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THE STAR LORD

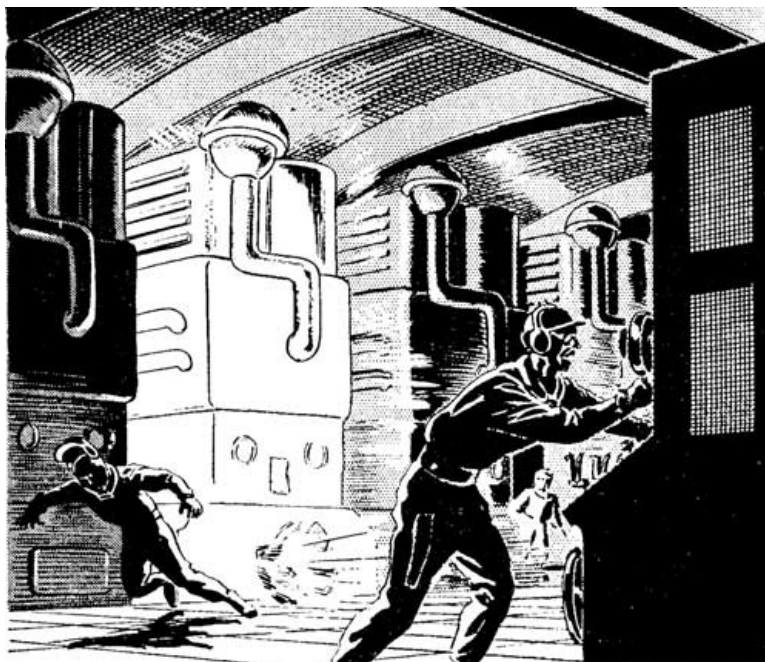
By Boyd Ellanby



To some passengers a maiden voyage was a pleasure cruise; to others it meant a hope for new life. Only the Captain knew of its danger!

The *Star Lord* waited, poised for her maiden voyage. The gigantic silvery spindle, still cradled in its scaffoldings, towered upwards against the artificial sky of Satellite Y. [Pg 7]

The passengers were beginning to come on board before Captain Josiah Evans had finished checking the reports of his responsible officers. The ship was ready for space, now, and there was nothing more he could do until takeoff. With long, deliberate steps he walked to his cabin, closed the door, and in the privacy he had come to regard as the greatest luxury life had to offer him, he sank into his chair and reached for the post-bag which had been delivered by the morning's rocket ferry from earth.



There were no personal letters for him. He rarely received any and never really expected any, for his career had always been more important to him than personal ties. Shoving aside the official documents, he picked up the small brown parcel, slit the pliofilm covering with his pocket knife, and inspected the red leather cover with its simple title: *Ley's Rockets and Space Ships*. At the bottom of the cover was a date: May 1, 2421, Volume 456. In the nearly five hundred years since the publication of Volume one, which listed all the earth's rocket ships on half of one page, the annual edition of this book, regularly edited and brought up to date, had become the spaceman's bible. [Pg 8]

Captain Evans was annoyed to find that his hands were shaking as he leafed through the pages, and he paused a few seconds, trying to control his excitement. His black hair had begun to turn gray above his ears, and there were a few white hairs in his bushy eyebrows. But a healthy pink

glowed under the skin of his well-fleshed cheeks, and the jut of his chin showed the confidence of one used to receiving immediate, unquestioning obedience. When his long fingers had stopped their trembling, he found the entry he had been looking for, and a triumphant smile lighted his heavy features as he settled deeper in his chair and read the first paragraph.

"Star Lord: newest model in space-ships of the famed Star Line. Vital Statistics: Construction begun February 2418, on Satellite Y. Christened, October, 2420. Maiden voyage to Almazin III scheduled spring, 2421."

He looked up at the diagram of the ship which hung on the wall at his right, then glanced at the zodiometer on his desk. May 3, late spring.

"Powered by twenty-four total conversion Piles. Passenger capacity 1250. Crew and maintenance 250. Six life boats, capacity 1500. Captain. Josiah Evans."

His throat swelling, he was almost choked with pride as he read the final Statistic. This, he thought was the climax of his career, the place he had been working towards all his life. It had been a long road from his lonely boyhood in a Kansas orphanage, to Captain of the earth's finest spaceship.

The *Star Lord* was the perfection of modern space craft, the creation of the earth's most skilled designers and builders, the largest ship ever launched. Protected by every safety device the ingenuity of man had been able to contrive, she was a palace to glide among the stars.

His heart beat more rapidly as he read the next section.

"Prediction: her maiden voyage will break all previous speed records, and regain for her backers the coveted Blue Ribbon, lost ten years ago to the Light Lines."

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No question of that, he thought. No faster ship had ever been built. But he frowned as he read the final paragraph:

"Sidelights: Reviving a long obsolete custom, certain astrologers in London have cast the horoscope of the Star Lord and pronounced the auguries to be unfavorable. This verdict, plus the incident at the christening, has caused some head-shaking among the superstitious fringe, and some twittering about 'cosmic arrogance'. But few of the lords of the earth, we imagine, will therefore feel impelled to cancel their passages on this veritable Lord of the Stars."

Evans remembered that christening. High in the scaffolding he had stood on the platform with the christening party: the Secretary of Interstellar Commerce, the Ambassador from Almazin III, the Governor of Satellite Y, and President and Mrs. Laurier of Earth.

Swaying gently in the still air, the traditional bottle of champagne hung before them, suspended at the end of a long ribbon. Mrs. Laurier's eyes were shining, her cheeks flushed, as she looked at her husband for a signal. At his smile and nod she had said in a high clear voice, "I christen thee *Star Lord!*" and then reached out to grasp the bottle. Before she could touch it, somewhere above them the slender ribbon broke.

The bottle fell like a stone, plummeted straight down and crashed into a million fragments on the floor of the satellite.

An instant's shocked silence, and then a roar of voices surged up from the crowds watching below. Mrs. Laurier had put her hand to her mouth, and shivered.

"What a dreadful thing!" she whispered. "Does that mean bad luck?"

President Laurier had frowned at her, but the Secretary of Interstellar Commerce had laughed.

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Laurier. There is no such thing as luck. Even without a bath of champagne, this magnificent vessel will prove that man is certainly master of the universe. She begins her life well and truly named."

The Star Line ought to abandon that silly custom of christening a new ship, thought Captain Evans. It was an archaic ceremony, utterly irrational, a foolish relic of a primitive world in which people had been so uncertain of their machines that they had had to depend on luck, and to beg good fortune of unpredictable gods.

Taking up *Ley's Space Ships* again, he began fondly to reread the page, when there was a knock at the door and a crewman entered.

"Mr. Jasperson to see you, sir."

The Captain stared, a tiny muscle in his cheek quivering.

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"You know I'm not to be disturbed until after takeoff, Stacey."

"Yes, sir. But Mr. Jasperson insisted. He says he knows those rules don't apply to *him*."

Evans closed the book, laid it on his desk, and stood up. He leaned forward and spoke softly.

"Tell Mr. Jasperson—"

"Tell him what, Josiah?" boomed a voice from the opening door. "You can tell me yourself now."

Burl Jasperson was a portly little man with legs too short for his bulging body, and clothes that were too tight. His head was bald except for a fringe above the ears, and he might have been a comical figure but for the icy blue eyes that probed from under the dome of his forehead.

"What have you got to tell me? You're quite right not to let the ragtag and bobtail bother you at a time like this, but I know your old friend Burl Jasperson is always welcome."

With scarcely a pause, the Captain extended his hand.

"How are you, Burl? Won't you come in? I hope the Purser has taken care of you properly?"

"I'm comfortable enough, thanks, and I'm looking forward to the trip. It's odd, come to think of it, that though I've been Chairman of the board of directors, and have spent some thirty years managing a fleet of space liners, yet I've never before made a trip myself. I don't like crowds of people, for one thing, and then I've been busy."

"What made you decide to go along on this one?"

Reaching across the table, Jasperson picked up the silver carafe and poured himself a glass of water.

"Ah! Nothing like a drink of cold water! The fact is, I wanted to check up on things, make notes of possible improvements in the Star Line's service, and sample passenger reactions. Then too, I'll have the satisfaction of being present on the trip which will establish the Line's supremacy, once and for all. This crossing will make history. It means everything to us, Josiah. You know we're counting on you to break the record. We want to win back the Blue Ribbon, and we expect you to manage it for us."

"I shall do my best."

"That's the spirit I like to see. Full speed ahead!"

"Certainly—consistent with safety."

"Consistent with *reasonable* safety, of course. I know you won't let yourself be taken in by all this nonsense about the imaginary dangers of hyperspace."

"What do you mean?"

"All this nonsense about the Thakura Ripples! But then, of course you're a sensible man or we wouldn't have hired you, and I'm sure you agree with me that the *Star Lord* can deal with anything that hyperspace has to offer." [Pg 11]

Jasperson adjusted the set of his jacket over his plump stomach while he waited for an answer, and Captain Evans stared at him.

"Is that why you're wearing a pistol?" he said dryly. "To help the ship fight her battles?"

"This?" His face reddened as he patted his bulging pockets. "Oh, it's just a habit. I don't like being without protection; I always wear a gun in one pocket and my recorder in the other."

"You'll scarcely be in any danger on the ship, Burl. Better leave it in your cabin."

"All right. But about the Ripples—you aren't going to take them seriously, are you?"

"I wish you'd be a little more frank, Mr. Chairman. Has the Star Line suddenly lost confidence in me?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort! We've every confidence in you, of course. But I've been hearing rumors, hints that we may have to make a slow crossing, and I've been wondering. But then, I'm sure that a man of your intelligence doesn't take the Ripples any more seriously than I do."

"I don't know what gossip you have been hearing," said the Captain, hesitantly. "'Ripples' is probably a very inaccurate and inadequate name for the phenomenon. Thakura might equally well have called them rapids, falls, bumps, spaces, holes, or discontinuities."

"Then why did he choose to call them Ripples?"

"Probably because he didn't know exactly what they are. The whole problem is a very complicated one."

"Complicated nonsense, I call it. Well, we won't quarrel, my dear Josiah, but don't let them hold us back. Remember, we're out to break all records!"

Under the artificial sky, crowds of people streamed into the administration building of Satellite Y. The jumping-off place for all rockets and ships going to and from the stars, Y-port was a world of

its own, dedicated to only one purpose, the launching and berthing of ships.

It was a quiet and orderly place as a rule, and its small permanent colony of workmen and officials lived a spartan existence except for their yearly vacations on Earth. But today it seemed as if half the earth's people, friends and relatives of the passengers, had chosen to make the port a holiday spot of their own, to help celebrate the launching of the *Star Lord* on her maiden voyage. The rocket ferry between Y-port and Earth had had to triple its number of runs in the past week, and this morning's rocket had brought in the last of the passengers for Almazin III.

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Alan Chase trudged wearily along with the crowd entering the building, trying to close his ears to the hundreds of chattering voices. He was tall and very thin, and his white skin clothed his bones like brittle paper. Walking was an effort, and he tried to move with an even step so he would not have to gasp for breath as he moved slowly forward with the line before the Customs desk. In his weakness, the gaiety around him seemed artificial, and the noise of voices was unendurable.

Just ahead of him in line was a young man in an obviously new suit; the pretty girl holding to his arm still had a few grains of rice shining in her hair.

"That will be all," said the Inspector. "I hope you and Mrs. Hall have a very happy honeymoon. Next!"

He gritted his teeth to stop his trembling as the Inspector reached for the passport, glanced at a notation, then looked up.

"I'll have to ask you to step in and see Dr. Willoughby, our ship's doctor. It will only take a moment, Dr. Chase."

"But I'm not infectious!"

"But there seems to be some question of fitness. In cases like yours the Star Line likes to have a final check, just to make sure you'll be able to stand the trip. We're responsible, after all. Last door on my right."

Close to exhaustion, Alan walked down the hall to the last door and stepped inside. A healthy, rugged man with prominent black eyes looked at him with a speculative glance.

"And what can I do for you?"

Holding out his passport, Alan sank down into a chair, glad of a chance to rest, while Dr. Willoughby studied the document, then looked up, the routine smile wiped off his face.

"Well! So you're Dr. Alan Chase. I've been much interested in the papers you've been publishing recently. But this is bad news, Dr. Chase. I suppose you had an independent check on the diagnosis?"

"Not even one of our freshmen could have missed it, but I had it confirmed by Simmons and von Kramm."

"Then there's no question. How did you pick it up, doctor? Neosarcoma is still rather a rare disease, and it's not supposed to be very infectious."

Alan tried to speak casually, although just looking at the rugged good health of the man opposite him made him feel weaker.

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"No, it's not very infectious. But after medical school, I went into research instead of practice, and I worked on neosarcoma for nearly five years, trying to devise a competitive chemical antagonist. Then, as used to happen so often in the old days, I finally picked it up myself—a lab infection."

The older man nodded. "Well, you're doing the right thing now in going to Almazin III. I've made some study of the disease myself, as you may know, and I entirely agree with your theory that it is caused by a virus, and kept active by radiation. Since the atomic wars, the increased radioactivity of the earth undoubtedly stimulates mitosis of the malignant cells. It feeds the disease, and kills the man. But on a planet like Almazin III where the radiation index is close to zero, the mitosis of the sarcoma cells stops abruptly, virus or no virus."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Alan. "I've read some of your papers on the subject, and the evidence sounds pretty convincing."

"It's conclusive. If you arrive in time you've nothing to worry about. I've seen men as badly off as you, with malignant growths well advanced, who migrated to Almazin III and recovered within a year. Without radioactivity to maintain it, the disease seems to be arrested immediately, and if the tissue damage has not gone too far, the tumor regresses and eventually disappears. Once you're cured, you can come back to earth and take up your work where you left off. Well, let's check you over."

The examination was brief. Dr. Willoughby initialed the passport, and offered his hand.

"You should stand the trip all right. But I'm glad you didn't put it off any longer than you did."

Another two months of earth's emanations, and I'm afraid I couldn't have certified you. It's lucky for you that the *Star Lord* is the fastest ship in space. That's all, Dr. Chase. I'll be seeing you on board."

In the swiftly moving elevator cage Alan ascended the slender pylon to the boarding platform, crowded by a group of quarreling children in charge of an indifferent nursemaid.

The Chief Steward, rustling in starched whites, stepped forward at the port, clicked his heels, and curved his thin lips into a smile.

"How do you do, sir. The Star Line wishes you a happy voyage. Will you be kind enough to choose?"

Following his nod, Alan looked down at the silver tray extended for his inspection, and then stepped back as a heavy perfume assaulted his nostrils.

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"What are those?"

"Carnations, sir, for the gentlemen's coats, and rose corsages for the ladies' gowns. Compliments of the Star Line."

"But they're white!"

"Yes, sir. The white flowers, the only kind we are able to grow in Y-port, are symbols of the white light of the stars, we like to think."

"What idiot gave the Star Line that idea?" said Dr. Chase. "You know stars are all colors—white, green, yellow, blue, and even red. But white carnations are a symbol of death."

Steward Davis lowered his tray. "Then you don't care to wear one, sir?"

"Not until I have to," said Alan. "Now please call some one to show me my cabin."

"Band playing in the lounge, sir. Tea is being served in the Moon Room, and the Bar is open until just before takeoff."

"Thanks, but I've been ill. I just want to find my cabin."

"Boy!" called Steward Davis. "Show this gentleman to 31Q."

Alan followed the pageboy through a complex of corridors, ascending spirals of stairs, down a hall, and to the door of Cabin 31Q. The boy threw open the door and Alan stepped in, then halted in shocked disbelief at sight of a white-haired old man who was just lifting a shirt from an opened suitcase.

"I am Dr. Chase. Isn't this Cabin 31Q?"

The old man beamed, his pink skin breaking into a thousand tiny wrinkles. "That's right. 31Q it is."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Have you no powers of observation? Unpacking, of course. I was assigned to this cabin."

Staggering over to a bunk, Alan sagged back against the wall. He lifted his tired eyelids and stared at the sprightly old gentleman.

"But I was promised a cabin by myself!"

The old man looked distressed. "I'm very sorry, young man. I, too, hoped to have a cabin to my self. I learned only a few minutes ago that I was to be quartered with another passenger—evidently you. Somebody made a mistake, there's no question of that, but the Purser tells me that every bit of space is occupied, and no other arrangements can be made. Unless you want to postpone your voyage, and follow in a later ship?"

"No," said Alan. His voice had sunk to a whisper. "No, I can't do that."

"Then we'll have to make the best of it, young man," he said, picking up a pile of handkerchiefs, and putting them in the drawer he had pulled out from the wall.

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"Let me introduce myself. I am Wilson Larrabee—teacher, or student, according to the point of view. Some years of my life I've spent being a professor of this or that at various universities, and the other years I've spent in travel. Whenever the bank account gets low, I offer my knowledge to the nearest university, and stay there until I pile up enough credits so I can travel again."

"Sounds a lonely sort of life, with no roots anywhere."

"Oh, no! My wife loved travelling as much as I do, and wherever she was, was home." He paused, his hand arrested in the act of hanging up his last necktie, and for a moment his face was somber. Then he finished hanging up the tie, gave it a little pat, and continued cheerfully.

"We saw most of the world, in the fifty years we had together. The last trip she made with me, to

the Moon and back, was in some ways the pleasantest of all. After we returned, we started planning and saving and dreaming of making one last grand tour outside the solar system. And then—well, she was more than seventy, and I try to think that she isn't dead, that she just started the last tour a little ahead of me. That's why I'm making this jaunt now, the one we planned on the *Star Lord*. It's lonely, in a way, but she wouldn't have wanted me to give up and stay home, just because I had to go on alone."

Glancing at Alan's bent head, Professor Larrabee abruptly banged shut the lid of his empty suitcase and shoved it into the conveyor port in the wall to shoot it down to Luggage. Then he straightened up and ruffled his white hair.

"That's done, young man. Will you join me in the Bar for a spacecap?"

"Sorry, sir. I'm very tired. I just want to rest and be quiet."

"But a frothed whiskey would help you to relax. Come along, and let me buy you a final drink before we take off for eternity."

Alan noticed with distaste the white carnation in the coat lapel of his companion. "I hardly like to think of this trip as being synonymous with eternity," he said. "You sound as though you didn't expect to come back."

"Do I? Perhaps I made an unfortunate choice of words. But do you believe in premonitions, Dr. Chase?"

"No. All premonitions stem from indigestion."

"No doubt you are right. But from the moment of boarding this ship I have been haunted by the memory of an extremely vivid story I once read." [Pg 16]

"What kind of a story?"

"Oh, it was a scientific romance, one of those impossible flights of fancy they used to publish in my boyhood, about the marvels of future science. This was in the days before we had got outside the solar system, but I still remember the tale, for it was about a spaceship which was wrecked on its first voyage."

"But there've been hundreds of other such stories! Why should this particular one be bothering you now?"

"Well, you see," said the professor apologetically, "it's because of the name. The coincidence of names. This other ship, the one in the story—it was called the *Star Lord*."

"I wouldn't let that worry me. Surely it's a logical name for a spaceship?"

Professor Larrabee laughed. "Logical, and perhaps a trifle presumptuous. But I'm sure it's a meaningless coincidence, my boy. Now how about that drink?"

Alan shook his head.

"Come, Dr. Chase. Allow me the liberties of an old man. You're obviously ill, you want to crawl into a hole and pull the hole in after you, and enjoy the deadly luxury of feeling sorry for yourself. But we can't do that sort of thing. Let me prescribe for you."

With an effort, Alan smiled. "All right, Professor. I usually do the prescribing myself, but right now I'm too tired to argue. I'll accept a spacecap with pleasure." He swallowed a panedol tablet to ease his pain, then pulled himself up.

"That's the spirit, my boy! We will drink to the *Star Lord*, that she may have a happier fate than her namesake."

Five minutes before takeoff. The first signal had sounded. The Bar was closed by now, the lounges deserted, and in theory the twelve hundred and fifty passengers were secure in their cabins, waiting for the instantaneous jump into hyperspace.

At the port, Chief Steward Davis leaned against the wall with his tray of wilting flowers, while the Second Officer and two crewmen stood by, waiting for the final signal to close the port.

They were startled by a sudden commotion, a flurry of voices, and turned to see the elevator doors open on the loading platform. A group of laughing people surged forward.

"But I'm late again, darlings!" cried a vibrant voice. "You must let me go now! The ship is waiting just for me, I know. Stop holding me!" [Pg 17]

"But we don't want to lose you!" called a man.

"You know I'll be back in the fall."

"But the theater can't get along without you!"

"But it won't be forever, darling!"

Still laughing, Tanya Taganova pulled away from her teasing friends. She was a tall woman, very slender; very beautiful, with her burnished auburn hair and warm brown eyes. She walked forward with the swift precision of a dancer, in her flared gown of stiff green satin, whose ruff stood out about her slender neck to frame a regal head. In her arms she carried an enormous sheaf of red roses.

With light steps she entered the port, then turned to wave at her friends and give them a last challenging smile.

The Second Officer asked sharply, "Are you a passenger, madame? You're rather late."

"And I tried *so* hard to be on time for once in my life! I'm very sorry, lieutenant!"

"Quite all right, madame. You got here in time, and that's what counts. But you'll have to hurry to get to your cabin before takeoff."

"Wait!" said Steward Davis. His long face had come to life as he looked at her admiringly and extended his tray of flowers.

"White roses? For me?" she said.

"Yes, madame. Compliments of the Star Line."

Turning her head, she moved away. "Thank you, but I'm not ready to wear white roses, yet. It's not that they're not lovely, but—" she raised her arms, burdened with their scented blooms, "you see that I already have so many flowers, and the red rose is still for the living!"

Davis banged his tray to the floor and shoved it aside with his foot.

"All right, madame. Now we'll have to hurry. We'll have to run!"

A final bell rang, a final light flashed.

On the floor below the ship, the crowds of relatives and wistful stay-at-homes gazed up; at the beautiful metal creation, poised on its slender fins, nose pointed towards the opened dome.

A vibration began, a gentle, barely perceptible shuddering of the ground which increased in frequency. It beat through the floor, into their feet, until their whole bodies quivered with the racing pulse that grew faster, faster, as the twenty-four total conversion Piles in the ship released their power. Then, as the people watched, between one instant and the next, the ship vanished. In the blink of an eyelid she had shifted to hyperspace.

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The *Star Lord* had begun her maiden voyage.

* * *

By the second day out, most of the passengers felt completely at home. The ship had become a separate world, and the routines they had left behind them on earth, and the various routines they would take up again some six weeks from now on Almazin III seemed equally remote and improbable. Life on the *Star Lord* was the only reality.

She moved through the uncharted realms of hyperspace, travelling in one hour's time as measured by earth watches, more than twenty light years distance, if measured in the units of real space. The ship itself was quiet. The vibration of the takeoff had ended in a moment, and now the passengers could hear no noise and hum of motors, could feel no motion against swelling waves, no battering against a barrier of uneven air. The artificial gravity induced a sense of security as absolute as though the ship were resting on living rock.

Although most of the cabins were small, they were cleverly designed to provide the maximum of comfort, even the least expensive of them. For the very wealthy, the rulers of the galaxy's finance, the owners of the galaxy's industries, the makers of the galaxy's entertainment, there were the luxury cabins. The floors glowed with the soft reds of oriental rugs, the lounge chairs were upholstered in fabrics gleaming with gold thread. Cream-colored satin curtains fluttered in an artificial breeze at the simulated windows, and on the walls hung tranquil landscapes in dull gold frames. To those who had engaged them, the ornate cabins seemed only appropriate to their own eminent positions in life.

Delicious meals were served three times a day in the several dining rooms, the softly lighted Bar was never closed, and every day three theaters offered a varied program of stereo-dramas. There was even—the most marvelous, daring, expensive luxury of all—a swimming pool. The pool was small, and was open only to the first cabin passengers, but the fact that a ship travelling to a distant solar system could afford room enough for a pool, and extra weight for the water needed to fill it, seemed evidence that man had achieved a complete conquest of the inconveniences of space travel.

One luxury, however, freely accessible to even the poorest sheep herder on earth, was denied the

passengers of the *Star Lord*.

They could not see the stars. They could not see the sky.

The ship had portholes, of course, and observation rooms which could be opened if at any time she cruised in normal space, but the ports and observation windows were closed now, for there was nothing to see. The ship was surrounded by blackness, the impenetrable, unknowable blackness, of hyperspace, but this black emptiness did not frighten the passengers because they never bothered to think about it. [Pg 19]

But the builders of the ship had designed it so that even the simple pleasure of looking at a friendly sky should not be denied its passengers. An artificial day and night of the appropriate length was maintained by the dimming and brightening of lights, and the main lounges were bounded with special walls which looked like windows, through which could be glimpsed bright summer days, fleecy clouds drifting over a blue sky, and, in the evenings, soft starlight.

Every passenger should have been soothed into contentment by these devices, but by the end of the first week, Burl Jasperson was restless.

He hated to sit still, and the hours and the days seemed endless. His bald head and portly body were a familiar sight as he roamed the ship, inspecting every detail as though it were his personal responsibility. Once a day he called on Captain Evans to check on the progress of the *Star Lord*, once a day he chafed under the cold courtesy of the Captain's manner, and then wandered on. In his jacket he wore his pocket recorder, and he was momentarily cheered whenever he found an excuse for making a memorandum:

"Chairs in lounge should be two centimeters lower. Sell Deutonium shares. How about monogrammed linens for the first cabins? Install gymnasium?"

As he walked, he murmured these thoughts to his recorder, and each night his meek and colorless secretary sat up late to transcribe them into the locked notebook which was his special charge, after Jasperson had taken his sleeping pills and crawled into bed.

On the evening of the eighth night out, Burl Jasperson wandered into the Bar, and drummed his pudgy fingers on the table as he waited to give his order.

"A glass of ice water, and a Moon Fizz. And be sure you make it with genuine absinthe. You fellows seem to think you can get away with making it with *'arak*, and your customers won't know the difference. Well, just remember I'm one customer that does, and I want *real* absinthe."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Jasperson," said the Bar steward. [Pg 20]

Turning restlessly in his chair, Burl let his eyes stop on the white-haired old gentleman beside him, happily consuming a brandy and soda. After a moment's inspection, he stuck out his hand confidently.

"My name's Jasperson. Everything all right? Enjoying the trip?"

The pink skin wrinkled in amusement.

"I am Wilson Larrabee. Everything's fine, thank you, except that the ship is almost too luxurious for a man of my background. A professor's salary does not often permit him indulgences of this kind."

"You a professor? Of what?"

"Various things at various times. Philosophy, physics, Elizabethan drama, history of science—"

"Myself, I never could understand why a sensible man would go into that business. No money. No prestige. Never doing anything, just reading and thinking."

"Every man to his taste," said Larrabee.

"Yes, within limits. But the things some of you professors think up! Most of the ideas do more harm than good, scaring people to death, hurting business. You'd think they ought to have more sense of responsibility!"

He tasted his drink, then nodded knowingly at the bartender. "This is something like! *Real* absinthe."

Professor Larrabee studied his companion. "I can hardly suppose, Mr. Jasperson, that you hold professors responsible for all the ills of the world. And yet you seem disturbed. Did you have something in particular in mind?"

"Yes. The Thakura Ripples!"

Amusement vanished from the professor's eyes. "What about them?"

"Why are people so afraid of them? As far as I can see, they're just a piece of nonsense thought up by a dreamy-eyed physics professor, and he hypnotized people into believing in them. But as I was telling Captain Evans last night, they've never been seen, never been measured, and there's nothing at all to prove that they have any existence outside the mind of a madman. And yet people are afraid of them!"

"And just what are the Thakura Ripples?" said Alan Chase, drawing up a chair. "Waiter, I'll have a spacecap."

"Feeling a little better tonight, Alan?" asked his friend.

"Some, thanks. I just had a checkup from Dr. Willoughby, and he thinks I'm more than holding my own. Now go on about the Ripples. Where are they? What do they do?"

"Suit yourself," Jasperson muttered. "If you want to tell ghost stories, go ahead."

"Thank you. The Thakura Ripples, my boy, are an unexplained phenomenon of hyperspace. We do not know what they are—only that they are dangerous." [Pg 21]

"But I thought that space was entirely uniform?"

"Alas, no. Not even normal space can be called uniform. It has been known for a long time that variations exist in the density of the interstellar gases. Just why they occur, what pattern they follow, if any, was for many years one of the major unsolved problems confronting astronomers and physicists. Then they learned that these variations in density of the interstellar gases were directly connected with the development of the successive ice ages on the earth, and eventually a study of the collisions and interactions of the various light forces from the stars in the galaxy made the pattern clear. We know, now, that the variations occur only in a certain band of space. They may occur at any given place within that band, but their position is constantly shifting and unpredictable."

"Now you see it, now you don't?" said Alan.

"Exactly. Now it was Thakura's theory that the Ripples are an analogous band of mysterious forces existing in hyperspace. They may be tangible barriers, they may be force barriers, we do not know. But a ship entering this lane *may* go through it without damage, and by pure chance take a course which misses all these bumps in space. Or, by going slowly and using his instruments to feel his way, a navigator can often sense them ahead, and if he is skillful he may be able to dodge them. But if, in some terrible moment, he smashes head-on against the Thakura Ripples, the conversion Piles which power his ship are immediately affected. They begin to heat, perhaps to heat irreversibly, and if they get out of control, they may vaporize. In the last fifty years at least five ships have vanished in this region, and it was Thakura's belief that they were disintegrated on the Ripples."

"But there isn't any evidence!" Jasperson exploded.

"Isn't a demolished space ship evidence?"

"No! It's evidence that something went wrong, certainly, but it doesn't tell us *what* went wrong. I'm not an unreasonable man, professor, I'm a hardheaded business man, and I like to deal with facts."

"I don't have an intimate knowledge of these matters, of course," said Larrabee, "but it was my impression that in the past fifty years since travel in hyperspace became common, several ships have been unaccountably lost."

"Your first figure was right. Five ships have been lost—that much is fact. Why they were lost is still a question. It's my considered opinion that they were lost by human failure; the crewmen let the Piles get hot, and the ships were helpless. In the early days they had to get along with only one or two Piles, and if they went wrong the ship was done for. But we've changed all that. That's why the *Star Lord* has twenty-four Piles. No matter what happens it's impossible that *all* of them should go bad at once. She can ditch the dangerous Piles and still always have power enough left to make port. One thing is certain, this ship will never be wrecked on the Ripples of a mad scientist's imagination! A phenomenon like the Ripples, is impossible. If it existed, we'd have had some proof of it many years ago." [Pg 22]

"But surely you don't mean to imply that if we don't know a fact, it is therefore impossible?"

"Not at all. But you know yourself, Professor Larrabee—you're an educated man—that by this time our physicists understand the universe completely, from A to Z. There are no unexplained phenomena. Thakura is shut up in a madhouse now. In my opinion, he was already insane when he published his theory."

Larrabee was nodding, thoughtfully. "I wonder what makes you so certain of your theory?"

"What theory? I never deal in theories. I'm talking fact."

"Your theory that we have unveiled all the mystery of the universe; how do you know? Every now and then, of course, man lives through a century of such amazing progress that he concludes that nothing remains to be learned. But how can he ever be certain?"

"But we are certain! Most physicists are in agreement now that there hasn't been one single

unexplained physical aberration in the past century!"

"Most physicists except Thakura, you mean?"

"But Thakura is insane! We understand all the physical phenomena of the universe."

"Except the Thakura Ripples?"

Jasperson slammed down his glass and stood up, his face red and puffy. "Steward! More ice water! I'm getting tired of those words, professor. Do you think for one minute I'd have risked my life to come on this trip if I'd thought there was the slightest danger?"

Alan looked up languidly. "You mean you wouldn't mind sending a crew and passengers into danger—as long as you could take care to be safe yourself?"

"Surely you're not afraid, Mr. Jasperson?" said Larrabee.

"No. What is there to be afraid of?" He gulped down his drink. "Nothing can wreck the *Star Lord*!"

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When Dr. Alan Chase woke up next morning and glanced at his wrist watch, he realized that the breakfast hour was nearly over. Professor Larrabee had already left the cabin.

Alan was not hungry. It had been many months since he had really enjoyed an appetite for food, but he got up and began to dress, so that he could perform the duty of eating. But his clothes, he noticed, were beginning to fit a little more snugly. He fastened his belt at a new and previously unused notch, buttoned his jacket, and then performed the ritual he carried out every morning and every evening.

Touching a facet in the ornamentation of his wrist watch, he walked about, geigering the room. Radiation normal, somewhat less than earth's normal, in fact. The twenty-four Piles were well shielded, and if this continued, he should survive the journey in fair shape.

At the door of the dining room he paused, for the entrance was blocked by Steward Davis and the young couple he had noticed the day they left Y-port.

The tall young man with ruffled black hair was arguing, while the pretty girl clung to his arm and watched his face admiringly, as though he were the only man in the world.

"But Steward," said the young man, "Dorothy and I—that is, Mrs. Hall and I—we felt sure we'd be able to have a table by ourselves. We don't want to be unreasonable, it's only that this is our honeymoon, maybe the only time we'll ever get to spend together, really, and we like to eat alone, together, I mean. That's the reason we chose the *Star Lord*, because the advertisements all talked about how big and roomy it was, and how it didn't have to be so miserly with its space as they did in earlier ships. They said you could have privacy, and not have to crowd all together in one stuffy little cabin, the way they used to."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hall," said the Steward crisply. "We are all proud of the spaciousness of our ship, but not even the *Star Lord* can provide separate tables for everybody who—Oh, *good* morning, Mr. Jasperson! Glad to see you, sir." Turning his back on Tom, he smiled and bowed to the new arrival "Everything all right, sir?"

"Good morning, Dr. Chase. No nightmares last night? 'Morning Davis. Tell that waiter of mine to be more particular about giving me plenty of ice water. I like plenty of water, and I like it cold."

"Sorry, sir. I'll speak to him at once." He bowed again as Jasperson strode on.

"Then could we—" Tom began.

Davis whirled with an impatient frown. "What? Are you still here? Surely I made it clear that there's nothing I can do, Mr. Hall?"

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"But couldn't you at least move us to another table?"

"I regret that you are dissatisfied with our arrangements. All table space was allocated before we took off from Y-port."

"But you've put us with such noisy people!" said Tom stubbornly. "They keep talking about how much money they made in deutonium, and they refer to us, right in front of us, as the babes in the woods. They may be rich, but they haven't the manners of a six-year old. We *can't* stay at that table."

"Mr. Hall, I can't waste any more time with you. If all our passengers were to demand special privileges—" He shrugged his shoulders.

Dorothy Hall whispered shyly, "Ask him, then, what about that man?" and she nodded her head slightly to the right.

"Yes," said Tom. "You say there isn't enough room, but what about that table over there? It's made to seat two, and there's just that one man who eats alone."

Davis glanced over. "Oh, yes. But that's Mr. Jasperson! He likes to be by himself."

"Who's Mr. Jasperson?"

"A very important man."

"And I'm not?"

Alan broke in. "Excuse me, Mr. Hall. I am Dr. Chase. Won't you join my table? Three of the people assigned places there are Almazanians, a diplomatic mission, I think, and they naturally prefer to have their own cuisine in their own cabins, so we have room for three more."

"How about it, Steward," said Tom. "Any objections?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Davis strolled away.

Tom glared at the retreating back. "That guy has the face of a murderer. He can't be decent to anybody with less than a million credits."

Dorothy laughed. "Never mind, Tom. Someday you'll be the most famous lawyer in the Interstellar courts, and maybe you'll get a chance to prosecute him for arson or treason."

Alan led them to the rear of the dining room, where his two table companions were finishing the last sips of their coffee, and lighting the first cigarette of the morning.

"Miss Taganova, may I present Tom and Dorothy Hall, who would like to share our table."

Tanya lifted her beautiful auburn head and smiled a welcome. Professor Larrabee stood up, his pink cheeks crinkling with pleasure as he shook hands with Tom.

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"Young people make the best companions," he said, "especially on long journeys."

Alan sat down and reached for the vitamin dispenser. "These particular young people want privacy. They're on their honeymoon, and would hardly shed a tear if all the rest of the world suddenly ceased to exist."

"It's not quite like that, Dr. Chase," said Tom, his face reddening, "but those people at our other table were just out of our class, one way or another. The men talked all the time about their bank accounts, and the women clawed at each other about which one had the biggest house, and the biggest pearls and diamonds and emeralds, until we began to feel smothered in a blanket of credits and diamonds."

"Credits and diamonds must be very nice things to have," said Tanya. "I've never managed to collect many of either."

"I've nothing against them in themselves," said Tom, "but right now they don't seem to matter very much. We had to wait five long years to be married, five years for me to finish my law training, and for Dorothy to wear out her family's opposition. They didn't want her to throw herself away on a penniless lawyer."

"As if I were a child who didn't know her own mind," said Dorothy. "Well, I wanted Tom, penniless or not; and anyway, in a few years he's going to be the finest lawyer in the Interstellar Courts."

"I hope you'll always be as happy as you are now, children." The professor's eyes were misty as he stood up. "Come, Miss Tanya. Take a stroll with me, and bring back to an old man a brief illusion of youth."

"But you'll never be old!" she said affectionately. "You're still the most fascinating man on the ship."

Like every other man in the room, Alan watched with envious eyes as Tanya took the professor's arm and sauntered to the door, the heavy taffeta skirts of her pearl-gray gown swishing and rustling as she walked.

Within the sealed hulk of the *Star Lord* the twenty-four Piles silently did their work, out of sight, out of the thoughts of the passengers. Driving the ship through the unknowable infinities of hyperspace, they held her quiet, steady, seemingly without motion. They behaved as they were intended to, their temperatures remained docilely within the normal limits of safety, and the ship sped on.

The technicians and maintenance men, the navigators, the nucleonics men, all kept aloof from the social eddies frothing at the center of the ship. They lived in another world, a world of leashed power, in which the trivial pursuits of the passengers were as irrelevant as the twitterings of birds.

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In the central tiers occupied by the passengers, each morning the walls of the lounges and dining rooms resumed their daily routine of simulating the panorama of earth's day. Lights glowed into

a clear sunrise, brightened into a sunny sky across which light clouds scudded.

Children played in the nurseries, grownups idled through the hours, eating the delicious food, taking a dip in the priceless pool, attending the stereodrams, and playing games. At the cocktail hour, the orchestra played jaunty tunes, old-fashioned polkas, waltzes, mazurkas; at dinner, it shifted to slower, muted melodies, suitable background for high feminine voices, deep male laughter, and the heavy drone of talk.

In the walls, the sun set, twilight crept in, and the stars came out. After the stars had been advancing for several hours, people finished their dancing and card games, walked out of the theaters, had a final drink at the Bar, paused at the bulletin board which detailed the ship's daily progress, and went to bed.

Dr. Alan Chase followed his own routine. Each morning and each evening he geigered his cabin and found the radiation still below the earth normal. He was surprised to find that he was holding his own, physically, instead of becoming progressively weaker, as he had expected, and he began to feel hopeful that he might quickly regain his health on the inert atmosphere of Almazin III. He was not strong enough, however, to take part in the active games of the passengers, and had not enough energy to try to make friends, except for the people at his dining table—particularly Tanya.

Of all the lovely women on board, he thought Tanya Taganova the loveliest. He knew he was not alone in this, for the arresting planes of her face, the dramatic color of her rustling taffeta gowns, attracted many followers. He would sit in the lounge at night and watch her dancing, and then realize, suddenly, that she had disappeared, long before the evening was over. She was an elusive creature, as unpredictable as a butterfly.

Wandering listlessly about the ship, one afternoon he stepped through the open door of the Library. In the almost empty room he saw the auburn head of Tanya, bent over so as to hide her face and show him only her glowing hair. She raised her head as he approached.

"Are you looking for a book, Dr. Chase?"

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"No, I just wondered what was interesting you so much."

She shifted her seat, to let him see a large sheet of rough drawing paper covered with a chalk sketch of a desolate gray marsh over which green waves swirled from the sea, behind them loomed rose-colored granite hills.

"I'm a scene designer, you know. But at home, somehow, I never have time to myself. People will never believe I'm serious, and when I want to get some real work done, I run away on a trip, by myself. Right now I'm sketching out a set for a new stereodrama we're staging next autumn. This particular one is for a melancholy suicide on Venus. I've several more here." She pointed to a scattered heap of drawings.

The soft chime of the library telephone interrupted them. Tanya rose and moved to the desk.

"Yes? Not now, youngster. I'm working. Yes, maybe tomorrow."

Alan had been examining her drawings. "Is this what you do during the hours when you disappear?"

"Usually. Sometimes I drop into the playroom to chat with the children. They're more interesting than their parents, for the most part, and nobody ever seems to pay much attention to them."

"But do you have to work at night, too? When you disappear in the middle of the evening, everybody misses you. The men all watch for you to come back, their wives sigh with relief, and old man Jasperson toddles around and searches the dance floor and bleats, 'Where's Miss Tanya? She was here just a little while ago, and now I can't find her anywhere!'"

"I know. But one dance an evening with him is about all I can stand. I don't really like the man."

"But why? He's a little stupid, but he seems a harmless sort of duck. In a financial deal, of course, I can see that he'd be sharp and ruthless—that's how men like him become millionaires—but he can't knife anybody on shipboard."

Tanya slashed a heavy black line across her drawing, bearing down so hard that she broke the chalk, and threw the pieces to the floor.

"He's a coward! Haven't you ever noticed the way he bullies the waiters? How he patronizes Professor Larrabee, and ignores the young Halls? And to hear him tell it, you'd think only his advice makes it possible for Captain Evans to run the ship! I'm afraid of men like that. They're cowardly and boastful, and in a crisis they are dangerous!"

"What an outburst over a fat little bald-headed man! Aren't you letting your dramatic sense run away with you?"

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Laughing, Tanya picked up her chalk and resumed sketching. "Probably, but after all, I earn my living with my imagination."

"Then you aren't just a rich young woman dabbling in the theater?"

"No indeed. If you could see my bank account! No, I'm going to Almazin III to make authentic sketches of the landscape. We may do a show set in that locale, next year."

"I wish I could see some of the shows you stage."

"When we get home, I'll send you a pass."

He did not answer. Suddenly the melancholy Venusian scene she was creating depressed him, as if it had been a reflection of his own barren life.

"Or don't you like the theater, Dr. Chase?"

"It's not that," he said hastily. "Only—" He shrugged his shoulders. "Something about this ship, I suppose. Home seems so very far away."

"Have you felt that too? I've had the feeling, sometimes, that earth isn't there any more, and that this ship is the only reality."

By the end of the third week out, Burl Jasperson was afflicted by an almost intolerable tension. He prowled the ship like a tiger, for he could think of nothing more to do. For the moment there were no more improvements to suggest to the Star Line, no more brilliant financial deals to execute, and each empty minute seemed to swell into an endless hour. He tried to relax by viewing the dramas on the stereoscreen, but he was always too uneasy to sit through an entire performance, and would leave in the middle to resume his pacing of the corridors.

At his private table in the dining room he stared at the empty chair across from him, munching his food mechanically, seething with unrest. He could see Tanya's gleaming head across the room, with Alan Chase's beside her, and he tortured himself with imagining the light laughter, the friendly talk which must be taking place there. Never, before this trip, had he been made to feel so unnecessary, so much an outsider. Wasn't he a lord of finance, a master of industry, the kind of a man to be respected and admired? Of course, less successful men called him ruthless, he realized, but he was not ruthless—only realistic. He was an able man, and if he expected people in general to take orders from him, it was only because he was more intelligent and more capable than the people to whom he gave his orders. Nothing wrong with that.

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But these miserable empty days were beginning to frighten him. He felt lost. The ship ran by herself, without needing his help, and there was no doubt at all that she would win the Blue Ribbon. Although he questioned Captain Evans sharply, and checked every day on the minutest data of the voyage, so far he had found nothing to criticize—except the coldness of Josiah Evans' manner.

He ground his teeth through a stalk of celery in a vicious bite. After all, wasn't he Chairman of the board of directors of the Star Line? Wasn't it his right, even his duty, to make sure that everything was going well?

The crowd of diners had grown thin, now, and he could see clearly the little group at Tanya's table. They were laughing, and he could see the delightful animation which always disappeared whenever he tried to talk to her.

Steward Davis sidled up, a deferential smile on his long face.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Jasperson?"

"Um."

"Looks like we'll get the Blue Ribbon this trip, doesn't it, sir?"

"Um."

"If you should ever want any special dishes, sir, any little delicacies not available to everyone, I should be glad to speak to the chef."

Jasperson pushed his plate away. "I'll remember, Davis." Throwing down his napkin he stood up. His waiter came running.

"Dessert, sir?"

Without answering, he strode across the room, trying to compose his mouth into a smile as he reached his goal.

"Miss Taganova, would you care to join me in the bar for a drink?"

They all looked up at him in astonishment.

"But I've just finished dinner," she said.

He waited, uncertainly. At last Professor Larrabee pointed to the unoccupied chair.

"Perhaps you'd care to join us, instead?"

No one else spoke, and he sat down nervously. Conversation had stopped, and at last he broke out with explosive force.

"I wish Captain Evans would speed up this ship. It feels as if we'd been on the way forever. And still three weeks to go!"

"Do you find three weeks so long a time?" asked the professor.

"It seems like eternity. I wish something would happen. Why can't we have a little excitement?"

"Couldn't you find any more banks to break today?" Alan drawled. "No gambles on the stock exchange?"

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The professor broke in soothingly. "Now, there's an idea! You're obviously a gambling man, a man of action. Do you play poker? Why don't you get up a little game among your friends? That ought to provide you with excitement for one evening at least."

"Would you join the game?"

"No, no, my dear Mr. Jasperson! You and I do not move in the same circles. I confess, I enjoy the delightful uncertainties of poker, but I could never afford to play for your stakes."

"Then we'll make the stakes what you can afford. Each raise limited to five credits?"

"In that case, I might consider it."

"You, Dr. Chase?"

"Too exciting for an invalid, I'm afraid."

"You, Mr. Hall?"

Tom squeezed Dorothy's hand under the table. "No, thank you, Mr. Jasperson. My wife and I, we have other plans."

"If it's money, young fellow, I'll stake you, and you can have a year to pay me back."

Tom grinned. "You're very generous. But what makes you so sure you'd be the winner?"

"I always win. Will you join the game, Miss Taganova?"

He accepted her silent head-shake without protest.

"Then I'll try to round up two or three others. We don't want a big crowd—too many people make me nervous. Perhaps Willoughby will play, and I'll get Captain Evans. He doesn't like the game, but he'll sit in if I insist. See you in my suite in half an hour."

The poker game had been in progress for more than an hour when Captain Evans entered the parlor. Frowning, Jasperson looked up.

"You're late, Josiah. I told you we'd begin at nine."

"Sorry, Burl. I was delayed."

Jasperson paused in the act of raking in the pot, and looked up sharply.

"Anything wrong?"

"No, all serene."

"Anything you need my advice on?"

"No, just a routine conference with the navigator."

"Then pull up a chair and get in the game."

Nearly half the chips were piled in front of Jasperson, and across from him a modest heap sat before the professor. At his right the baggy-eyed only son of a deutronium millionaire fingered his dwindling pile indifferently, and on his left Dr. Willoughby stared unbelievably at his few remaining chips, three blues and a couple of whites.

"I'll just watch," said the Captain. "You know I'm not much of a gambler. Chess is my game."

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"Oh, come on, Josiah. I insist that you play. Prove that you've got red blood in your veins."

Evans hesitated, but remained standing. "I'd rather just look on."

"Now look here, Captain. Doesn't the Star Line always try to please its passengers? Well, I'm a passenger. Or is it just your native caution that makes you afraid of losing?" His laugh did not entirely disguise the irritation in his voice.

"All right, anything to oblige," said Evans wearily, pulling up a chair. "What stakes are you playing for?"

The Captain lost, slowly and steadily. Mechanically he went through the motions of dealing, discarding, drawing, and betting, but it was obvious that his mind was not on the game. Jasperson rarely lost a hand, if he had stayed at all, while Professor Larrabee's luck was unpredictable, the pile of chips before him fluctuating, growing or diminishing with startling swiftness.

They were interrupted once when a waiter came in with a tray of bottles and glasses. The Captain refused.

"But one drink won't do you any harm," said Jasperson.

"I never drink in space. For one thing, the rules of the Star Line explicitly forbid it, as you should know."

"Yes, I helped make that rule. That means I can release you from it."

But Evans was firm. "I never drink in space," he repeated. "I'll take two cards—no, make it three."

The professor surveyed his hand with his customary sprightly air.

"I'll play these," he said.

Jasperson discarded. "I'll take one."

Captain Evans languidly opened the betting, but after the first round he dropped out, and only Jasperson and the professor remained. Each raised the other persistently, and while Jasperson grew more and more excited, the professor smiled as usual, his eyes glinting with amusement.

"And another five," said Larrabee.

For the first time, Jasperson hesitated. "You sure you mean it, professor? I kind of hate to clean you out, especially because I doubt if you can afford it."

"Suppose you let me be the judge of what is, after all, a private matter?"

"All right, it's you that will go bankrupt, not me. And another five."

"See you, and raise you five!"

Jasperson sat back and pondered, his cold eyes calculating. "Now let's review the situation, just among friends. The professor's a smart man, and he isn't rich. He saw me draw one card, so he can make a pretty good guess what I probably hold, if I drew the right card, but he's playing a pat hand, and playing as if he meant it. Well, I've put a lot of credits in that pot, but I never did believe in throwing good money after bad, even in a friendly game. I quit."

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"What? You mean you're going to drop out without even seeing me?"

"I know when I'm licked. Five credits is five credits, even to me." He threw down his cards and reached to gather in the deck.

Slowly Professor Larrabee raked in the chips, as Jasperson went on complacently.

"That's the only principle a practical man can work on. Know when you're licked. Get all the facts, analyze all the data, and then act on the logical conclusion, no matter how much you may hate to. It was clear to me that you must have drawn a pat flush that would top my straight, so I simply decided not to waste any more money."

"Thank you, Mr. Jasperson. I appreciate the gift."

"It was no gift. You had me beat."

"Did I? Only if you had all the facts, only if you analyzed all the data, and only if you reached the correct conclusion. Perhaps you ought to see what I held."

Deliberately he turned over his hand and spread the cards.

Jasperson jumped to his feet in a rage. "But that's a handful of junk! Not even a pair! You held a bust, and I had you beat!"

"Certainly. But you didn't know it. Without all the facts, you acted on a faulty conclusion."

Breathing noisily, his plump face flushed, Jasperson smashed his fist into his pile of chips and scattered them to the floor.

"A pure bluff! I hate bluffing!"

"Then you miss a great deal of fun in life," said Larrabee calmly. "I find it dull just to analyze data and then bet on a sure thing. I like a little excitement."

Slowly the financier sank back into his chair. He gulped in a large breath of air and tried to steady himself, a sickly smile around his mouth.

"Excuse me, Professor. But you took me by surprise." Hands trembling, he began to shuffle the deck.

There was a knock at the door, and a crewman entered.

"What is it, Stacey?" said Captain Evans.

"Chief Wyman is waiting to see you in your quarters, sir."

With a sigh of relief, the Captain turned in his few chips. "Time for me to quit, anyway."

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His face still red, Jasperson looked up hopefully. "Shall I come with you? Any way I can be of use?"

"No thank you, Burl. I'll leave you to your little game."

In the Captain's quarters, Chief Wyman was pacing the floor.

"Sir!" he burst out. "This is it! We've hit the Thakura Ripples!"

"Impossible, Wyman! It's too soon. What's happened?"

"You told me to report as soon as we ran across anything suspicious, sir. Well, look what our screen has been picking up."

He handed over a plastic record tape, perforated by minute notches which outlined an unsystematic, jagged line of peaks and hollows.

"We've been getting this stuff all evening."

"Doesn't seem to mean anything. It doesn't show any sort of pattern."

"No, sir, and it may not mean anything, but it's different from what we've been getting up till now. And then another thing. It's probably not serious, but the number ten Pile has started to heat."

"Begun to heat? What's wrong with Pile Ten? One of your men been getting careless?"

"I'm positive not, sir. I have complete confidence in all of them."

Captain Evans studied the record tape, a worried frown on his forehead.

"It's just possible, I suppose, that the Ripples—Is Pile Ten heating fast?"

"No, sir. It's still below the critical level, and of course we're putting in dampers."

"I wish we *knew* something definite about the Thakura Ripples," the Captain burst out, "what they are, what they do, what they look like, and *how* they affect our atomic Piles! If only Thakura were still a sane man, and could finish up his calculations!"

"Maybe Thakura was crazy to start with," said Chief Wyman, "or maybe the Ripples drove him crazy. I don't know. But I do know Pile Ten is heating."

"Well, keep watching it. Double the checks on the other Piles, and let me know of even the slightest rise."

As soon as the door had closed, Evans opened the desk panel and buzzed Operations.

"Pilot Thayer? Captain Evans here. I am about to give you an order. As soon as you have executed it, come at once to my cabin, and bring Navigator Smith with you. Here it comes. Reduce speed immediately, repeat immediately, to one-half, repeat one-half. That's all."

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Nobody felt the alteration in the progress of the *Star Lord*. Within the metal casing of the ship nothing was changed. The sunny scenes in the walls were just as bright, and the synthetic light of the slowly moving stars at night was just as soothing. For the passengers, the black menace outside the ship did not exist. Because change of speed cannot be felt in hyperspace, they had no way of realizing that the *Star Lord* had slackened her pace and was feeling her way cautiously as a blind man to avoid the ominous barriers of the Thakura Ripples.

On their way to their cabins that night, there were a few people who noticed that the bulletin which detailed the day's run had not been posted on the board, but they wondered only for a moment why it had been omitted, and then forgot the matter.

Going in to breakfast next morning, Burl Jasperson stopped to read the bulletin as usual, to find how many light years distance had been put behind him in this interminable journey, and he clenched his fist at finding a blank board before him.

Abruptly turning his back on the dining room, he proceeded straight to the Captain's quarters, where Stacey stopped him in the anteroom.

"Where's Captain Evans?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jasperson. The Captain left orders he was not to be disturbed."

"He'll see *me*. Let him know I'm here."

"I'm sorry, sir. My orders were, nobody was to be admitted. He was very specific."

Stacey did not budge, but the inner door swung open and the Captain's tired face peered out.

"You have a very penetrating voice, Burl. I suppose you might as well come in. It's all right, Stacey. Stand by."

He moved to let Jasperson enter, and closed the door.

About the desk sat Chief Engineer Wyman, Chief Pilot Thayer, and Chief Navigator Smith, all studying a chart laid out before them, and making computations. They looked up at the interruption.

"What's going on here?" said Jasperson. "If you're having a conference of some kind, I should be in on it."

"Just routine work, Burl. What is it you want?"

"Somebody is getting careless. The bulletin of yesterday's run has not been posted. It's little things like that that make all the difference in the reputation of a shipping line. Somebody ought to be reprimanded. What was the day's run, by the way? Well, speak up, Josiah! I'm waiting."

Evans reached for a sheet of paper from the desk and silently handed it across. Jasperson looked at the figures, frowned, and spoke angrily. [Pg 35]

"Have your computers broken down, Captain Evans? Or is this a joke? Why, that's only about two-thirds our usual distance. At this rate it will take us from now to eternity to arrive."

"You'd better sit down, Burl." The Captain looked steadily at him. "Those figures explain why I ordered that the bulletin was not to be posted. Not one passenger out of a hundred would have noticed much change in the figures, but I do not want to alarm even that one in a hundred. I have ordered the ship to proceed at half-speed."

"What? Have you lost your mind?"

"We are approaching the Thakura Ripples. It just isn't safe to go any faster."

Expelling a long breath, Jasperson spoke more calmly.

"That means we'll be late in reaching Almazin III?"

"Three or four days, perhaps, not more. Eventually we'll get through this danger zone, and then we can resume speed."

"But we *can't* be late, Captain Evans! Surely you haven't forgotten that we're out after the Blue Ribbon? The Light Line's ships have made it in forty-three days, and we've got to do it in forty-two or less. This trip is a matter of prime importance to the Star Line, and a delay of even three days would keep us from breaking the record. I thought you understood all that?"

Sighing, the Captain shook his head. "I know all that. But we are in dangerous regions, and I can't risk my ship just for a piece of silk! Last night Pile Ten started heating. It's still hot, and we may have to expel it. I hadn't expected to reach the Ripples so soon, and had even hoped we could avoid them entirely, but evidently the limits of the band haven't been charted very accurately. The only safe thing is to go slow."

"But the Ripples are imaginary! Why do you think we've hit them?"

"There's the number Ten Pile."

"But why should only that one out of the twenty-four be affected? And even if it is heating, that's no good reason for slackening speed."

Captain Evans glared back at the plump little man, then his eyes wavered, and his fingers fiddled uncertainly with the papers on his desk. His chief officers were watching him intently. At last he straightened his shoulders and spoke sternly.

"Mr. Jasperson. Surely it will not be necessary to remind you that I am the Captain of this ship. I am in sole command. Is that correct?" [Pg 36]

"Yes, but—"

"Would you seriously advise me to go contrary to my own knowledge, my own instinct? To run this ship into an area of danger, to risk the lives of the passengers, all for a piece of ribbon?"

Would you want to take the responsibility of giving me such an order, even if I should agree?"

As Jasperson looked around at the watchful faces of the Engineer, the Pilot, and the Navigator, some of the belligerence left his voice.

"Certainly not, Josiah! And anyway, it's not your knowledge I'm quarreling with. If you run the ship according to the facts, you'll do all right. It's when you let your judgment be influenced by your imagination that I object. But by all means, do as you think best. When the Star Line loses confidence in its Captains, they replace them. I'll look in again, if I may, later in the day."

When the door had closed behind him, Pilot Thayer shook his head wonderingly. "You'd think he ruled the universe!"

"He's a man of very limited imagination," said the Captain. "But never forget, he wields a great deal of power. Now, are your orders clear? Smith, you'll continue your charting."

"I'm doing my best, Captain, but what am I charting? Sometimes I wonder if maybe your friend Jasperson isn't right. If the Ripples are imaginary, maybe I'm getting gray hairs trying to make a map of something that isn't there!"

"Chart it anyway! We can't take chances. Wyman, I'm not a bit satisfied with the way Pile Ten is behaving. It should have cooled to normal before now. Watch it. If we have to dump it, we want to act before it gets too hot. Anything else?"

"One other thing, sir," said Engineer Wyman, pointing to the diagram of the ship which hung on the wall. "Pile Ten is located just below Lifeboat C, and the radiation index of Boat C is getting a little high."

"That's bad. Well, keep shoving in the dampers, and keep me posted."

After they had gone, he sat for a while at his desk, studying the data on the papers before him. He paced the room for a few minutes, then paused to pick up the little red volume of *Ley's Space Ships*. He had no need to open it. It fell open of itself at the well-read page, and his eyes rested for one rich moment on the words: *Captain: Josiah Evans*.

What name, he wondered, feeling almost physically sick with uncertainty, what name would be printed in the next edition? [Pg 37]

The orchestra played melodiously at lunch time. The chef had produced delicacies even more delectable than usual, and at each table the waiters poured sparkling white wine into long-stemmed glasses, while murmuring softly, "Compliments of the Captain!"

"Is this a special occasion?" asked Tanya.

"Not that I know of, miss."

"Every meal feels like a special occasion," said Alan, "because I get to talk to you."

"Sh-h! Here come the Halls."

Tom and Dorothy flitted in to the table, hand in hand, still absorbed in the wonder of being together, scarcely aware of the world about them, then left, without finishing their dessert. Alan and Tanya looked after them with affectionate amusement, but Professor Larrabee seemed withdrawn and a little sad, as though they evoked memories of a time now lost to him forever.

"They make me feel so *old*!" said Tanya.

"And lonely?"

"Perhaps, a little. They seem so sure, somehow, that all the rest of their lives will be just as happy as this, always."

"And why not?" said Professor Larrabee.

The orchestra swayed into a final soft chord, and immediately a voice spoke from a loudspeaker in the ceiling.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Conversation stopped, the room became quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen. The customary lifeboat drill will be held this afternoon at 1600 hours. The attendance of all passengers is requested."

The voice stopped, the orchestra resumed its playing, and the passengers sipped their coffee.

"I wonder why he said 'customary'?" said Tanya. "We've been out about three weeks, and this will be the first drill we've had. Do you suppose something is wrong?"

"I'm afraid your sense of the dramatic gets the better of you," said Alan. "What could be wrong with the *Star Lord*?"

"Maybe her name," murmured Professor Larrabee, and his eyes looked haunted.

Solitary at his table, Burl Jasperson sipped at a glass of ice water as he pondered. For the first time in his life he was not quite sure what course to follow. He wanted that Blue Ribbon for the Star Line, and yet—he did not know what to do. While he listened to the announcement of the lifeboat drill, his lip twisted in contempt. Just like Josiah Evans, he thought, to be over-cautious and run the risk of starting a panic.

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Still thinking, he left the dining room and went to the main lounge to study the illuminated map of the ship. The three-dimensional panorama showed the slim and elegant body of the *Star Lord*, tapered like a silver spindle. Six small ships, three on each side of the long axis, each capable of carrying 250 people, were fastened into her hulk. Seemingly a part of the ship itself, their outer walls forming a part of the ship's wall, they were designed to be detached at the touch of a button, and launched into space as free craft.

When the warning bells rang, he joined the crowd of passengers who were assigned to Boat F, peered at the boat through the transparent panel, and listened attentively to the instructions. It was Steward Davis, he noted approvingly, who was in charge.

"Passengers will file in through the usual port and walk to the farthest unoccupied seat, and buckle themselves into place. They have nothing further to do. Crewmen will take care of the mechanics of detaching and launching the boat. You will note that there are no separate cabins, only rows of seats as in the primitive airplanes, but you will find this no real discomfort, since the boat would undoubtedly be picked up after a very short interval by some alerted space liner."

Jasperson raised his voice above the crowd's hum.

"What about provisioning? Are the boats stocked on Y-port?"

"No, Mr. Jasperson, except for food concentrates, and one air tank which is placed there for the greater comfort of the crewmen who must go in to clean or to make minor adjustments. The boats are not fully provisioned until the need arises. After all, we don't want to invite trouble, do we?"

People laughed appreciatively.

"No," he went on, "if there should be an emergency, we have specially trained crewmen whose job it is to stock reserves of air and water. They would go to work as automatically and efficiently as machines. Any other questions?"

Jasperson lingered after the indifferent crowd, to inspect the boat more closely, then slouched away.

All that afternoon he prowled the ship, trying to make up his mind. He stopped now and then to question a business acquaintance, ask a journalist his opinion, and he quizzed Larrabee again, more sharply than before, about the hypothetical Ripples. He kept moving, and as he walked he calculated, bringing to bear all the power of a mind which he believed to be logical, and which his financial success had proved to be keen and intelligent. All his life he had trusted his judgment, and it had rarely failed him—barring accidents like that unfair poker game. At last, as the hours went on, his decision crystallized. He had made up his mind.

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At dinner he drank champagne in addition to his usual ice water, and only half heard the scraps of conversation in the dining room. There was to be a special masquerade dance, he gathered. People around him were excitedly planning the improvisation of costumes. He would not get himself up in any silly costume, he decided, but if his plans went well, he might look in later in the evening, on the chance to being allowed to glide over the waxed floor with the lovely Tanya.

After finishing his last drop of coffee he went directly to the cabin of Captain Evans, who had just begun to eat his simple dinner.

The Chairman of the board of directors pulled up a chair and sat down, without waiting to be asked.

"Look here, Josiah, I want to talk to you. I've been thinking. I'm afraid I was too brusque this morning. That's a bad habit of mine, and I want to apologize. But after all, we should not be quarreling, for your interests and mine are the same, as you surely realize."

Captain Evans pushed away his tray, lit a cigar, and puffed stolidly. "I realize that I must consider the safety of my passengers, if that's what you mean."

"That's included, of course." Jasperson made his voice warm and persuasive, the voice that had swayed boards of directors, the voice that reassured hesitant bankers.

"Passenger safety is always paramount, of course, and I respect your attitude there. But in this particular case, isn't it possible that you are being too cautious?"

"But Burl! Can the Captain of a ship *ever* be too cautious? Think of his responsibility!"

"His responsibility is very great, and I would never advise you, nor permit you, to shirk yours. But

sometimes caution may cease to be a virtue. Think about this caution of yours for a minute. Surely you believe that I would never urge you to do anything against the interests of the ship, or against your own conscience? Now you have an excellent mind—logical, objective, clear. That was one reason we chose you for this place. Try to consider, for a moment, the bare possibility that your decision to reduce speed may not have been justified."

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Evans was silent, and finally Burl asked, "How far did we get today?"

"240 Light years."

"And if you decide to continue at that speed for five or six days, that means we'll be approximately three days behind schedule in touching Almazin III?"

"About that."

"And that means we won't break the record. Now consider the reason for this very unhappy situation. Think about it with an open mind. You have one Pile heating—but has that never happened to a ship before, even in normal space? You and I both know it happens, and that ships have been lost because of a defective Pile. Logically, why shouldn't this be just another such case? You say it is caused by the Ripples, but as man to man, what objective evidence can you bring forward to prove their existence? I'm not trying to browbeat you, you understand, but just to ask you to look at the matter carefully. You said yourself, this morning, that you hadn't expected to be meeting the Ripples at this point—you had thought they occurred in a rather different area of hyperspace. Couldn't that mean that they don't really exist, anywhere?"

Captain Evans wiped his glistening forehead with his handkerchief.

"Yes," he said. "I was surprised. I'll admit I didn't expect them here. But there's so much we don't know about hyperspace!"

"No, there's so much we *do* know! Are you a child, to fancy there are goblins outside just because it's dark? There is a perfectly rational, alternative explanation for the things that worry you. Why can't you accept them?"

Evans got up and began to pace the floor. "I guess I'm following a hunch."

"But would you make us lose the Blue Ribbon for a mere hunch? Don't you trust your own objective judgment?"

Sweating heavily, the Captain tried to stub out his cigar, but his hands were moist and his fingers trembled.

"I don't know!" he shouted. Then he went on, his voice low and tired. "You may be right. Burl. You may be right. We may not have hit the Ripples. The Ripples may not even exist, although some very competent spacemen and some very brilliant physicists are convinced they do. But how can I judge? How can I be sure?"

Jasperson leaned forward, intent as a cat on a bird.

"None of the other Piles have started to heat? There's nothing else to make you suspicious?"

"Nothing except the space record tape, and that makes no sense."

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"Exactly. Then why don't you look at this situation as a hardheaded spaceman should, and order full speed ahead?"

"Burl, there are fifteen hundred lives dependent on me. How can I take such a chance?"

"It wouldn't be a chance. And if by the one unlucky chance in ten million there should be trouble, you have ample lifeboat space for everyone. Isn't it worth the gamble?"

"I don't like gambling lives against a piece of blue silk ribbon."

Jasperson sighed. "Come, Josiah, be reasonable. I wouldn't think of giving you an order, or trying to interfere with your decision in any way, but surely I may be allowed to help you to reach the correct decision? How will you feel when the *Star Lord* limps into port four or five days late, and you have to explain to the Board that she was delayed because you were trying to dodge some non-existent Ripples. You are afraid! Change your frightened point of view, and that will make you change your orders and get us on the way once more, full speed!"

Muttering to himself, wiping his brow, Captain Evans walked around the little room, while Jasperson sat back and watched him with cold, intent eyes. Evans glanced once at the little red book, half covered with papers, and pain contorted his face.

Suddenly he stepped to his desk and called Engineer Wyman.

"What about that space tape, Wyman? Has Smith been able to detect any pattern in the

impulses?"

"No, sir. No pattern of any sort we can recognize, anyway."

"And what report on Pile Ten?"

"Pile Ten is doing nicely, sir. Lost half a degree in the last hour. By tomorrow she ought to be back to normal limits."

Clicking the phone, Evans resumed his pacing in the heavy silence. At last he faced Jasperson and spread out his palms, his face gray as parchment.

"All right, Burl. You're probably right. I won't argue any longer."

"Good man! The Star Line will know how to appreciate your decision." He hesitated, and asked, "You'll agree, now, I didn't push you into this? It's your own free decision?"

Calmly, Evans answered. "It is my own responsibility."

He buzzed Operations.

"Wyman? Captain Evans speaking. Full speed ahead!"

On the dance floor late that night, a crooner in blue Venusian mask and wig hummed the melody while the orchestra wailed and zinged behind him. The lights had been dimmed to a purple midnight, and shadowy couples flitted about the room, swaying, humming, laughing. Horned devils danced with angels, pirates and Roman senators guided in their arms lovely Cleopatras and sinuous mermaids. Hunched over the little tables, clinking glasses, grotesque silhouettes of Martians, Venusians, and Apollonians whispered intimately. [Pg 42]

The walls of the room displayed the evening stars of late summer, and, special event for a gala evening, a fat yellow half moon sailed lazily in the sky.

The *Star Lord* shuddered, briefly. Briefly the crooner's voice wavered, the notes of the violins hesitated, but no one noticed. A second quiver of the ship, and the dancers paused to look at one another questioningly, then laughed and danced on.

Jasperson had been sitting beside the wall, vainly searching among the dancers for Tanya. He stood up, his forehead suddenly wet with sweat. Plowing through the dancers and out of the door, in the corridor he ran into Steward Davis, gliding along on silent, slipped feet.

"What was that, Davis?"

"Don't know, sir. Nothing serious, or the alarm lights would be on."

"Come with me."

He flung open the door of the Captain's cabin. It was empty. Stacey was not in the anteroom, and the inner cabin was silent. The water carafe had been turned over on the desk, and a few papers lay scattered on the floor.

"They might be in Operations, sir."

"Show me the way!" They raced down the corridors, past the open door of the room where dancers still swayed and the orchestra still played. Through a hall, down an escalator, down, down, to the center of the ship.

Jasperson paused. "You needn't wait, Davis. But I may want you again. I'll let you know."

Pushing aside the crewmen who stood guard at the door, he rushed into the room.

"Josiah! What was that shock? I demand to know what's happened!"

Evans threw him a glance of pure, intense hatred, and then resumed his questioning of Chief Wyman.

"You say Number Ten just let go?"

"Not exactly, sir. For a couple of hours or so after we resumed speed, it stayed steady. All of a sudden, it started to climb. They called me, but by the time I got there it was already at critical level. We put in more dampers, but it kept going up and up, and I thought it might vaporize any minute. I hadn't any choice, sir. There wasn't time to call you and get orders. I had to drop it." [Pg 43]

"Certainly. I'm not criticizing you. But there's one thing we hadn't counted on. Chief Thayer says Pile Ten took lifeboat C along with it."

"But how could that happen?"

"Boat C was just above, you remember. The heat triggered the release mechanism, and the boat launched itself into space."

Jasperson interrupted, trying to speak calmly. "What's happened? Tell me what's wrong?"

"We've hit the imaginary Thakura Ripples," Evans said savagely, "and they're tearing us apart!"

The plump soft body of Burl Jasperson seemed to deflate. The truculence drained from his face, leaving his skin a dirty white as he whispered, "Then the Thakura Ripples *are* real? And we're in danger?"

The Captain's laugh was bitter. "What do *you* think? Don't you want to give me the benefit of your advice now?"

Again the door burst open, and a crewman ran in.

"Captain Evans, sir. Piles Fourteen and Fifteen have started to heat. They're already at critical level."

"Dump them!"

The phone buzzed, and Evans listened with a face which was turning a graveyard gray.

"If you can hold them down, keep them. If they pass the critical point, shoot them away." Turning, he looked straight into the dilated eyes of Jasperson, and spoke as if every word were a knife thrusting into the pudgy body.

"Every one of the Piles is starting to heat. Every last one. One life boat is lost. That means fifteen hundred people to be crowded into five little boats!"

"What are you going to do?" croaked the little man.

"I've already reduced speed. I've sent out and am still sending out calls for help, over phase wave. We'll shift to normal space, and we'll launch the lifeboats as soon as they can be provisioned and loaded. And then we'll pray. And now, Burl Jasperson, how do you like the Thakura Ripples?"

Bracing himself against the desk, Burl tried to smile. "If there's any way I can help, of course, just let me know." With a feeble attempt at jauntiness, he staggered out of the cabin.

Opening the long-closed shutter of the observation port, Captain Evans could see the suns of normal space glittering in the blackness about the ship, unfamiliar and alien. Before the shift to normal space he had sent out SOS calls throughout the galaxy, but he had not waited for any replies before shifting. He could not know whether the calls had been heard, or even whether there were any ships close enough to send help after hearing the calls. He hoped, with all his being, that they had come out in a region of inhabited planet systems, in a regular shipping lane, so that his passengers could be picked up and taken to port—any port.

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He kept his line open to Operations, and every minute or so Wyman spoke to him, giving the data on the climbing piles. Ten had been jettisoned in hyperspace, and so had Fourteen and Fifteen. Since their shift to normal space, it had been necessary also to detach the entire bank of Nineteen, Twenty, and Twenty-one, whose index had risen at a terrifying rate.

Wyman's voice spoke in his ear. "One, Two, and Three are climbing fast, sir."

"Shoot them away!"

"No good, sir. I've tried. The release mechanism has fused, and those three Piles are welded to the ship!"

Evans closed his eyes. That meant that the life of the ship was doomed. There would be no way to save her. But the passengers could still be saved, if they got away soon enough, before the three Piles vaporized.

"Wyman!" he whispered despairingly, "is there any single Pile that isn't heating?"

"No, sir."

"Is there any single Pile that's responding to your dampers?"

"No, sir, not one."

"Then, in your experience, they are all bound to go, sooner or later?"

"I've never seen anything like this in my experience, sir. It looks bad."

The door opened, and Jasperson slunk in. His skin had lost its cushioning, gray folds sagged under his cheek bones, and black hollows outlined his glittering blue eyes. The Captain ignored him, and spoke into the phone.

"Very well. In exactly fifteen minutes I shall sound the alarm and we'll abandon ship. I can't take a chance on waiting any longer. Keep a skeleton crew at work on those Piles to hold them down as much as possible, and have all other crewmen report to their lifeboat stations."

"Right, sir. But Boat C has gone, you remember. When we dumped Pile Ten."

"Yes. Distribute her passengers among the remaining boats."

"Is there no hope, Josiah? Is this the end?"

"The end of the *Star Lord*, yes. I hope to save the passengers. You heard me. In fifteen minutes all preparations should be finished, then I sound the alarm. Don't worry, Burl. There's room enough for everybody, your skin is safe."

"But won't the lifeboats be horribly crowded?"

"Crowded, yes, but not impossibly so. If they can carry two hundred and fifty people in fair comfort, they can jam in three hundred by squeezing a bit."

Jasperson shuddered. "So many people! And so close together! I can't bear crowds, Josiah, you know that. They make me feel sick and confused. It will be terrible!"

"Whether you like it or not, there's nothing else to do if we want to save lives. I'll sound the alarm in a quarter of an hour. Get yourself ready, but whatever you do, don't tell the others yet. I don't want a panic on my hands until I'm ready to deal with it."

Biting his lip, Jasperson turned, without a word, and shuffled out of the cabin.

Once in the corridor, he began to run, a shrivelled old man waddling on wings of fear down the hall to the dining room where empty tables waited in the elegant silence of gleaming silver and crisp white linen for the breakfast hour.

Davis was standing at the sideboard, staring blankly at the flashing red light above the door.

Jasperson ran up to him and clutched his arm. Looking around cunningly to see that they were alone, he whispered.

"Davis, I want to talk to you."

"Later, sir. That red light means I'm wanted at the briefing room."

"Yes, but wait a minute!"

"I'm supposed to go at once, sir."

"A thousand credits if you'll listen to me a minute!"

As Davis hesitated, Burl went on. "Listen, Davis, the ship is in trouble. The Captain is going to launch the lifeboats. You're in charge of Boat F, aren't you? You know how to operate it?"

"Of course, Mr. Jasperson."

"Then come with me, and we'll take the boat now. I'll pay you well."

"But we can't do that!"

"Why not? The *Star Lord* is doomed. In fifteen minutes this place will be a madhouse, and there may not be room for everybody. I want to get out of here before the mob. We'll take Boat F."

Steward Davis' eyes were thoughtful as he replied. "But sir, we can't just take a boat for ourselves, like that. There's two hundred and fifty people assigned to Boat F."

"Worse than that! Three hundred! One lifeboat has been lost already. It's dangerous to wait—there'll be a stampede and the lifeboats might even be wrecked. No, we must take her alone, Davis. I'll give you ten thousand credits if you'll do it, and as long as you live you'll have me as a friend."

The steward's Little eyes looked sidewise at the pleading man. "But I'd be found out for sure, Mr. Jasperson, and then what would become of me? I'd never get another job as long as I lived. I'd have to change my name, disguise myself, and maybe live on some other planet, and all that would take money. I'm a poor man, and I don't see how I could afford it."

"But if I have to squeeze into one of those boats with three hundred other people crowding against me, I'll go crazy! We'll go to some out-of-the-way planet, and you can change your identity and be perfectly safe. Can't you understand, man? My life is at stake, and my sanity. I'll give you fifteen thousand credits!"

"Well," said Davis. "Could you make it twenty-five?"

"Done! Meet me at Boat F in five minutes."

Jasperson rushed to his cabin. Yanking open the wall safe he dragged out his brief case and the locked memorandum book, thrust his pistol into his pocket, and ran to the door.

"Follow me!" he called to his startled secretary, and hurried from the room.

Running past the library door, he glimpsed Tanya at work, her auburn head bent over her sketching. On impulse, he stopped and ran back.

Panting from the physical punishment of running, nearly smothered by the pounding of his terrified heart, he gasped out his invitation.

"Tanya! The ship is going to blow up! Don't tell anyone. Come with me now, before the crowd, and I'll get you off safely in my lifeboat. I'll take care of you, Tanya."

She pulled away. "Have you lost your mind, Mr. Jasperson?"

"Don't argue. There's no time. Come, I'll protect you. We'll have plenty of room. If you wait, it may be too late."

"Go with you, and leave the others? You're mad!"

"But if you wait, you'll be trampled to death by the mob. I'm giving you a chance to save your life."

"But you can't take that boat for yourself. What would happen to the other people? That would be murder. Get away from me! I'm going to call Captain Evans."

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As she ran to the phone and pressed the dial, he padded out of the door and resumed his flight to Boat F where Davis waited, peering nervously up and down the hall. Waving his secretary to follow, Jasperson rushed through the port.

"Everything ready, Davis? Provisions all in?"

"All set. I saw the tail end of the truck leaving just as I got here, but I'll just check—"

"Hurry, man! There's no time to waste." He cocked his head, listening to the low rumble of an approaching motor. Davis ran inside, and together they watched from the port.

Coming swiftly down the corridor was a small motor truck. It stopped, and the driver jumped out and shouted.

"Get out of that boat! She's not ready yet! What are you—"

With a steady hand Jasperson drew his pistol and pressed the trigger. The man fell without a sound.

"What are you waiting for, Davis? Shove off!"

The port door slid shut. A few seconds delay, and Lifeboat F, carrying three persons, shot away from the *Star Lord* into space.

Alarm bells rang, red lights flashed.

Sickening with the inexorable rise of her fevered power units, the *Star Lord* trembled with the clangor of bells ringing in library and nursery, in lounges and dance hall, in bar and cabins, in dining rooms and theaters. The orchestra crashed to a stop, the dancers halted, startled and vaguely frightened, half laughing at themselves as they listened to the bells.

Then silence, and the voice of Captain Evans.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Do not be alarmed. Because of certain mechanical difficulties the *Star Lord* has shifted to normal space. There is no immediate danger, but purely as a precautionary measure we shall launch the lifeboats. Remember, there is no danger, but I ask each of you to proceed at once, in calm orderly fashion, to the station to which you are assigned, and there obey the orders of the officer in charge. The passengers formerly assigned to Boat C will be placed in other boats. Do not wait to go to your cabins. Proceed immediately to your lifeboats."

The voice clicked off. A few seconds of silence, and then the quiet was broken by the patter of hurrying feet. In a moment, the public lounges were empty.

* * *

In the library, Tanya was still calling into the phone.

"Operator, operator!" she cried. "I must speak to the Captain. It's a matter of life and death!" But the phone was dead. [Pg 48]



When the alarm bells rang, she listened to the announcement and then slowly put back the useless instrument. Back in her corner, she picked up her chalk, shuffled her drawings into an orderly heap, paused, and with a wry smile dropped them all to the floor and hurried away.

A sound of crying wailed from the open door of the playroom, and she looked in to see a group of children, none of them more than six, huddled together and sobbing. She walked up to them and smiled, hands on her hips.

"Well, small fry! What are you doing up so late? Why the big howls?"

Still they cried, ignoring their abandoned toys. Around the room hobby horses sat quietly, alphabet blocks lay scattered, and picture books and sprawling dolls littered the floor.

"So," she said. "Your nurses ran out on you, did they? Left you to shift for yourselves? Never mind, youngsters, Aunt Tanya will look after you. Take hands, now, and come with me."

When the alarm rang in the Bar, a glass crashed to the floor as the only son of the deuterium millionaire jumped to his feet and ran.

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Professor Larrabee deliberately finished his drink, gently put down the glass, and stood up.

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"Our final spacecap," he said. "Well, Alan, it's been a good trip, but I can't say I'm surprised at its ending. The ship had the wrong name, from the beginning."

"We'd better hurry, Professor. We must find Tanya and the Halls."

"You're walking too fast for me, my boy. Don't worry. They're in Boat F, with us, and we're sure to find them there."

In the corridor leading to F station their way was blocked by the crowd, many of them still wearing the grotesque costumes of the masquerade dance, now pale and tawdry in the bright lights. Stunned with horror, they stared through the transparent wall at the gaping socket where the lifeboat had been. Crewmen formed a tight circle around the truck and the man who lay moaning on the floor. Pistols ready, they held back the crowd while Dr. Willoughby administered an intravenous shot of panedol, and Captain Evans, kneeling beside the dying man, tried to catch his whispers.

"It was Mr. Jasperson, sir. He got me before I could do a thing. I tried to stop him."

"You say you warned him?"

"I called to him, sir, and said the boat wasn't ready. But he didn't give me a chance. He shot me."

The boy closed his eyes, and Evans stood up.

"Through an error, ladies and gentlemen, Boat F has already gone. You will please go to the other stations and wait for assignment to the other boats."

The crowd whispered, staring uncomprehendingly at the Captain's stony face.

"Did you ever teach mathematics, Professor?" Alan murmured. "How do you divide fifteen hundred people among four boats?"

Larrabee only smiled, a faraway look in his eyes.

A frightened voice cried, high and loud, "But there won't be enough room!"

Someone screamed. Someone else started to run. In a few seconds a mob of running, panic-stricken people jammed the corridor, fighting their way out. Alan and the professor, an old man and an invalid, had no strength to resist and were helplessly carried along by the living wave.

"Stop those people!" shouted the Captain.

A gun fired into the air and the mob hesitated, then surged on, shouting, past the lounges, to join the throngs waiting at the other stations.

"It's no use," said Evans wearily. "Chief Thayer. Send men to all the stations to guard the boats. You proceed to Boat E and load it first. If any person tries to force his way in, shoot to kill!" [Pg 51]

In their small cabin, Dorothy Hall raised herself on one elbow and looked down at her sleeping husband. His hair was rumpled, his face calm and placid.

"Tom," she whispered. "Wake up, Tom!" Mumbling sleepily, he opened his eyes, then smiled and tried to draw her down to him.

"Wait, Tom. Did you hear the Captain's message?"

"What message?"

"I was so sleepy I didn't understand it very well. Something about the ship, and we must all go to our lifeboats."

"You must have been dreaming. What time is it?"

"Not quite midnight. Do you think everything is all right?"

"Of course. You just had a bad dream. The *Star Lord* can't be in any trouble. You know that."

"Don't you think we ought to go see?"

Playfully he tousled her hair. "Trying to get away from your husband? Tired of me already?"

Relaxing, she snuggled down beside him with a happy sigh.

"I'd never be tired of you, Tom, in a million years. Wherever you are, that's where I want to be, always."

She closed her eyes.

The children were no longer afraid, and they had stopped crying. Leading them through the maze of corridors towards Boat station F, Tanya laughed and told them jokes until, reaching a corner, she suddenly found the passage blocked with a screaming mass of people, fighting, gouging, jamming the hall so that forward movement was almost impossible. She drew back, huddling the children behind her.

"No place for us here, youngsters," she said. "Let's go back, where it isn't so noisy."

Obediently they followed her back to the library, where she settled them in her favorite corner and picked up the abandoned chalk and paper.

"Now Aunt Tanya will tell you a story," she said. "And if you're very good and don't cry at all, I'll even draw you some pictures to go with the story. Once upon a time...."

There was not enough room. A lifeboat which had been designed to carry two hundred and fifty persons could not suddenly expand to take in three hundred and seventy-five, although Chief Thayer did his best. At Boat E he stood with drawn pistol, sorting the crowd, and ordering them one by one through the port according to custom as ancient as the race.

[Pg 52]

"Women and children first," he repeated, again and again. "*Women and children first!*"

They could hear from distant corridors an occasional shout and the clatter of running feet, but the first panic had subsided, and under the menace of the crew's guns the people had become subdued.

White-faced men stepped back and made themselves inconspicuous in the shadows, watching their wives and children file through the port, and looking after them hungrily. Once, a man screamed and tried to crash through the cordon. Thayer shot him, and he fell moaning to the floor. Dr. Willoughby moved through the crowd, soothing the hysterical, jollying the frightened, until he spied Alan Chase standing at the edge of the group.

He pushed through to Alan and threw his arm around the bony shoulder, encouragingly.

"I'm assigned to this first boat, Chase, and they'll want you in one of the others. We want at least one medical man in each boat. But I must warn you—" he look-ed around cautiously, but they might have been alone in a desert for all chance there was of anyone's listening to them, "be sure to get off in Boats B or D. Don't wait for Boat A."

"What difference does it make?"

"Boat A lies above two of the Piles that had to be dumped, and the radioactivity index is sure to be high. Normal people won't be harmed in the brief time they'll be on board if they're rescued, and if they're not rescued, of course, it won't matter anyway. Even you might not be harmed, but with your condition you shouldn't take the risk."

"But does it really matter?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we'd counted on my reaching Almazin III quickly and living in an inert atmosphere in order to cure the neosarcoma. Now that the *Star Lord* is wrecked, I may not be able to get there for months, and that will be too late. If I'm going to die, I'd rather stay with the ship and get it over with."

"Don't be an idiot, doctor! Don't you realize how much better you are? The mitosis was definitely decreasing the last time I checked you. This delay won't be fatal, I'm convinced."

Alan shook his head skeptically.

"Dr. Willoughby!" called Thayer. "Boat ready to launch!"

A grip of the hand, and he had gone. The port shut.

Boat E, jammed with three hundred and twenty-five persons, released itself and shot out into star-studded space.

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Boat B was the second to be launched, and Boat D followed.

Keeping to the back of the crowds, Alan watched, admiring the efficiency with which Chief Thayer worked, shouting, wheedling, cursing, until three hundred and thirty people were squeezed in, like frightened cattle in a pen.

There remained only Boat A, and from the shadows he watched nearly five hundred tense faces, drawn with the anxiety of wondering who was to go, and who remain.

Good thing the women and children had all been taken off in the earlier boats, Alan reflected thankfully. It would be heartbreaking enough for Thayer to have to choose among the men, and say to some, *Go*, and to some, *Stay*.

Captain Evans appeared, flanked by Thayer and Stacey, each with drawn pistol. He faced the silent crowd and spoke with terrifying calm.

"I will take charge here," he said. "I cannot ask Thayer to take on such a responsibility. I am sure it is not necessary to tell you that there is not room enough in this boat for all of you. If rescue

ships arrive in time, those who must remain behind will be taken off. If not—I realize that no human being has the right arbitrarily to send some men to life and keep others for possible death. But since choice of some sort is necessary to avoid a panic which might result in unnecessary deaths, I shall choose which ones are to enter this boat, as nearly as possible according to the random positions in which you are now standing. Anyone trying to change his place will be shot!"

No one moved. No one spoke.

"Thayer, you will send in two crewmen to help run the boat. You yourself will be the last man in, to take command. As for the rest—" He paused, wiped his hand over his reddened eyes, and staggered. In a few seconds he had regained control of himself, and with shoulders erect he pointed his arm and called out,

"You go, and you, and you, and you...."

Alan heard a low chuckle behind him, and turned to find Professor Larrabee.

"What a climax, my boy! Do you believe in premonitions, now?"

"Why haven't you gone?"

"Too old, Alan. I don't want to go. My life is done. But I can't say I really mind. It's been a wonderful adventure, sharing the life and death of the *Star Lord*."

The boat was nearly half full when the tense quiet was broken by the treble voice of a child.

Captain Evans whirled to face the corridor, along which came Tanya, holding to the hands of the two smallest children, while the others clung tightly to the stiff folds of her taffeta gown. [Pg 54]

His stare was ghastly. "Miss Taganova! I thought you'd gone! Where have you been? And why weren't these children sent off in the other boats? Didn't you hear the warnings?"

"Somebody's always scolding me for being late," said Tanya, lightly. "But I really couldn't help it. These children seem to have been abandoned by the nursemaids and lost or forgotten by their parents. I have been trying to amuse them until it seemed safe to bring them to you. If I'd come before they would have been trampled to death."

"Well, luckily it's not too late. In you go, the lot of you."

The six youngsters were scrambling through the port, and the Captain had resumed his "You, and you, and you...." when Alan darted forward and clasped Tanya's hand.

"I just want you to know," he whispered. "If the *Star Lord* had gone on to port I'd never have dared say it. But since it can't matter now, Tanya—I'd like you to know—"

She smiled. "I know, Alan. I've known it for many days. And I'd have made a good doctor's wife, I think!" Her lips were trembling as she turned away and entered the port.

"Dr. Chase!" roared the Captain. "What are you doing here? You were supposed to go on Boat D!"

"There isn't room for all of us, Captain. I thought the healthy men should have the preference. I prefer to stay here."

"Personal preferences mean nothing at all at this moment. Get into the boat."

"Let some one else have my place, sir. I haven't long to live anyway, you know. I don't mind staying behind."

The Captain steadied his pistol. "Get in. That's an order. This is no time for mock heroics. You should have gone with Boat D to look after the women and children. Whether you live a month or a year doesn't matter to me, but it is important that you use your medical skill to take care of these people until they are rescued."

With a dazed look, Alan walked through the port.

"And you, and you, and you...."

Thayer called out at last. "That's all, sir. No more room."

"None at all? You're sure?"

"Certain, sir. The talley is three hundred and thirty...."

Nearly a hundred men remained in the corridor. Ashen-faced but calm, they stared at the rectangular doorway which would have meant a chance to live. [Pg 55]

"In you go, Thayer," said the Captain. "Prepare to release."

Into the tense silence broke the brittle clicking of high heels as Tom and Dorothy Hall sauntered up, arm in arm, a puzzled frown on their foreheads.

The Captain moaned. "Another woman! Wait, Thayer. We've one more woman here. Which one of you men in Boat A will volunteer to give up his place to young Mrs. Hall?"

An elderly man walked serenely back into the ship, and joined the others.

Dorothy looked bewildered. "But what's happened? We kept hearing so much noise we decided to get up. Is something wrong?"

"We're abandoning ship. This gentleman is giving up his place to you. Get in."

She clung to Tom's arm. "Not without my husband!"

"Mrs. Hall! We can't waste time on hysterics. This ship might be vaporized while we're talking. A man has given up his chance at life for you. Get in."

She held back. "And Tom?"

With a haggard smile, Tom pat-ted her shoulder. "Never mind me, honey. You go jump in. I'll be all right."

"Mrs. Hall, I'm willing to deprive one man of his chance, because you are a woman. But I will not ask anyone else to give up his place to your husband. Every man in the lifeboat has as much right to his life as your husband, and so has every man who must be left behind. Go, now. It's your last chance!"

Her face had become calm and all hint of tears was gone. Without hesitating she looked up at her husband and spoke softly.

"Tell the man to go back. Whether we live or we die, we'll do it together." Smiling at Tom, she took his hand to lead him away.

"Come, Tom. Let's go look at the sky. I believe these stars are real ones."

"Close the port!"

The door slid shut. A minute's long wait, then the boat released herself and shot out into the blackness. The last of the lifeboats was gone.

Professor Larrabee materialized from the shadows and approached Evans with outstretched hand.

"Well done, Captain!"

"You here? I'd hoped you'd gone with the others."

"What for? My life is over. I've had my pleasures. And this way, I shall be seeing my wife all the sooner. She always loved adventure, and I shall tell her all about the Thakura Ripples. Will you join me in a drink, Captain Evans?" [Pg 56]

"No, thank you." His voice broke. "No. I need to be alone." He turned and strode away.

In the privacy of his cabin he buzzed operations.

"What news, Wyman?"

"Slow, steady climb, sir. All piles have passed critical stage."

Slowly he replaced the phone, and covered his eyes.

Huddled against the wall of boat F, Burl Jasperson stared out of the observation port, his cold eyes intent on the distant, fast receding lights of the *Star Lord*. Now that he felt himself to be safe, he was weak and exhausted. Beside him sat his secretary, a wizened little man who stared numbly at his clasped hands.

Jasperson coughed.

"Yes, Mr. Jasperson?"

"Get me a panedol tablet and a glass of water. I don't suppose there's any ice, but if there is, put in some ice. I'm thirsty."

Meekly the secretary shuffled down the long length of the boat, solitary as a ghost, to the cubicle labelled Rations. He was gone a long time, thought Burl, and when at last he returned his feet were dragging more than ever.

"There isn't any water, Mr. Jasperson."

"You idiot! There's got to be water."

"I couldn't find any, Mr. Jasperson."

"Davis!" he roared. "Davis, get me a glass of water!"

Davis looked out from the control room. "Get it yourself. This isn't the ship's dining room any

more, Jasperson. I've got other things to do now than taking orders from you."

"But I don't know where it is!"

"All right. I'll get it for you this time and show you where it's kept, but after this you wait on yourself."

Leading the way to Rations, he opened a steel cupboard and reached in. Suddenly anxious, he groped about frantically, then cried, "But there isn't any water!"

Jasperson swallowed, with dry throat.

"There isn't any water?" he asked plaintively. "But I'm *thirsty!*"

As the hours crawled by, Jasperson sat in the vast emptiness of the boat and stared out at the alien stars. He could not bear to look at the long rows of empty seats, seats that might have been occupied by living men, two hundred and forty-seven silent, omnipresent accusers. His eyes were glowing coals, his skin sagged in wrinkles over his haggard face, and his voice was a mere croak. [Pg 57]

"Are you *sure* there's no water?" he asked again. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, I'm certain, as I've told you a thousand times," said Steward Davis. "Don't you suppose I'm thirsty too? If you hadn't been in such a hurry to sneak away we'd have been all right. That man you shot was probably getting ready to load the water tanks."

"But you told me the boat was all provisioned!"

"I thought it was, when I saw the tail-end of that truck! But you didn't give me time to check. Why did you have to be in such a hurry?"

Groaning, Jasperson turned again to peer at the unfamiliar suns.

"How long will it take us to reach an inhabited planet, do you think?"

"I don't know, because I don't know just where we are. With luck, maybe a week, maybe two."

"How long can we live without water?"

"Longer than you'd think. Twelve to fifteen days if we don't move around. We may be able to land somewhere before then. If not—" His voice rose to a sudden shriek. "*What good are those twenty-five thousand credits going to do me now?*"

The secretary sat in numb collapse, but Jasperson prowled the room, up and down, up and down, past the rows of empty seats, while Davis sat and watched him with glittering eyes. Jasperson's head was aching, and he was aware, all at once, that he was out of breath, as though he had been climbing a steep hill under a broiling sun.

"Have to see to this," he muttered. "They can't treat me this way." Stumbling, he lurched down the aisle towards Davis, staggering like a drunken man.

"Got to have more air, Davis. This won't do."

Insolently, Davis got up and looked at the oxygen indicator set in the wall.

"Needle's falling a bit. I'll turn on another tank." He touched the switch, then sat down again.

Jasperson began to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

With shaking hand he pointed, laughing harder, his sagging cheeks quivering as he roared.

"It's those chairs! Ever see such silly chairs? The way they sit there, and look at you?"

"Hey, man, you're drunk! I wonder...."

He got up to look at the oxygen dial again. The needle had fallen still further.

"Where's that oxygen?" he shouted. He rushed into the inner compartment and was back immediately, his eyes black with terror. [Pg 58]

"No air reserve either! Only that one tank! You great, blundering, condemned fool! A man can live for fifteen days without water, but he can't live ten minutes without air. We're done for!"

Jasperson giggled.

Davis collapsed, and he, too, began to laugh, a helpless, gasping laugh. They had entirely forgotten the self-effacing secretary, but the noise of their dying laughter did not disturb him. He had already fallen sideways in his chair, and would never wake again.

On the *Star Lord*, Tom and Dorothy sat in the empty lounge, looking through the observation port at the real stars that studded the void. They were holding hands. They were not afraid, and there was nothing they needed to say.

Some of the doomed passengers sat in the Bar, drinking steadily. Others sat and stared at nothingness. Professor Larrabee lay in his cabin, his face turned to the wall, his eyes closed. But he was not sleeping. He was thinking of his wife, and a smile clothed his face.

* * *

In his cabin Captain Josiah Evans waited alone. His hair was almost white, now, his cheeks were sunken, and all semblance of youth had left him. Knowing the futility of his action, nevertheless he completed the day's entry in the ship's log, and closed the volume.

As the hours crept by he noticed that the temperature in the room was rising. Once more, for the last time, he called Operations.

"It's no use, Wyman. Let the Piles alone. It's only a matter of hours now—or perhaps minutes."

"Shall I cast loose the other Piles, sir?"

"No, no use in that, since you can't jettison Piles One, Two and Three. When they go, we all go. It's impossible, now, that any rescue ship could get to us in time. You've done a good job, Wyman. You are now released from duty."

His hands were sweating, his whole body was wet from the high summer torridness of the room. Captain Evans wiped his sticky hands on his handkerchief and picked up the little red book, *Ley's Space Ships*. Opening the book, he read for the last time the well-loved page. Then he took up his pen and made a new notation in the margin.

"*Star Lord: Lost, May 26, 2421, on the Thakura Ripples.*"

He paused a moment, and then with firm, steady strokes he wrote the final entry: "*Destroyed by the arrogance of her owners, and the criminal pride and weakness of her Captain.*"

He put down the pen, and laid his head on his desk.

[Pg 59]

Hour after hour Boat A circled the dying *Star Lord*, its weary passengers tense with hope for the all but impossible rescue. Alan sat next to Tanya, guarding the sleeping children.

Suddenly she sat up. "What's that? Out there?"

Over the loudspeaker came Thayer's voice. "We have successfully made contact with a rescue ship. A space cruiser will reach us in approximately eight hours."

Tanya scarcely heard him. She was still peering out, her eyes on the faint lights of the *Star Lord*.

"Look!" she cried.

"Shut your eyes!" shouted Thayer. "Everybody turn your head!"

Far out in space where the *Star Lord* had been was a brilliant red glow, like many suns. It changed, suddenly, to a blinding light, so bright that it was more blue than white, then vanished.

Man had not yet made himself Lord of the Stars.

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