonder what would happen if the machinery stuck, or something. How would you ever get your car out?"

"It doesn't get stuck," Sam said. A peculiar look crossed his face as he added, "Not any more."

"Did it ever?"

Sam shrugged. "Oh, well, you know twenty or thirty years ago all this automatic stuff wasn't quite so good as it is now. Cars, repair shops ... things went wrong, sometimes. Like ... like the Traveler."

"The Traveler?" The woman looked up. "Oh, that's just a ghost story. Like the Flying Dutchman. Isn't it?"

The lunchroom was completely silent. Sam was no longer paying any attention to the couple sitting at the counter. He was close to the big window, standing stiffly, feet apart, like an admiral on a ship's bridge, his eyes studying the empty horizon. There, where the lines of the road met with the precision of a drawing-board exercise in perspective, he thought he saw a fleck of light.

"It isn't when it goes past," Sam said, in a quiet tight voice. He talked at the window, his back to the other two, his words meant mostly for himself.

"It's not its going by. That doesn't bother me," he repeated. "It came by my old place five or six times, I remember. That's why I finally asked to be transferred out here, where it hardly ever goes by. But I could have gotten used to it. I mean, you don't have to look at it, or anything. It's just another car. Old, sure, but there's no difference. A car goes by, that's all. Only...."

"You mean it's real?" the woman asked, in a low voice.

Her husband's eyes were looking out, toward the empty road, following Sam's look.

"The Traveler," he said, without looking at his wife. "Sure, it's real. Why'd you think they don't make that model of car any more? It's real. I knew somebody who saw it, once."

"There might even be two or three Travelers," Sam said, watching the distant glitter of light. There was certainly a car coming. Just a car ... although it was still too far away to tell for sure.

"A haunted car!" the woman said, her eyes wider. "Gee!"

"It isn't a haunted car," her husband said. "It's just one of the earliest makes of automatic highway cars. Everything automatic, steering, destination set ... just like any car is, nowadays. Only it wasn't quite perfect, somehow."

"They got into their car," Sam said, his eyes picking out distant, microscopic details. The high flaring fins, the double headlamps ... lit up, although it was broad daylight on the road. He knew what the rest would be. It was moving so slowly. But it always moved slowly, barely thirty miles an hour. As if somebody wanted you to look and see....

"They just got in, the way anybody would do," Sam said. "They set a destination, and the windows closed up, and the airconditioner went on, and the car went out on the road."

"Only it never got there," the other man said. "Wherever it was going to go."

"But ..." the woman looked puzzled. "Wouldn't anybody stop it? I mean, wouldn't it run out of fuel, or ... well, how did the people in it get out?"

"It does just what any car does," her husband told her. "It gets fuel when it needs it. You can't just stop a robot control device. Not till it's good and ready."

"But the people in it," she said. "They'd starve, or something...."

The car called the Traveler, rolling at the stately thirty miles an hour it always held, was coming down the road now, and the two men stood, watching. The woman, a little behind them, watched too, her face growing whiter. No one said anything as the old fashioned car rolled by, straight and steady down the highway, holding the center of the lane as sharply as it always did.

There was a film of dust inside the windows, though the Traveler was clean and shining outside. But the film did hide the white bone faces, the despairing hands that had long ago stopped trying to break through those closed windows.

"They never did get out," the man named Jack said, as the Traveler rolled on, growing smaller along the endless road.

"I don't mind it when it goes past," Sam said, his voice thinner edged. "I really don't. It's just a car. Things like that used to happen. I mean, it's a car. Even when it stops to get gas, I don't have to pay any attention."

He looked at the couple, his mouth loose. "As long as it just goes on. That's all right. But I keep thinking some day it'll stop. And the door will open. And maybe ... maybe they'll want lunch."

He giggled uncontrollably, and then choked it back.

Outside, the big hangar doors of the repair shop opened. The car that had been inside appeared; it moved out and stopped, its doors open invitingly.

"Your car's ready now," Sam told the couple. "So long, folks. Have a nice trip."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ROAD STOP ***

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