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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HAS ANYONE HERE SEEN KELLY? ***



The body tanks had to be replenished and the ship had to be serviced—and the crew was having a Lotus dream in its bed of protoplasm. But Kelly knew how to arouse them....

Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?

By Kenneth O'Hara

Illustrated by Paul Orban

THE CREW pulsed with contentment, and its communal singing brought a pleasant kind of glow that throbbed gently in the control room.

"Has anybody here seen Kelly ... K-E-double-L-Y?"

"Shut up and dig my thought!" Kelly's stubborn will insisted. "I'm going on out for a while!"

The delicate loom of the Crew's light pattern increased its frequency a little and the song stopped. "Better not," the Crew said.

"But why not?"

"No need."

"We could be running into something bad," Kelly thought.

"No danger now, Kelly. Checking the ship is just a waste of time."

"How can you waste what you have so damn much of?" Kelly thought.

"Do not leave us again, Kelly. We love you and you are the most interesting part of the Crew when you're with it."

"The ship ought to be checked. Our bodies ought to be looked at."

"We know there is no danger any more, Kelly. Do not go. There are so many interesting experiences we have not even begun to share yet. We are only half way through your life and we have not even started to experience your impressions of your colorful and complex Earth culture. And we have not even started on the adult lives of Lakrit or Ljub. Come back with your Crew, Kelly."

"But no one's checked the ship for over a year!"

"Please do not worry about the ship, Kelly. In fifty years nothing has gone wrong. We can trust the ship thoroughly now, it will take care of us."

"It will take care of *us*! That's a helluva way to look at it!"

"There can be no danger now, Kelly. In fifty years we have encountered every conceivable danger, every imaginable kind of world or possible menace."

"Have we?" Kelly thought. "Every danger from outside maybe, and I'm not even sure of that. But how about danger from inside?"

"Inside?"

"Us. How about apathy for instance? Apathy's a real danger. You talk about this space-can like it was a big metal mother! Listen, I'm supposed to see that this tub holds together. At least until we get back somewhere near enough to the Solar system so we'll feel we've been somewhere else!"

"But, Kelly—"

"I'm getting out for a while, I tell you!"

"All right," the Crew sighed. The light loom faded a bit, down to a self-indulgent glow. "Hurry back to us, Kelly."

"I'll give some thought to it."

So Kelly concentrated on the increasingly painful and difficult task of tearing his consciousness free of the big glob of protoplasm in the tank, and getting it back into his body that hibernated in the bunkroom.

As usual the switch was too painful. It stretched and stretched and finally snapped in an all too familiar explosion of shocking light.

HIS BONES creaked. His skin rustled as he sat up and looked around. There was the old feeling that there was dust over everything when there was no dust. There was all that emptiness sweeping away into the endless silence and he thought again, as he always did, how comforting and cozy it was being a part of the Crew.

But someone had to check the ship. It was only machinery after all, and machinery could wear out, sooner or later. And he wasn't at all sure, as he kept insisting, that they had encountered all the possible dangers.

It might seem that in fifty years you could run into everything. But fifty years was no time at all out here where time had no real meaning any more.

His body squeaked as he took a few tentative steps about the bunkroom. One did not actually forget how to walk. It was just awkward as the devil. And the blood, the entire autonomic system, tended to slow down. It seemed reluctant to step up general metabolism.

Apathy. Sure it was a danger. This time, Kelly decided, I'll do something about it. He was the engineer and he had signed on the great odyssey to keep the ship going. But the Crew was part of the ship. Was not there an obligation even greater to keep the Crew going?

The four others lived but almost imperceptibly in some very low state of slowed metabolism there in the bunkroom and Kelly looked at them. The faithful and the wonderful ones. The ones with whom he had shared so many dangers and awful silences that the five of them had been able to evolve the idea of the protoplasm in the tank and merge their consciousness in it.

Kew, the Venusian, in her bowl of self-renewing nitrate. Lakrit from a Jovian satellite, a fluorine fellow of distinction inside a sphere of gaseous sulphur. A crystalline character with a sense of humor named Ljub, whose form gave off a paled glint as it nourished itself on silicates. And a highly intelligent but humble six-foot-long sponge labeled Urdaz stuck in a foundation of chemical sediment at the bottom of a tank of reprocessing salt water.

Each with their own special kind of appendages and sensitivities, each able to move his special closed-system about through the ship by means of clever types of mobility.

But basically, in outward form, they were too alien to have much in common. Only as intelligences, as life forces, could they share a common bed. And it had evolved to that in fifty years. A bed of protoplasm in a shock-absorbent tank.

Kelly looked at them warmly and thought about how it had worked out. The strange thing was that it did have a lot of good things to recommend it. Or had had them. It had solved the problem of intimate communication and driven back the tides of loneliness. It had lessened the dangers of mental and physical illnesses in the material bodies and assured a prolongation of the life of each body, which was important in itself, for this trip had proven to be a lot longer than even the most pessimistic had anticipated.

The Crew, pulsing in its tank, Kelly thought oddly, is a new life form. One that had evolved to meet the exigencies of deep space which had proven to be alien to any adaptability common to

any world that rotated through it.

But maybe they were too damn happy, Kelly thought. Too contented. If they ran into a real emergency now, the ship would be finished. The Crew in the tank was, itself, incapable of action of any overt kind. It could not manipulate anything. It could only be happy.

And the bodies here in the bunkroom could not rally fast enough to meet a sudden crisis.

And they had agreed that the first law was survival.

But to survive this way might well mean destruction in another.

So Kelly walked and thought about it, and weighed the precarious balance.

He slipped through the silent ship and to the control room. He peered into the viewscope. Some galaxy or other spun its giant pinwheel outward toward some destiny of its own. The high noon of the endlessness had been unfamiliar for years. He checked the ship's instruments. The Crew in the big tank simmered and throbbed in its introspective bliss, utterly oblivious to Kelly now.

Kelly saw the red dwarf a few hundred million kilos away. Three planets ground their familiar path around it. The second in distance had a breathable oxygen, according to the scopes, but little else to recommend it.

Kelly straightened up. He had no idea when the plan had really started forming, but now it was formed. When Kelly made up his mind to a thing, there was no other course but to conclude it. He knew what he had to do.

Somehow, even as part of the Crew, some part of Kelly had been able to keep that forming plan a secret. Which was a lucky miracle, for if the Crew had known his intentions it would certainly not have let him out this time.

Even if you wanted out, Kelly reasoned, the Crew would keep you in. And maybe after long enough you did not care to get out. But once out, he wondered, could it keep you out if it decided to blackball a man for one reason or another?

Like wrecking the ship?

IN THE CHROME strip above the control panel, Kelly saw his face grinning strangely back at him, a bearded, hollowed, paled face with an unfamiliar glitter in the eyes. Every time he had left the Crew to enter and reactivate his own body, that body had seemed a little less familiar. This time it seemed to be almost entirely someone else.

He stared at the face in the chrome, then whispered the hell with that and he flipped the controls over to manual. He sat down. Behind him, the Crew whispered in its tank, protoplasm developed in the labs and quivering now with some unified sensation that was purely subjective and blissfully unconcerned with what happened outside itself.

"It's sick," Kelly concluded, with an emphatic clamp of his jaws. "It's not right!"

True, sharing the intimate sensations of alien life forms like Kew, the female Venusian, had been exciting. Especially the sex experiences which, in a flower of Kew's type, was certainly something. There were interesting things to being a part of the Crew all right. But the main purpose, survival, had been forgotten. Now being the Crew was an end in itself. Kelly could imagine the Crew business going on and on until finally even the material bodies in the bunkroom would be forgotten entirely and allowed to rot away to dust about which the Crew would no longer care.

And that was very bad. It should not have worked out this way. But it was not too late to do something, shake them out of the Lotus dream.

He checked the scopes again. Now the second planet revealed plenty of breathable atmosphere settled in the lower valleys. He headed straight for it.

The Crew was soon going to get one devil of a jolt!

He put the ship into a close orbit around the planet. It seemed nothing but a fearsome forest of oxydized spikes rising in corrosive silence, with here and there a lean slash of valley. There was no indication of life, no vegetation visible or revealed by the scopes. One of the valleys had a thin mouth of water stretching down the length of its face. Kelly set the speed and the controls and ran for the bunkroom and the shock-absorbent cushions. He strapped himself in and waited.

It was done. As long as the thing had gone so far, Kelly decided, the truth should never be revealed because that would lessen the therapeutic value of his action. He would wreck the ship. Not too badly. Not so badly that all of the bodies, distinct, separate individual bodies again, couldn't put the ship back together, as in the old days. And that would keep them in their bodies gladly for a while where they belonged! Where the good Lord had intended for them to stay.

They would not be rocked away to apathy in a phony metal mother womb, thinking the ship was going to take care of *them*!

The more Kelly thought about it, the better he felt. He stretched inside the straps. He felt his slightly atrophied muscles luxuriate over the tissues and bones of his big frame.

Any body, no matter what its shape, should be proud of itself. That was Kelly's belief, and this thing that had happened seemed somewhat blasphemous. Without bodies and their complex sensory recording apparatus, the rich consciousness enjoyed by the Crew could not exist, would never have been created at all. The Crew was living off the largesse of experience built up by their bodies. The Crew was just narcotized enough that it did not realize that the body banks had to be replenished.

Metal shrieked.

Kelly yelled feebly. He fought, he grappled with the threatening blackout like a man fighting an invisible opponent on an endless flight of stairs.

The grinding rolling terror of the sound, the ripping, twisting, tearing scream of it cried on and on. Kelly knew one thing then.

He had not figured it right. His calculations were off. *The ship had hit too damn hard.*

LATER, when he managed to get the straps off and tried to move, he fell painfully onto the tilted deck. One of his eyes felt sticky. He rubbed at it and his hand was smeared with blood.

He shuffled around in a stumbling circle. Minor damages could have been repaired. But this—the ship was peeled open in glaring strips like a breakfast cannister. A cold wind moaned through the ship that was now nothing but a metal sieve. A hazy light filtered down and ran off the metal like cold flour rust.

Kelly fell to his knees. "Kew," he whispered. "Ljub, Urdaz—Lakrit...."

The Venusian flower lady was sliced down the middle like a cabbage, and the nitrate bowl was shattered and Kew was dead in a pool of fading green blood.

Smashed into the bulkhead was Lakrit's sulphuric bathtub, and his atmosphere had already filtered away with the wind to wherever it was going. Ljub's pale glow was out for good, and his crystalline heart was as opaque as a dead eye. Only a few pieces of Urdaz's tank were visible, and Urdaz himself had already turned to a powdery food that the wind ate slowly in long trailing streamers.

"What—what in the name of God have I done?" Kelly whispered.

All dead—

No! He slammed at the bulkhead until the warped metal gave and he ran to the control room. The Crew—the Crew—

He stared at the tank.

Through a jagged opening in the ship's walls, the wind whined and plucked at Kelly's red hair. The wind was colder now. He kept on looking at the tank. He reached out and touched the big transparent curve of it and then jerked his hand back with a whimper in his breath.

There was nothing in the tank, nothing but a blob of slowly drying slime. He pressed his nose to the tank. "Crew—" he whispered.

There was no life in the slime. When he pounded on the tank, the stuff collapsed in upon itself in withering flatness.

Kelly yelled. The cold wind froze at his teeth. It sucked at his breath and dried at the interior of his mouth. He ran and climbed. The jagged periphery of the opening sliced at his flesh. But he did not feel it, and he fell twenty feet, without feeling that either, down the side of the ship. He started crawling over the hard naked belly of the rock.

He got to his feet. He ran stumbling down an incline of shale worn round and shiny by the wind that had blown here just as it blew now, and would blow for God alone possibly knew how long. He fell and rolled to the edge of the water.

He looked into it. He felt of it. He jerked his hand away. The stuff was icy. But it was worse than icy. It was dead. It was dead water. It was without any bottom, and without any life in it anywhere. You could tell by looking into it. The wind moved over the top of it as though the water were glass, and the water was the color of a slightly transparent naked blue steel.

There was no life here. Maybe there had been once, who knew when, who could guess how long ago. But there was none now and even the water had forgotten it.

Kelly cried out as he stood up. "What have I done?" He raised his arms at the hazy red sun lying over the spires of towering stone and metal like a bloated balloon scraping precariously over rusty spikes. "God, what have I done?"

The cry echoed tinnily on the rocks and fled on the wind.

Kelly ran for a long way, falling and stumbling and getting up again. Kelly had always had one primary drive, and that was to keep going, no matter what. So now he tried to keep going.

But there was no life on this planet. He had known that before. Some strange kinds of intelligence could tolerate some unpleasant worlds. But nothing would live here.

Nothing *could* live here.

"That's your fate," Kelly thought. He sat down and stared at the walls of rock and metal all around. "Your fate, Kelly. Your punishment, your well deserved hell."

That was what it was. Retribution. And knowing that, he tried not to care. He tried to be glad and face what he deserved.

If that were not the answer, then why had only Kelly been spared to face emptiness and silence and no life, all alone?

The irony of it was that he would go on as long as possible keeping himself alive in his own hell. There was food aplenty in the ship, enough to last as long as hell cared to have him.

He turned and started walking back toward the ship that seemed some five miles away. At that instant, the ship disappeared in an abrupt explosion that twisted the rocks, and a mushroom cloud flowered gently above the lake as Kelly fell trembling on his belly and hugged the ground and pushed his face into the shale, while the wind tore and screamed around him and particles of flint ripped his clothes and slashed at his flesh.

HE DID NOT bother walking much farther toward where the ship had been. There was only a crater there now which would offer him nothing in the way of sustaining his very personal and thoroughly private hell.

He walked. The effort became more difficult and finally he was on his hands and knees, crawling. The wind sucked at his ripped clothes, and felt like cold sharp steel in his raw wounds. But slowly and deliberately he continued to crawl.

Kelly had always had the idea that a man should keep going and so now he kept on going. Even if there was no place to go, and you could not remember particularly where you had been, you kept on moving and fighting and slugging along until you could no longer move.

He lay there looking up at the hazy rust of the sky with the naked spires pointing up into it for no reason at all, because there was nothing up there.

He had been there and he knew. Nothing up there but space, black and without a beginning or end. He had not even checked the records of the ship so that now, lying here, he did not even know how far away from Earth he was. At the speed they had traveled, a ship went a long way in fifty years. But the ship, the records, everything was lost.

And no one would ever know now how far they had come.

Or gone. What was the difference, anyway?

But Kelly had no difficulty in remembering *why* they had come.

They had come into space because that was how it was with those who fought their way up to being the dominate life form of whatever world they had lived on and grown and died on. If you were the kind who went into space, you went because space was there.

Who needed a better reason than that?

"Kew," he whispered. "Lakrit, Lljub, Urdaz, listen now—I thought I was doing the right thing—maybe my idea was right—but I just made a mistake in the calculations. I just made a helluva mistake—"

The wind sighed over the naked rock and the rusted metal and the rock and the dead blue water.

He turned and pushed his head against the rock, and his body curled up against the bitter wind. "You've got to forgive me," he said.

"*Has anybody here seen Kelly? K-E-double-L-Y?*"

He shivered and kept his eyes closed. It was part of the wind. He did not want to go out that way, hearing crazy voices in the wind.

"Has anybody here seen Kelly—?"

He raised his head and blinked and the wind drove tears down his cheeks.

"Am I just hearing something that's going crazy inside my head?" He peered around. There was nothing, nothing anywhere of course, nothing where nothing had ever been, and nothing else but nothing could ever be.

"You're wrong, Kelly. Your Crew's here."

Kelly raised himself painfully to an elbow. "Where—*where*?"

"Right here, Kelly. We had a difficult time locating you. Sure, we forgive you. You were trying to do what was right. We know that."

"There's nothing—nothing—" Kelly said.

"You're wrong. The Crew's here and we're waiting."

He stared at the rock. He put his face against it and pushed his hands to it. There was a kind of dull glow in it, a faint hint of warmth in the rock.

"How can this be?" Kelly said.

"This is the life here, Kelly. Perhaps there is life everywhere in the most impossible seeming places. And where life is, Kelly, we can live with it and be welcomed by it. Here, this rock is life, and it has taken us in. It has been here a long time. And it will be here for a much longer time."

"Rock," Kelly said.

"But hurry and come back."

"But no one will ever know. How long—how long can we wait?"


"Who can answer that, Kelly? But maybe they will find the Crew someday."

Kelly looked up once at the completely unfamiliar distances growing darker. Sometime, he thought, they'll come from wherever Earth is and find the Crew of the ship, find a rock here waiting the ages out.

"Hurry, Kelly!"

His head dropped against the rock. His hands slid down it, and a smile moved over his lips and froze there as the wind whispered over it.

... **THE END**

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