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arrival at anxiety

by ... Jerome Bishop

The long trip through space was nerve-shattering to body and mind. But most of all the crew lived in mortal fear of—journey's end.

IT WAS LIKE a speck in the eye—tiny, but impossible to ignore. It hung there in front of them, always in plain view, an infinitesimal beam of light from a far-away sun deflected spaceward by one of its spinning planets. But as the speck grew daily larger and nearer, the crew of the *Golden Queen* grew proportionately more sensitive to it—inversely as the square of the distance.

Shaw, the navigator, spoke for the first time in more than an hour. "Some day," he said, "you won't have to twist your neck into a porthole to see the sky you're riding on. They'll make these ships transparent, and thousands of passengers will sit in lounge chairs and case the entire visible universe. Whenever they like, they'll—"

He stopped without finishing. It occurred to him that he was not only whistling in the dark, but had expressed himself similarly before in practically identical language. His attempt at conversation was greeted with complete silence—a silence that had grown from nervousness to fear. Not that there was

The merits of the "surprise twist" as an artistically effective literary device has been debated pro and con by critics of all persuasions since O. Henry first introduced it to popular fiction. We've always believed that when it is added merely as a flippit it cannot redeem an otherwise uninspired story. But as it is used here by Jerome Bishop in a story gem-brilliant throughout it crashes in your brain like a thunderclap.

any actual panic on board. The fear was restrained, controlled by proven methods.

Captain Olson was quietly playing solitaire on one end of the tiny table in the middle of the cabin. On the other end Schwartz, the engineer, was studying his notes again. Of the crew of twelve, one was on watch forward, the rest on routine jobs, at recreation or asleep.

Shaw turned his eyes back to his own reading, *Astral Navigation*, a handbook written by a college professor who had never been off the Earth. He resolved that he wouldn't be the first to break the next silence.

The *Golden Queen* had been cruising for forty-nine days—Earth days, divided by her chronometers into twenty-four equal parts—and should reach her destination in less than a week. Like all the Federated Globe craft she was compact, carrying not an ounce of surplus mass, or a cubic inch of unnecessary volume. Oxygen, supplies, food, fuel had been metered impartially into her storage tanks. If she ran short—well, the chemist could produce a little more of anything really vital; enough certainly for a few days.

It had never happened. What did happen was that the whole arrangement was wearing on the nerves. You couldn't make a gesture in the miniature cabin without bumping into something, couldn't relax in a chair without tripping somebody.

Shaw summed it up. "Dammit," he said, "I can't stretch out in the bunk anymore. My hair's grown too much."

Add to this the uncertainty which still attended interplanetary flight, and the fact that, for "security" reasons, no communication could be maintained with Earth, and you came up with a crew that was inevitably jittery. But on this flight there was something more to be added—a dread of their destination.

There was not one of them who, at the takeoff, would have stayed behind, or willingly waited for some future flight. None would have consented to live out his days gravity-shackled to the surface of any planet he had ever seen. From Captain Olson, who had made fifteen major flights and was incredibly old—over thirty-five, it was said—to Shaw, the rookie, space was in their blood. Yet the half-dark, half-brilliant planet that brooded in the ship's eye, the planet that was their landfall, frightened them.

"Lord, it's hot in here!" Schwartz made a quick gesture, and rose from his chair abruptly.

The ship's gravity was not adequate for a move such as this. He hit the foamlite ceiling, pivoted about, returned to the floor and glared at Shaw, who glared back.

It was Shaw's turn to watch the ship's temperature, and he and Schwartz had had this argument before. He got up with exaggerated

carefulness, went to the port side of the cabin and read the instrument.

"Sixty-eight, sir," he said mincingly and added a delicate sneer.

Olson stood up, quickly but with precision, and stepped between them. "Your watch, Mr. Shaw," he said briefly. The chronometer showed four hours of the fiftieth day.

Without effort the *Golden Queen* glided, swimming through space at about fifty thousand miles an hour. The reckoning of speed which could be made by the light entering her eye was reasonably accurate. The Captain could judge almost as well by the rate at which her rockets dwindled as she left a field of heavy force, until finally she was cruising idly, making only the effort to correct her course.

She could easily have been accelerated to any imaginable velocity. But Captain Olson, like every competent commander in space, always reserved more than adequate fuel for the landing. In her shining hull was mirrored all the starry universe. No light or heat entered except by the eye in her bow, which was set on her destination and automatically controlled her course, allowing for the displacement of the planet in its orbit.

So she floated through time and space toward her meeting with the forbidding planet, serenely as a Sun. She was no virgin, perhaps, but she was rarely beautiful.

It was her beauty that lured men aboard to make a crew. On the

surface of a planet she was forever poised for space, and the mystery of the stars hung about her like a trailing nebula. They cursed her, though, for her efficiency. Once under weigh, she was almost automatic.

The work of manning her was reduced to a series of periodic checks. Most crewmen, after a few weeks in space, found themselves wishing that they could discover something wrong—even something vitally wrong—just to relieve the boredom of routine. The *Golden Queen's* present crew were no exception. So the common malaise of space travel, a composite of several causes, was growing in them.

Nobody felt apologetic for the fear that was fermenting with uncertainty. It was indefinite but by no means unfounded. There were plenty of stories. Ships landed, and their crews were never heard of again on Earth. Reception parties whisked them away—under the surface, it was supposed—and they were gone. On the other hand, ships frequently settled on the surface of the fateful planet ahead and the crews went about their business unmolested or were even received with special honors. The inhabitants were unpredictable.

If only there were some way of knowing ahead of time, a resourceful and determined ship's crew might find a method of dealing with unfriendly natives, or delay the landing till circumstances changed. But there was no way.

Good luck would make their venture come out right, and no other force known to spacemen could affect it in the least. Captain Olson, therefore, a crafty sailor and a brave man, allowed his ship to hold her course without interference.

Shaw came off watch and spent half his sack time going to sleep. After the alarm roused him and he had unfuzzed his brain with coffee, he looked again at the approaching planet hanging in space like a basketball. A quick calculation showed him clearly now that the satellite which had come from behind the planet two days ago was going to intersect their course. It was a sizeable body and it was essential to avoid not only actual contact with it, but also the sink-hole of its gravity.

It was up to him to calculate an alteration in their course or their velocity which would by-pass the hazard at the least cost in time and fuel. He reported the situation to the Captain and went to work.

As he worked, doubt hung over his shoulder like a shadow. He wanted to impress the Captain with the absolute accuracy of his reckonings. So the altered course must not be too long, too expensive—or too safe. Yet it must take them unerringly past the orbit of the satellite and set up the ship for her final drive straight to the planet. He made the reckoning close, allowing only the slightest deviation from an absolute balance of the vectors.

When he turned it in, Captain Olson studied the figures for several seconds but said nothing. That air of doubt which was the *Golden Queen's* atmosphere had even him in its grip.

In four days everybody aboard was living on sheer nerve and discipline. Their faith in navigational science was being progressively shot to pieces, for the satellite was rushing toward them at a speed that made them shrink away from the ship's bow. By the time Shaw was feverishly rechecking his figures, it had obscured the rest of the universe. Shaw woke up the Captain, who was in fact not asleep.

"There's a mistake, sir. Sorry." It seemed all he could say.

Captain Olson did not reply. Together they made the correction. Rockets roared portside. The satellite shot dizzily across the *Golden Queen's* field of vision and disappeared at such a distance that they could have seen a man on the surface. In that desolate area, however, no men lived.

Shaw, who had read a little psychology, thought he knew how it had happened. In weighing the vectors he had unconsciously been influenced by a deep conviction that a definite crash on the satellite was better than an uncertain landing on the planet. He did not try to explain this to the Captain. He had a feeling that the Captain knew all about it.

The loss of fuel and the sound of their own rockets echoing from

the surface gave them something to think about while the *Queen* drove across the last intervening emptiness and began to circle the planet. Olson personally remained on watch now. He was the first to see their objective, a great landing field at the edge of a waterway.

Then the *Queen's* eye, focused on the thick cross of the distant spaceport, showed a series of tiny dots rising, like bees from a hollyhock. In a matter of minutes these lightning-fast objects were swarming around them.

Shaw manipulated the transmitter furiously, identified his ship. The *Golden Queen* was checking her fall progressively. The little craft kept a tight cordon around her. Into the receiver came, in idiomatic English, exact instruc-

tions for landing. Then Shaw put the question.

"Who won?" he said tersely.

"Who won?" The voice in the receiver was puzzled. Then there was a chuckle. "Oh. The Social Conservatives won the election. You're okay."

They all shouted at once, even Olson at the controls. They laughed immoderately in pure pleasure, beating each other on the back. They were safe! The *Golden Queen*, snorting frightful bursts of energy from her nose, settled, hesitated, placed her landing gear gently but irrevocably upon her native Earth—their native Earth. The only planet, Captain Olson often said grimly, where he was ever afraid to make the approach for a landing.