

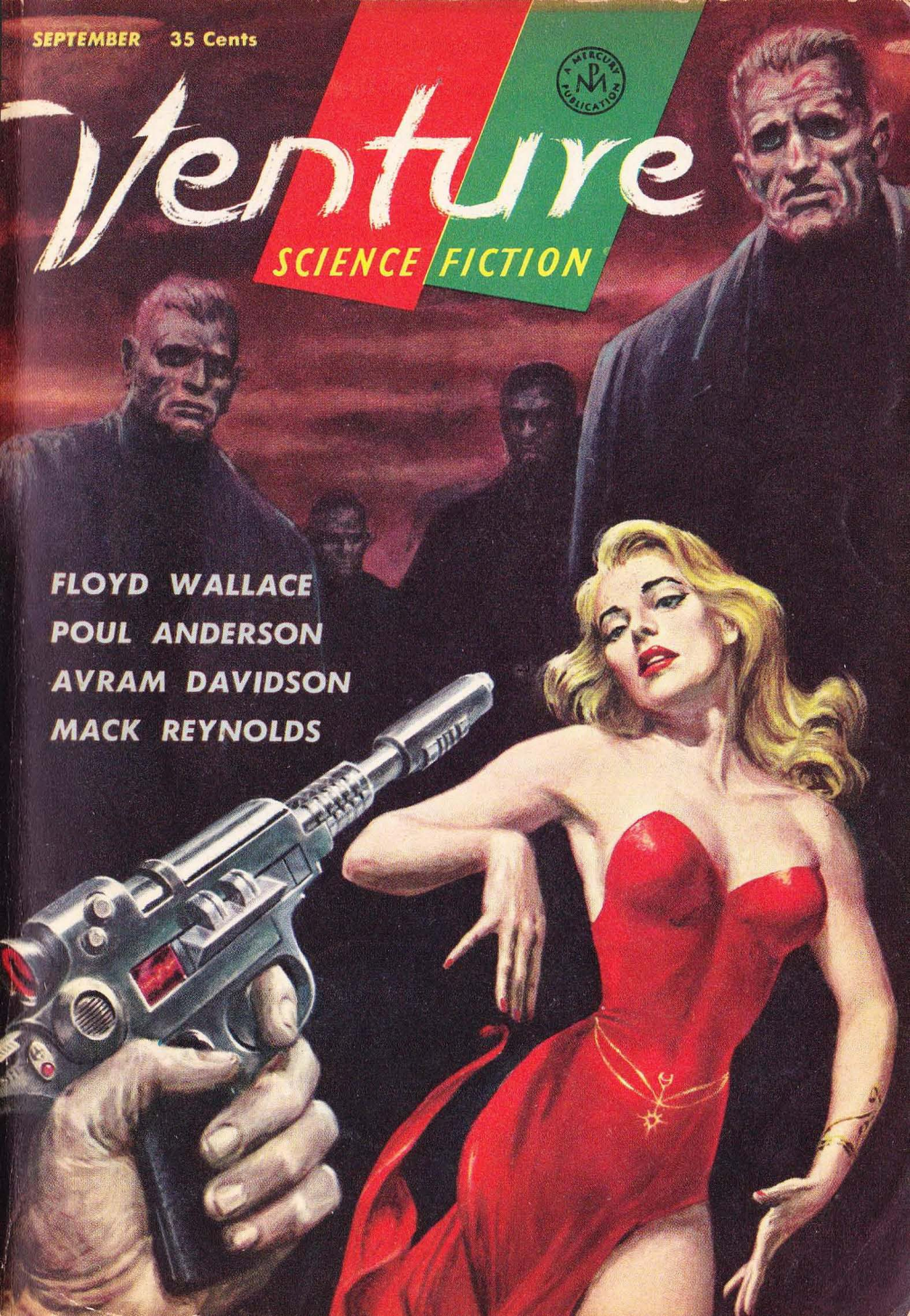
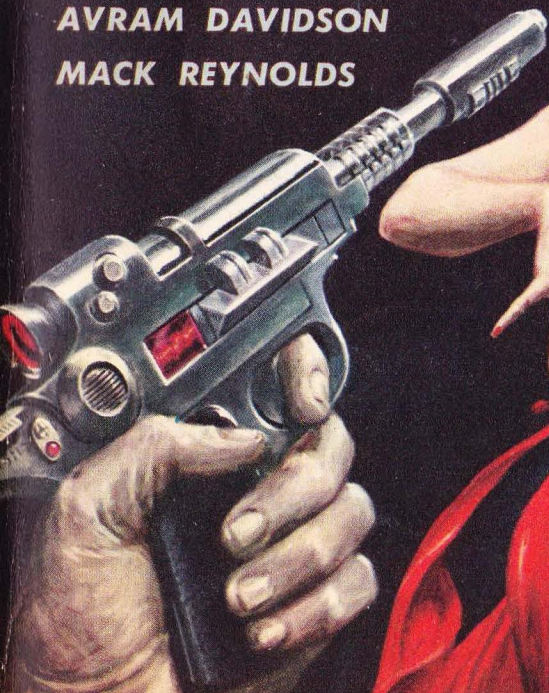
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# Venture

SCIENCE FICTION

FLOYD WALLACE  
POUL ANDERSON  
AVRAM DAVIDSON  
MACK REYNOLDS







# Venture

## SCIENCE FICTION

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# EXECUTIONER No. 43

by ROG PHILLIPS

*I walked in the bar on Endron and ordered a bourbon.*

*An eight-and-a-half-foot blonde came over and said hello.*

*She was small for an Endronian, and kind of cute.*

*Gutsy, too—everybody else seemed scared to death of me.*

THE PADDED SWINGING DOOR was twenty feet high and seven feet wide. I pushed it open and stepped inside, and looked down the length of the bar, seeing nothing but backs. Huge, hostile, shoulder to shoulder. Human backs, yes . . . but over two times human size.

I felt the hostility. An instinctive fear of the menace in the sheer tonnage of those backs constricted my throat, but at once a protective, compensating hatred flowed in. These were Endronians. They were human in ancestry, but the planet Endron had changed them.

I strode down the length of the bar, the backs looming above me to my right, a living cliff. Size twenty-two shoes were hooked over the rungs of the stools. The top of the bar was at my eye-level.

Though no one turned to look at me, they knew I was there, and they knew why. The silence was absolute as they waited—and hated.

I reached the only empty stool in the place. I lifted my foot to the rail, and pulled myself up. The giant to my right turned his head and looked down at me with curiously flat eyes, got off his stool, and walked away toward the back. I watched him go, and suddenly I knew he was afraid.

The herd noises gradually resumed, and from the front sounded a sudden deep rumble of protest as someone tried to leave and was turned back by the native Endronian police, who now had this building sealed off and would permit no one to enter or leave until I had finished.

The bartender was a dwarf, seven feet tall with shoulders four and a half feet wide and coffee brown eyes in a massive face that seemed molded from bread dough. He moved toward me. "Want something?" he breathed.

"Bourbon with seltzer on the side," I said, conscious that my baritone voice sounded high pitched to his ears.

If he felt any fear, he concealed it well. He reached upward, and two objects seemed to materialize in his elephantine fingers, one a half-pint shot glass of Bourbon, the other a two-quart glass partly filled with sparkling liquid and three-inch ice cubes. He put both gently on the bar in front of me. I fished out a coin and laid it down with equal gentleness. He touched it with a finger whose tip covered it completely, flicked it deftly off the bar into his palm.

Someone slipped onto the stool to my right.

It was a blonde with a husky voice, who said, "Buy me a drink, handsome?"

She had smooth white shoulders with nothing on them, a goddess-like face that looked down at me with dreamy blue eyes, satin-smooth complexion, nostrils, and lips that were oversize perfection. I saw dreams lurking in her eyes, and sick fear.

I thought of Nalda. My wife who had gone after I lost two fingers on my left hand. The same

sick fear had looked out of Nalda's eyes . . .

I glanced at the dwarf, and returned to my study of the fear in the girl's eyes.

The lazy smile on her lips congealed. She made an imperceptible motion to slide off the stool, caught the dwarf's equally imperceptible shake of the head, and remained where she was.

"Sure," I said finally.

She blinked. The smile connected to her face again. The dwarf materialized a shot glass containing a half-pint of zero-proof cold tea.

Five repetitions and fifteen minutes later I'd finished half my drink, her hand was on my knee and I was suggesting a booth.

"Can't," she said. "I have to do my dance in a minute, but I'll be back."

She slid off the stool, brushing her breast against my face. I caught the faint scent of her perfume. Then she was walking away, eight and a half feet of female, beautifully proportioned, hips swaying slightly as she moved, blonde hair draped around her shoulders like something out of Heaven. Like Nalda.

Would I choose her? I turned back to my drink.

Through the curtain behind the bar and next to the stage a well-groomed giant appeared. The pads under the smoothly tailored sport-coat he wore pushed his shoulders

out to an artificial width of fully six feet, which his thirteen feet of height could carry easily.

He sat down on the table-size piano bench, pulled his trouser legs up to preserve the razor crease. His enormous hands played over the two-inch-wide piano keys in an experimental melody with a swift and casual expertness.

I watched him. I had played the piano once myself, a long time ago . . .

His sleek head, huge as a hippo's, turned slowly as he surveyed the semidarkness of the crowded bar, pausing only briefly as his eyes rested on me. His left hand reached inside his coat and extracted a cigarette half-an-inch thick and ten-inches long, while his right hand carried the swift melody and his eyes went on searching the line-up along the bar.

A mammoth lighter appeared in his left hand. A small brush fire burst into life, moved up to the end of the cigarette. Clouds of thick smoke billowed from the huge nostrils, the big lips. The rhythm of the melody being carried by the right hand changed subtly, the left hand joined in. . . . I gripped the edge of the bar to still the ache in my fingers, my soul.

And the girl who had left me swept onto the stage on five-inch heels, trailing yard upon yard of evening dress, put on only so that it could be taken off during her strip.

"She's good," a voice to my left breathed at me, so low pitched I could feel the individual vibrations.

I glanced up at the man's face, the worry in his saucer-like eyes. He wore an unpressed suit that did not hide his beer paunch. His nose was big as my fist, his chin and cheeks were covered by a forest of stubble thick as wire and the color of rusted iron.

His voice had been anxious, fawning. When I didn't reply he said, "She's little. Not too big for you, really." His fat lips leered with intimate meaning. "She could be a lot of fun for you."

I turned my head and looked up at him. I saw the color of his face change from an unhealthy red to pasty gray, the blue lacework in the whites of his eyes become more pronounced. His mouth dropped slackly open, but he said nothing more.

I turned my attention back to the girl and her dance, the piano player with the giant cigarette dangling from his lips, the ash on it long enough to break off at any moment. After a moment I glanced to my left and saw that the stool was now vacant. I felt a vague disappointment.

The music from the piano became slow, voluptuous. The girl matched its mood with her suggestive rhythm, her dreamy mask of a smile. Every few minutes she took off something else and poised

in mock daring, waiting for the loud clapping of the dwarf bartender and anyone else in an appreciative mood. Not many customers were.

Now and then she directed her dance toward me, and I sensed the eyes of the piano player on me, studying me.

From the slight dilation of his pupils I was sure he was slightly hopped—enough to be a fatalist, not enough to convince himself he was God. I could sympathize with his mood. I caught his eye and smiled slowly.

His fingers stumbled briefly. The ash on his cigarette broke loose, dropping onto the piano keys, immediately to be trampled by his fingers in a sequence of off-beat cover-up chords.

The girl was down to her G string and net bra, toying with both as though she might take them off. She was built well—no doubt about that. Here and there a desultory clap coaxed her, exploding into the underlying tenseness, dying abruptly as though sound itself were something to fear.

Suddenly I became aware of someone towering behind me. An alcoholic breath engulfed me. The girl had seen whoever it was. She stood halfway through the curtain, her net bra dangling from her hand, her eyes round and terrified, staring over my head.

The piano had stopped in mid-note. The sounds of slow breath-

ing, of ponderous movement—the herd noises—were suspended, and there was only the hot animal breath of the man who towered behind me.

I could feel his mood. Hatred of me and what I represented. Contemptuous dismissal of the cost to his race if he touched me. A growing urge to crush me, feel my bones snap under his probing fingers.

An enormous hand clamped onto the edge of the bar, a wrist thick as my waist extending upward into a sleeve that could have fit over my shoulders. The veins stood out on the hand like water hose, the fingernails were ugly slabs. A gigantic bulk brushed against me. Weak with relief, I realized the man was sitting down on the stool to my left.

I looked up past the enormous shoulder to the face. The lips were leering. The bloodshot eyes focused on me.

An almost subaudible voice roared from the lips. "Who you gonna kill, Earthman? Who you gonna kill?" It was followed by a gust of gale-force laughter, accompanied by a stench that was bad breath magnified a thousand times.

I stared up into his eyes. His laughter ended abruptly. He licked his lips with a soft, plopping sound that seemed abnormally loud.

"I haven't made up my mind—yet," I said finally, my voice seeming to echo shrilly in the silence.

Abruptly the piano jarred to staccato life, the herd sounds resumed their normal tempo. The giant licked his lips, his tongue a huge slab of jaundiced meat.

I turned away. A new stripper had moved onto the stage. At least eleven feet high. And wide . . . Wide? I had never seen anything as wide. Each of her breasts must have weighed fifty pounds, her buttocks were pachydermic. I noticed just before I stopped watching her that her feet were relatively small and there was a certain grace to her dance.

After that I watched the piano player's hands move over the keyboard. And in my mind the memory of long forgotten audiences, my own piano, rose—and died. And in my ear the husky voice of the girl who was not Nalda whispered, "Hello again, honey."

I dropped off the stool to the floor and as we moved toward the booths in the back she took my hand. I felt its softness, its warmth. It wasn't much larger than mine. She was, I began to realize, very small for a giant, and very beautiful.

The music of the piano player followed us, and when we reached a booth she slid in without releasing my hand, and pulled me in beside her. Under the table she placed my hand against her thigh, holding it there. Her eyes were very bright. She slumped down un-

til she seemed little taller than I, and said, "Kiss me, darling. Please. Please kiss me."

"Sure," I murmured. "Sure."

Her lips were hot, feverish, hungry. Her body trembled under my touch. Her eyes remained open, too bright in the darkness. Her hands reached around me, dug into my back, pulling me closer. Fear clothed her—fear, and something else. She moaned softly.

I pulled away from the kiss and her lips remained formed, her too bright eyes staring without seeing. Glistening tears had formed in them and as I watched they spilled out, forming rivulets on her cheeks.

With sudden irritation I pulled all the way away from her. Her eyes focused on her surroundings, then on my face, bewildered.

"You feel it too," I said harshly.

"I can't help it," she said. Her lips quivered. "I tried . . ." And then in a flat voice, "I suppose you will choose me to kill?"

Instead of answering I brought out my cigarettes, king size. She accepted one. It was small between her lips but not as small as it would have been between the lips of the piano player.

My lighter flared in the gloom. I lit our cigarettes, then held the flame near to the face of my wristwatch. It was ten forty-five. An hour and fifteen minutes to twelve.

"I don't want to die," she said, not looking at me.

"Few of us do," I said.



"I know it should be someone like me," she rushed on, unable to stop. "I'm no good. I want to die, sometimes. Sometimes . . . when I go to my room at the hotel, alone. My stinking room at the hotel—" Her voice was ragged.

She gripped my arm. "Look," she breathed. "You have how long? An hour? Maybe a little longer? Let's go to my room. I'll make you happy. I promise. We can set the alarm for five minutes of twelve so we don't forget. Then, when it's over . . ."

"Sure," I said tonelessly. "Then I could kill you."

"But then I would be willing—" She brought her hand up and clamped her teeth on her finger, her eyes wide.

"Sure you would," I said. "But do you think it's easy to kill someone? Let me tell you, sometimes it's easier to die. Let me tell you something. Remember when you were finishing your dance and that drunk stood behind me? I hoped he would kill me."

"But that would have meant a whole city!" she said. "The price for the death of an Executioner!"

"I know," I said. "Selfish of me. So instead I'll kill someone before midnight and I'll live to remember it for a long time."

"Wouldn't it be better to have some—pleasant—memories with it?" she stumbled. "Please. We can slip out of here . . ."

"No!" I said.

"Please!" She tried to pull me against her. "Please! And then you can kill me!"

"No!" I said, and shoved her away. She hung on, and I said, "God damn you, no!" I lifted my hand to hit her, to beat her . . . to strangle her.

Then, suddenly, she was in focus, and she was not Nalda. I pulled out a cigarette and my hand shook.

"Who is it?" I said. "Who are you trying to protect? The dwarf?" Alarm, relief, then cunning played over her face.

"Yes," she whispered, "It was Shorty. I—I love him." She gripped my arm suddenly, words rushing out. "Please don't kill him. I—I'm going to have a baby and Shorty—he's going to marry me—"

"Nuts!" I said, and got up from the booth and walked stiffly back to the bar. My drink was still there. The bourbon burned my throat.

The fat girl had been replaced on the stage by a willowy redhead about eleven and a half feet tall who was down to her G string. I watched her a moment, and saw fear grow in her, her dance begin to fall apart.

I turned my eyes away toward the piano player, watched the fluid movement of his fingers.

Gradually I became aware of a change in the noises around me. There was a new note in the rumble of subdued talk. Here and there

a voice rose above the sound of the piano. The piano player played louder.

"Hey, Earthman!" someone shouted, and immediately someone else shouted, "Shut up, Joe!"

An argument began. Another.

I looked at my watch. It was eleven twenty. I wished I knew who I was going to kill.

The talking grew louder. Mob panic might make someone forget that killing me would result in a whole city being destroyed by a bomb from space. That was the Code and the Code had to stand or civilization would fall. Without the principal of impersonal, inflexible retaliation, the race hatreds of the thousands of diverging species of Man would flare up, eventually isolating the planet.

The willowy redhead danced uncertainly, disconcerted by the growing noise and shouting.

The music stopped in a crescendo of sound. The piano player sat looking down at the keys. He was probably thinking, "Should I get up and walk out casually, and hope the Earthman won't notice me?" He remained still for long moments. Then, without moving his body, he let his hands move over the keys. Lightly.

A sudden focus of motion halfway toward the front attracted my attention. I saw a huge figure of a man surge up over the bar, landing behind it. The dwarf on his short thick legs trotted toward the

man, his face angry. The man stepped up onto the stage, the ceiling clearing his head by inches.

"Quiet everybody!" he shouted, lifting his hands. "I've got something to say." The noise died down to a sporadic voice here and there. The dwarf came to a stop halfway up over the edge of the stage, then thoughtfully dropped back to the floor.

"My name is Joe," the man on the stage said, his voice deep and thunderous. "Listen to me. We all know the Code. Put yourself in the Earthman's position. He has a job to do. Somebody on this planet killed a little yellow-haired man from Ceti Three. For that, one of *us* here tonight must die, just as forty-nine other Endronians must die in other towns tonight. I'm asking for volunteers. I'm volunteering myself. There must be a few of you who don't care whether you live or die. Let the Earthman kill one of us who volunteer. What can be fairer than that?" He sought me out with his eyes and grinned at me sardonically.

A thick silence settled over the place. I saw his line of reasoning. He knew the Code better than most people, and thought he could defeat me. But his plan depended upon everyone in the place knowing what he was thinking, what he couldn't say. To compensate for that weakness there might be true volunteers and a final rush of stragglers to remain with the herd.

At a spot near where Joe had climbed over the bar four men stood up together and used their stools as steps to get onto the bar. They leaped from the bar to the stage, their combined tonnage causing the bar to shudder. These were the skills upon which the scheme hinged.

The piano player, in player-piano style, began the slow dirge of "Almost Persuaded." He got a few nervous laughs.

Toward the back end of the bar another gigantic figure went over the bar and moved toward the stage. Here was the first true volunteer. His eyes held fear and determination. His coarse skin glistened with nervous perspiration. His sobbing was the muted rumbling of subway trains. In his own mind he was going to certain death—but he was going.

Others were joining those on the stage. It kept on until there were over twenty volunteers for death. Then, abruptly, there were no more. The one called Joe pleaded with them, appealed to their nobler sentiments, even hinted at safety in numbers, repeating over and over that only *one* could die.

As I watched him, the minutes growing shorter, the backstage curtains parted. The blonde, diminutive among the giants around her, pushed to the front of the stage.

"All right!" she said brassily. "It can be me too, and if it is I want to die doing my strip." She turned

to the volunteers with a too bright smile and said, "Stand back, suckers, and give a girl some room."

"Almost Persuaded" altered its cadence under the shifting touch of the piano player's thick long fingers, developed a dance rhythm, lost its melody in transitional arpeggios, and became one of the standard dance numbers. The volunteers were jostling one another for position along the back of the stage. The girl's hand twined upward. Her hips began to sway. Her feet went into the first steps of her dance routine. I lifted my arm and glanced at my wristwatch.

It was ten minutes to twelve.

I glanced along the bar, at the many empty stools and the scattering of eighteen or twenty hold-outs. It looked like a Monday night when most of the regulars are home eating aspirin. I sat in the center of a twelve-stool vacancy. Those still at the bar mostly avoided looking in my direction.

How many of those who had not volunteered knew the Code well enough to know that it was preferred that no volunteers be killed—and had deliberately chosen the dangerous course? Those were the really brave ones. . . . I was glad I could not tell which were the brave ones.

One of those at the bar, a well-dressed kid with glasses and white hands, had his eyes on me, watching me with excitement, knowing

that time was short, not wanting to miss the first motion of my hand toward the proton gun at my belt. Not wanting to miss the fun.

"All right!" the giant called Joe shouted suddenly. "It's almost midnight! What are you waiting for, Earthman? Take your pick!"

The girl lost step for a second, then continued her dance, a smile frozen on her face.

I stood up on a rung of my stool, so that my elbow cleared the bar. Steadying myself with my left hand, I turned my face toward those on the stage as I slowly drew the gun from its holster.

Finally I stared at Shorty, the dwarf bartender, until I sensed from the corner of my eye a flash of hope on the girl's face. I'd been right about that, then—it wasn't Shorty she worried about.

I swung around, looked down the room at the piano player, holding the gun loosely. I heard the girl gasp, just barely. I gave her credit—she went on dancing.

I kept my eyes on the piano player, who seemed unaware of me. Kill him, and I'd hurt the girl more than if I killed *her*. Shoot off a finger, hurt him as much as she had hurt me . . . shoot off her ears, make her ugly, make him scorn her . . . kill Shorty, let her think she'd won—then shoot her too . . . kill Nalda, get it over with . . . kill . . .

I swung to Nalda . . . to the blonde who was not Nalda but

was as close to her as anyone I'd been able to find in this town. She was the one to kill. Killing the real Nalda had not been enough—I had to go on killing her wherever I could find her. That's why I was an Executioner.

I opened my mouth to call her and tell her what I was going to do, make her die just a little before I fired. My hand shook . . .

I closed my mouth and sat back on the stool for a moment. Then I stepped down to the floor, lifted the gun, aimed quickly, pressed the trigger. The proton charge, moving at two-thirds the speed of light, left the sterile scent of ozone.

The piano stopped in mid-chord, the blonde screamed. Down the bar, the sick, excitement-hungry kid with white hands toppled from his stool, a black hole in his chest. His glasses smashed when he hit the floor.

There was a growing rumble of sound behind me as I walked to the great swinging door. I didn't listen—I was trying to think why I'd done it.

It had suddenly come to me back there that you can't kill anybody more than once—that one girl is just one girl, with just one life.

And the stupid, unimportant little thing that made me know that was the fact that when I opened my mouth to talk to the blonde, I realized I didn't even know her name. . . .