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THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

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Volume 9

FEBRUARY, 1959

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Next issue on sale January 1, 1959

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, February, 1959, published 10 times a year (monthly, except for October and December) by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyright 1958 by Columbia Publications, Inc. 36c per copy; yearly subscriptions \$3.00. Printed in the U. S. A.

Novelet

DREAMBOAT

by A. Bertram

Chandler



Ship's bio-chemists weren't supposed to experiment on their own — but all of them did. And the effect of Diego Ribiera's dehydrated mushrooms was out of this world ...

THAT WAS the voyage that I found Lynn, and the voyage that I lost her. That was the voyage that we carried the little Mexican Bio-Chemist, Diego Ribiera was his name, who was partly responsible for all that happened. Partly responsible. I say—the greater degree of re-

sponsibility should have been borne by certain crew members who let their dislike of the little man lead them into an act of spitefulness that imperiled the ship.

Ribiera was blamed, of course, and is no longer with us. His first voyage as an officer of the Interstellar Transport Commission was also his last. Had it not been for the pressure brought to bear by the Rhine Institute—and the Commission is utterly dependent upon the Institute for the supply of Psionic Communications Officers—Diego would have faced trial. As it was, he escaped with dismissal from the Service, and a severe reprimand—and is now working quite happily at Duke University. No doubt the results of his research will be published eventually, but I have no intention of waiting that long.

I am writing this mainly to get myself into the right frame of mind and also, I suppose, as an apology for what I am about to do. Legally speaking, it will be desertion; furthermore, I shall be committing the unforgivable sin of putting my woman before my ship. I'd

like to apologize, Captain Saunders, for any inconvenience that I shall be causing. I assure you, though, that all my papers are up to date and that young Ferguson—he will make as good a Chief Officer as he does a Second, I hope that he will be allowed to hold his acting rank—is quite capable of taking over. After all, no one man aboard a spaceship is indispensable. You might, too, forward this manuscript to the Institute after you have read it. It may give them a useful lead in their research.

IT WAS ON the morning of Departure Day that I first met Ribiera. I was in my cabin, my slipstick running hot, trying to work out the exact location of the center of gravity with all cargo, stores, propellant, crew and passengers on board. I was in the middle of the tricky calculations when I heard a timid tap at my door, which was open. I ignored it. After a second or so it was repeated. I swung around in my swivel chair to see who it was.

Even in his too-new uniform Diego Ribiera looked like

anything but a spaceman. He was small—although that was nothing exceptional; the Commission is apt to consider that the physical advantages of small stature outweigh the psychological disadvantages—and dapper, too dapper. His complexion was too sallow, his black hair too glossy.

"Excuse me," he said getting off on the wrong foot at once, "are you the First Officer of this boat?"

"I am the *Chief Officer*," I snapped. "And this is not a boat."

"What is it, then?"

"*She*," I told him, "is a *ship*."

I relented then. He was so obviously a first-tripper, straight from the College of Astronautical Ecology at Kew, and could not be expected to know any more about ships than I would know about, say, Mycology. I got up from my seat, stuck out my hand.

"My name's Gordon," I told him. "Bill Gordon. And you'll be Mr. Ribiera, our new Bio-Chemist."

"Yes, Mr. Gordon," he replied. "I couldn't find any of

the other officers, except a lady with zig-zag stripes on her epaulettes, and she said that she was far too busy to show half-baked farmers around the boat—ship, I mean. So I wondered if you would be so good..."

I TOLD HIM, "That will have been our Mary McCarthy you met. Our Chief Steward. She's always far too busy to do anything for anybody. Anyhow, I think I can spare a few minutes. I'll show you where your cabin is first—I suppose you've brought all your gear to the spaceport?—and then I'll take you to Hydroponics."

"This is a big boat—ship," he said as I led him through the alleyways.

"Wait till you get in the Alpha Class liners. The old *Game Fish* is a boat compared with them."

"The *Game Fish*? I don't understand."

"You signed on the *Gamma Pisces*, but nobody calls her that. This is your dogbox. Small but palatial, and handy to the Farm to cut down walking time. The Farm, of course,

is your own private territory. You're a departmental head, and a very important one. You'll let the Chief Steward and the Chef have what *you* think they should have, not what *they* think they should have. You are responsible for the balanced ecology of the ship."

We left this little cabin, walked along the alleyway to the Hydroponics Room.

"They still call it Hydroponics," I said. "It's a relic of the days when all the Bio-Chemist had to worry about was plant life. Spacemen used to call it The Garden, then. Now we call it The Farm." I pulled the key out of the pocket of my shorts. "This is yours now," I said, handing it to him. "The key to your kingdom."

HE OPENED the door, darted inside like a little, eager animal.

"They have one at Kew," he said, "but it's so different seeing it aboard a real boat—ship. And the lay-out's not quite the same..."

"You'll soon get used to it. That's the Sewage Farm over there—the algae tanks. This,"

I said, patting the side of the vat, "is Ferdinand..."

"Ferdinand?"

"The Bull. Finest beef tissue culture, guaranteed to melt in mouth—except after our Chef's been murdering it."

"And those will be the yeast vats there?"

"Yes. The Brewery."

"The Brewery?"

"Your predecessor, Karl Gerling, used to brew beer for the boys. Good stuff, too. Far better than the dishwater supplied in the stores."

"But, Mr. Gordon—surely that is against the Commission's Regulations."

"Of course it is—but every Bio-Chemist does it. We had one in the *Virgin Betty*—*Beta Virginis*—who used to make vodka. Good stuff it was, too. Others have specialized in wine..."

"Tequila, perhaps," he murmured. "But no. I am sorry. There are not the materials. Beer it must be."

"Don't say that I told you," I warned him. "It's just one of those things that everybody does and everybody ignores."

"I have read the Commission's Regulations," he said,

"and I note, too, that they forbid private experiments. I am carrying out some... seeds to a friend on Montezuma. I should like to try to grow some during the voyage."

"As long as it's nothing poisonous," I told him.

"No. It is nothing poisonous."

"As long as it's not man-eating orchids, nobody will worry about it," I assured him. "Anyhow, she's all yours. Come and see me again in half an hour's time and I'll take you in to morning coffee, and introduce you to the others. The Old Man should be down at about that time, too."

I left him to it, and returned to my room and my interrupted calculations.

DEPARTURE Day is always the same. Everything that can go wrong does go wrong. Small, but important, orders of stores go a-missing—and everybody, of course, comes to worry the Mate about them. Every time that I picked up my slipstick there would be somebody new at my door—Evan Lloyd, the Reaction Engineer, moaning about a miss-

ing cadmium damper for his Pile; George Broderick, in charge of the Interstellar Drive, worrying me about lubricating oil for his complexity of cock-eyed gyroscopes; Mary McCarthy expecting me to drop everything and do something about the dehydrated mushrooms that had not been delivered. Every five minutes, of course, the Old Man would buzz and demand the CG—and get more and more hostile as the answer was not forthcoming.

THEN THERE was the final checking of everything by ship's staff and the Commission's inspectors, after which the passengers boarded. At this time I was already in the Control Room, in the nose of the ship, looking out through the big ports and the yellow wastes of the South Australian desert. There's one thing about Port Woomera—you never feel very sorry to blast up and away from it.

The others were all at their stations—the Old Man sitting at his controls, the Second Mate at the radar altimeter, the juniors at their telephones.

Radio and Psionic Communications offices were manned, as were Reaction and Mannschenn Drive engine rooms. Down in the passenger deck the Purser, the Chief Steward and the Stewardesses would be looking to the comfort and safety of the passengers, with the Doctor and the Nursing Sister standing by in case required. Little Diego Ribiera would be in The Farm, worrying about the effects of acceleration upon his precious plants and tissue cultures. I found myself hoping that he would prove as good a brewer as had his predecessor. Yes, Sterling had been a good Brewer, but a poor Bio-Chemist. He had allowed the Chief Steward and the Chef far too much of a free run in Hydroponics...

I looked at the chronometer, saw that it was time for the last formalities.

"*Gamma Pisces* to Port Control." I said into the microphone. "*Gamma Pisces* to Port Control Request permission to proceed."

"Permission granted," came the voice of Captain Hall, the Port Master.

"Permission granted, sir," I told the Old Man.

"Thank you, Mr. Gordon. Sound the alarms, and then count her up and out."

I SOUNDED the alarm bells for the regulation twenty second clangour. When I switched off, I could hear faintly—through the shell of the ship—the wailing of the Port Woomera sirens. One last truck was scuttling over the sand, like a frightened beetle, for the shelter of the blast walls.

"Thirty," I said into the microphone, watching the sweep second hand. "Twenty five... Twenty... Fifteen... Ten... Nine... Eight... Seven.."

On the word *Zero*, we lifted, slowly at first and then with increasing acceleration. The desert and the buildings below were blotted out by a cloud of smoke and dust. Overhead, the sky darkened and the stars began to appear. My body was heavy, sinking deeply into the padding of my chair, and I wondered—as I always wondered—what it must have been like in the days when space-

men and passengers had to endure really brutal accelerations, before atomic power had replaced the inefficient chemical fuels.

The rest was routine—the cutting of the Drive and the swinging of the ship to her correct heading, the short resumption of rocket power to give her impetus in the right direction and then, at last, the starting of the Mannschenn Drive unit. The stars winked out, and outside our ports was the formless nothingness that we all knew and that we all, somehow, feared.

The voyage had begun.

II

IT HAS BEEN absurd, perhaps, to have written so much about the routine commencement of a routine voyage. You gentlemen at the Rhine Institute will know all about it; even if you have never been in Deep Space yourselves you will have seen films and read books, and those of you who are telepaths will have shared the thoughts and impressions of your graduates

who are Psionic Communications Officers.

It has been absurd, perhaps—but it has been deliberate.

Its aim has been the recreation of a mood—and that is essential to my plans. I have had to recall all the details, and the setting of them down on paper has helped. I have to remember how I felt when I pulled myself along the guide rails to the saloon, there to take my seat at my table for the first meal of the voyage.

I was in no mood to deal with passengers. It had been a long day, and a tiring one. I knew already the silly questions I should be asked by the customers sharing my board. "Why can't you keep the rockets running all the way to Montezuma so as to give us a substitute for gravity? Why are the shutters up over all the viewports? How does the Interstellar Drive really work? I read a story once about a ship where the I. D. went wrong, and they all got caught up in a Time Cycle... Could that happen here?" And so on. And so on.

The two men at my table

were already there, already seated, when I came in. I pulled myself to my seat, adjusted the lapstrap over my thighs, introduced myself. One of the passengers was in early middle age—a farmer, I imagined, probably from Castoria, our next planet of call after Montezuma. The other one was a beardless youth. He was, I learned, also going out to Castoria—an emigrant. He looked the type who would ask all the stock silly questions. He did.

WHILE I was coping with the first one—the one about keeping the Interplanetary Drive running all the way to Montezuma—Lynn came in. She swam to the table with the ease of an experienced traveler, acknowledged the half bows that are the only form of courtesy possible in Free Fall—if one rose from the table one would be liable to rise too far and too fast—and slid gracefully into the chair on my right.

I looked at her, and decided that I didn't like her. She was, I thought, a little too sleek, a little too self-con-

tained, a little too elegant. She would, I was sure, find a ship's officer, a farmer and a migrant very boring company and would—although not blatantly—let us know it.

"I'm sorry I interrupted," she said sweetly. "Do carry on, Mr. Gordon. It is Mr. Gordon, isn't it?"

"It is," I said. "Have you met Mr. Wells and Mr. Taine, Miss Verity?"

"Yes. The Purser introduced us all in the Lounge during switchover. But don't let me interrupt you. I'm sure that Mr. Taine must be anxious to hear all about how the Drive works and all the rest of it."

One of the stewardesses came and took our orders.

WHEN THE interruption was over, I said, "We can't run the Reaction Drive for two reasons, Mr. Taine. One is that we just don't carry sufficient reaction mass. The other one is that if we did so we should be changing the mass of the ship, and that, when the Mannschenn Drive is working, would be asking for trouble."

"Just like in the story I

read," he said eagerly. "There was this ship, you see, and somebody fired off the rockets while the Mannschenn Drive was working and got her all caught up in a Time Cycle. They'd go so far—say to next Wednesday—and then find themselves back at last Thursday and have to go through the week again. It was the hero who got them out of it—he had a rocket motor unmounted and carried forward so it would fire out through the nose of the ship..."

"I'm afraid it's nothing so glamorous," I told him. "It's just that if we change the ship's mass while the Drive is running it throws the Drive's automatic controls out of kilter—after all, it's set to deal with a certain, definite mass—and things run hot and start blowing fuses. Then the whole business of lining the ship up for her destination has to be gone through again—which is not exciting, but just hard work."

"I can see how the plates stay on the table," he said. "It's done by magnets. But why should the food stay on the plates?"

"Why shouldn't it?" I countered. "It's just a case of cohesion. Of course, a certain amount of care is necessary whilst wielding one's fork..."

I was careless as I wielded mine. A gob of the Chef's special pat (opinions differed—some said that it was made from processed algae, others that it was made from the ship's sewage before the algae had a chance to get to work on it) flew from my plate and hit Miss Verity under the right eye.

"Thank you for the demonstration," she said coldly. "It helps so much to have an experienced spaceman to advise in these matters."

THE ABSURD incident had the effect of setting the mood for the rest of the meal, and dinner, that night, was one of the Chef's less inspired efforts in any case. It is the custom that the first meal of the voyage shall consist of traditional fare—yeasts and algae—so as to give passengers an idea of what it was like in the old days, before the Hydroponics Room became, in effect, a farm. I'll say this for

our Chef—he always contrived to destroy any false ideas about the glamor of the Good Old Days.

I wasn't sorry when dinner was over.

As soon as I could, I drifted along to the Purser's office, found Kennedy enjoying a surreptitious sip from his own private stock of brandy. He opened a drawer, tossed me a plastibulb.

"I suppose you'd better have one," he said.

"Thanks, although I didn't come for that. I'd just like to skim through the passenger data sheets. It helps with conversation if I have some idea of the backgrounds of the people at my table."

"Help yourself," he replied, handing me the file.

I LEAFED through it.

"Taine," I said, reading aloud. "George. Birthplace Birmingham, England, Terra.... Occupation—circuit spotter. What is a circuit spotter, Ralph?"

"Search me. The engineers might know."

"Wells, Herbert. Grazier, of Hamersham, Castoria..."

"Why didn't you look up Verity, Lynn, first? Rather funny that. Verity Lynn sounds just as good as Lynn Verity. But I'll tell you about her. Born on Caribbea, but educated on Terra. Freelance journalist, and a successful one. Writes a lot for the women's magazines and appears on their video programmes. Specializes in travelogues of planets that have specialized in the revival of old, moribund Terran cultures—such as, for example, Montezuma. Satisfied?"

"Yes, thanks. I know what I can talk about now. Farming on Castoria. Freelance journalism. Circuit spotting. I must see one, or both, of the Chiefs and find out what it's all about."

"As though you cared," he said, smirking.

"It's my business to find out," I said virtuously.

(As a matter of fact I still don't know what a circuit spotter is or does.)

I left Kennedy then, made my way back to the Lounge. I

saw Lynn. She was at one of the small tables, with Wells and Taine in close attendance. Her Caribbean origin was obvious—she was smoking a cigar instead of one of the small, jewelled pipes without which the majority of colonial women would not consider themselves properly dressed. I considered joining them, then decided against it. The affair of the mishandled pat had done little to endear me to her.

I SAW THAT little Ribiera was not among the officers present, so wandered along first to his cabin, then to the Farm. He opened the door of the Hydroponics Room when I sounded the buzzer, let me in.

"Putting the cows to bed?"

I asked fecetiously.

"No, Mr. Gordon. It is that Chef. He came tonight for the material for the meal, and I let him dip his own yeast and algae from the vats. When his dipper was last cleaned I do not know. One vat of algae I cannot save, I have to destroy."

"Considering what they live on," I said, "you wouldn't

think that they'd be fussy. Still—I suppose that there are micro-organisms *and* micro-organisms.."

"Then," he said, "I remembered what you told me, about the activities of my predecessor."

He handed me a plastibulb. "What's this?"

"Beer," he said, grinning whitely.

"Already?"

"It is a poor Bio-Chemist," he told me, "who cannot accelerate natural processes."

I raised the nipple to my lips and sipped. I restrained myself from spitting, restrained myself from remarking that he seemed to have been successful in accelerating the natural process of decay.

"You do not like?" he asked.

"I hate hurting your feelings," I said, "but I do not like. It's even worse than the dishwasher they sell at the bar. You'll have to do better than this, Diego."

"I'll try," he said, looking miserable.

"Don't take it so much to heart. This beer-making is only

a sideline, just something that you do as a favor to the Old Man and the senior officers, in return for the favors they can do you. If you can't make beer—there's always wine. We had one farmer—Lorenzini was his name—who used to turn out Chianti and Vermouth, both of which were as good as any I've had in Italy."

"Yes, there is always wine," he said, brightening.

"There's always wine—but don't let it worry you. Your job is to maintain a balanced ecology, not a Deep Space distillery."

I LET MYSELF drift lazily around the Farm, enjoying the smell of growing things, the warm radiance of the big, artificial sunlight lamps, the musical tinkling of water. I pulled up at one of the tanks, looked curiously at the plants that were growing on some sort of black humus.

"What the hell are these, Diego? Toadstools?"

"No, Mr. Gordon. They are mushrooms. You said yourself that private experiments were allowable."

"Well, not exactly allowable,

but... So they're mushrooms, are they? So the Old Man will be able to have his traditional steak dinner, with all the trimmings, after all on Halfway Night."

"They are mushrooms, but they are not for eating."

"So they *are* poisonous."

"No, Mr. Gordon. They are not poisonous. It is just that they are not the eating kind."

"Seems odd to me. But I've known people to keep some queer vegetable pets—aspidistras and so forth."

"Would you like some more beer, Mr. Gordon?"

"No thank you," I said hastily.

I LEFT THE Farm, made leisurely rounds of the vessel. I looked in on the Duty Engineer in the Reaction Drive engine room, yarned with him for a while while he kept his eye on the Pile and the generators. I dropped into the Mannschenn Drive room, being careful not to look too long and too closely at the complexity of spinning, processing wheels while I passed the time of day with the watchkeeper. There was nobody in the Radio Of-

fice—light speed communications are, of course, useless when the FTL Drive is in operation. The Psionics Communication Office was manned, and I hung around in there for a while, listening, at second hand, to the conversations that Phil Kent our Rhineman, was holding with his opposite numbers aboard other ships in space and in the various spaceports. Then we discussed, half-seriously, what would happen if Fido—the big dog's-brain-tissue-culture psionic amplifier—should become infected with rabies.

Then I went back to my own cabin—by-passing the Lounge—and turned in.

It was a restless sleep, made all the more so by the way in which I dreamed, very vividly, of Lynn Verity.

III

THAT DREAM should have been regarded as what, in fact, it was—a clear indication of the state of affairs in my subconscious mind. My Subconscious knew that I had fallen in love with Lynn at first sight, but it was weeks before I would admit it.

It's obvious enough now. At table, conversation became little more than a duet, with neither Wells nor Taine able to get a word in edgewise. Even worse, so far as our companions were concerned, our conversation took on a sort of shorthand quality. It was no more than the sketchy outlines of a conversation—but we, Lynn and I, were able to fill in all the gaps.

I was attracted and, at the same time, scared. Subconsciously I knew what we were heading into, and I didn't like it. I had seen it happen too many times before. I had seen too many officers falling in love, either with a passenger or some girl on one of the planets of call and, shortly thereafter, resigning from the Service. Deep Space is no life for a married man.

You run across them quite often, these ex-Deep Spacers. You find them as pilots of little, Fourth of July rockets, running short hop ferry services from some dull planet to its even duller satellite. You find them as Assistant Port Masters at minor spaceports. You meet a few who have con-

trived—usually with the aid of their wife's money or connections—to sever their connections with Space entirely. They all tell you the same thing—that they're very happy and wouldn't come back for all the gold of Dorado—but you can see from their eyes that they'd sell their souls for a tall ship and the Long Haul.

That's what I used to think, anyhow. Do I still?

I don't know.

BUT I HAD more worries than the way in which things were building up between Lynn and myself. As well as my own worries, there were all the other ones that were dumped on my plate by one and all. There was Mary McCarthy trotting along to my room or to Control at all hours, mainly to complain about the Bio-Chemist. She was locked out of the Farm, she would say, and that was a thing that never happened in Mr. Sterling's time. Mr. Sterling had let her have a duplicate key, so that she could take supplies of green salads and such at any time that was convenient to her.

The real trouble, as I well knew, was that Karl Sterling had kept her well supplied with beer, in return for favors rendered. Karl Sterling liked Rubenesque women—even when, as in Mary McCarthy's case, their eyes are too small and set too close together, their faces more porcine than human.

The Chef—and he was a friend of Mary's—was always complaining to me about the same thing. Mr. Sterling, he told me, had always let him help himself to the tissue cultures and the yeasts and algae, had let him use his own discretion. All I could tell him was what I told McCarthy—that Ribiera was the head of his own department and would have to carry the can back if anything went wrong with the ecology of the ship.

RIBIERA was beginning to get into my hair too.

"Nobody likes me, Mr. Gordon," he would complain. "Nobody, except you. It is the beer, I think. I try to make them the beer—but it is not my national drink."

"Your beer wouldn't be any-

body's national drink," I told him unkindly. "Not even a Venusian swamp trotter's."

He ignored this.

"I tried to make them the wine..."

"It had," I admitted, "a certain medicinal value..."

"And then there are the Chief Steward and the Chef. They think that they should be free to come and go as they please in *my* Farm. The Chef tried to take my mushrooms, and was very annoyed when I stopped him. He ate one before I could stop him. He was drunk at the time."

"Oh? Was he? I wonder where *he* gets it from?"

"The Captain doesn't like me. The officers don't like me. The passengers don't like me. They call me Dago."

I was annoyed. Racial animosity should have been dead generations ago—yet it still keeps cropping up. The Master of an Interstellar vessel has the power to take disciplinary action against anybody—crew member or passenger—who raises the old, ugly ghosts. I decided that I'd see the Old Man on the subject as soon as little Diego left me.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"No, Mr. Gordon, but that is plenty."

"Have a gin, then." I waited until he had taken the first sip from the bulb. "Now, seeing that you can't make either wine or beer, what about trying your hand at gin?"

"I'll try, Mr. Gordon," he promised.

I HE TRIED, but the result did no more to endear him to his shipmates than had his other efforts. I am sure that his ineptitude in this unofficial branch of his calling was the cause of Captain Saunders' refusing to take seriously the complaints that I laid before him regarding racial animosity. Poor little Ribiera was still Dago, and was treated with contempt by crew and passengers alike, almost without exception.

Oh, yes, there were exceptions. Kent, our First Psionics Communications Officer, was one; Evan Lloyd, the Reaction Engineer, was another. "There's no vice in the little man, Bill," he assured me. "He's not like some people in this ship who take it as a per-

sonal affront if some pump or fan, or whatever, packs up and who expect me to drop everything and rush to fix it. . . .”

“Meaning, of course, our Mary McCarthy and her pal, the Chef.”

“Yes. Meaning Little Mary and the Head Poisoner. Anyone would think that the ship exists only to carry the Catering Department from star to star.”

“Whereas,” I said, “any spaceman knows that the ship exists only to carry the rocket motors from planet to planet.”

“Of course. Joking apart, though, what I like about Diego is that he has no delusions of grandeur. He knows that we’re all parts of a whole, and have to work together.”

LYNN, OF course, was yet another exception. I think that it was the persecution of the little Mexican that drew us together. We were both sorry for him. We both did what we could to make life easier for him. In the evenings, we encouraged him to come and sit with us in the Lounge, and we were often joined by Phil Kent and Evan Lloyd. He loved to

hear us talk of our travels, of ships and strange planets and stranger peoples. He was longing to be assured that he was one of us, a spaceman.

“You will be,” said Evan, “after the Halfway Day.”

“The Halfway Day?” he asked. “Oh, yes. I had forgotten. It is like the Crossing the Line Ceremony that they have aboard surface ships on planets where there are seas.”

“It is,” I said.

“But could you tell me, Mr. Gordon, what is the symbolism. What is the . . . the *meaning*?”

“The central character of Crossing the Line ceremonies,” I said, “is, of course, King Neptune—neptune being the god of the Sea in one of the old religions. He grants permission for the new hands, those who have not crossed the Equator before, to proceed without let or hindrance over and through his territory. We, of course, make Father Time our central figure. We are, in effect, flouting Time when we make our faster-than-light passages.

“Halfway Day itself is a very important day in the

voyage. For weeks we have seen nothing, have been running on whatever information we've been able to get from our mass indicators—and they're far from accurate except at close range. So, on Halfway Day we stop the Drive. We see the stars again—and the sight is welcome, believe me. We take our observations and find out if we're where we should be. We make any necessary adjustments to our course. The Mannschen Drive is allowed to cool down and is given a thorough overhaul. In this ship it is the custom to celebrate with a steak dinner. I hope, by the way, that Ferdinand is in good health..."

DIEGO smiled. "He is so. But what I was wondering about was this—will there be any sort of... of ordeal? I have read of these things."

"Oh, you'll be accused of trespass, and tried by Father Time's court. There'll be a bit of horseplay, and at the finish of it you'll be given a certificate authorizing you to exceed the speed of light without fear of precession or contrac-

tion between any two stars in the known universe. You won't be the only one to go through the mill. There're two cadets and four or five passengers. And Father Time himself gets what's coming to him at the finish."

"All very childish," said Lynn, "but fun. Tell me, Bill—do you run to a swimming bath in this ship?"

"Yes. We clear the Lounge so that we can rig it. We fill it and we hold the ceremony while the ship is accelerating at a half gravity or so. We have to build up speed again after the Mannschen Drive shut-down and before we restart."

"I suppose that it is necessary," said Ribiera.

"The swimming bath? The building up speed?"

"No. The...the ceremony."

"If ever you're to think of yourself as a real spaceman, it is," said Evan Lloyd.

THAT WAS one of the nights that we had the usual family party after dinner. That was one of the nights that we drank our coffee together

and smoked and talked, and pulled little Ribiera's leg and then played cards.

There was the night, a little later, when there were just Lynn and myself. Phil wasn't with us—he had a heavy rush of traffic to cope with. Evan wasn't with us—he was having generator trouble. Ribiera wasn't with us—it seemed that the Chef had made some sort of mess in the Hydroponics Room that had to be cleared up without delay.

For some reason there were very few people in the Lounge that night. The ship was very quiet, only the soft whining of the Drive and the occasional cough of a pump breaking the silence. The lights seemed dimmer than usual. Come to think of it—they *were* dimmer. Owing to the generator trouble, non-essential circuits were being starved so as to maintain a full supply of power to essential machines and instruments.

We sat in our chairs, Lynn and I, our lapstraps giving us the illusion of weight, of gravity. I looked at her, at her thin, finely featured face, her dark hair with the coppery sheen.

"A penny for them," she said.

I held out my hand. She opened her bag, extracted a one cent piece. I took it.

"I was thinking," I said, "that I shall be sorry when this voyage is over."

"So shall I," she said. "We get on rather well—although at first I never thought that we should. I thought—a typical spaceman, who thinks that his uniform makes him first cousin to the Almighty."

"And doesn't it?"

"Some of the others, yes. The Old Man. That poisonous Chief Steward of yours. One or two of the juniors. But not you."

"Thanks," I said.

THERE WAS a silence.

"We're both of us civilized people, Bill. We're not living in the dark days of the Twentieth Century. What we do is our own concern. We want each other. Well—I know that I want you, and I'm pretty sure that you want me. And... Damn it all. Bill do I have to rape you?"

"I'm scared," I said slowly.

"Scared? *You?* The stories

I've heard about you you don't scare easily—not of anything in skirts, that is."

"Not of the usual silly wenches who think that the cost of their passage covers an affair with one of the ship's officers. Of you—yes."

"Why?" she asked.

"It's a case of being frightened of getting involved too deeply. I'm happy here, in Deep Space. It's my life. The ship is a mistress to me, a wife. In the old days of surface ships on Earth's seas they used to call the Mate the ship's husband. Did you know that? A husband can have the odd, casual affair without leaving his wife. But it's the affair that turns out to be anything but casual that breaks up marriages."

"If that's the way you feel about it," she said.

"That's the way I feel about it. When I marry—as I suppose that I shall, some day—it will be to somebody who can take second place to the ship, to the Service."

"God help her," she said.

She unsnapped her lapstrap, drifted up and out from the

chair. I made as though to follow her.

"Don't bother, Mr. Gordon," she said. "And thank you for being so honest. At least you've spared me the humiliation of being dropped, as you would have dropped me, at the behest of an insensate construction of metal, a *thing*. I can find my way to my cabin, thank you."

I watched her go. I watched the slimness of her, the grace of her, as she floated towards one of the alleyways leading out of the Lounge. I cursed myself for having been so honest—but knew that by being honest I had saved both of us from deep involvement, had, perhaps, saved her from serious hurt.

I finished the brandy in my plastibulb, tossed the empty container towards a disposal chute—and missed—and then made my way to my own quarters.

IV

HALFWAY Day was, as it always is, a busy day.

In some ships, the Captain

plays the major part in the Halfway Day ceremonies; in others, such as *Gamma Pisces*, it is the Mate. It is not every shipmaster who cares to expose his sacred person to the risk of being mauled either by passengers or by his junior officers. It is, of course, essential that someone of senior rank be present, lest affairs develop into a serious brawl.

So I was sitting in the Lounge—really sitting, as the Interstellar Drive was off and the Reaction Drive in operation—in one of the big chairs placed around the plastic pool. The shutters over the big viewports had been withdrawn, and through the thick transparencies gleamed the bright, multitudinous stars, grouped in half familiar constellations. The passengers were enjoying the glorious spectacle outside the ship; I was pretending to be engrossed in a book.

THEN CAME the sound that I was waiting for—a steady tap-tap-tapping. There was a scream from one of the women, a cry of "Look!"

I got up and looked. Outside the nearer viewport were three

spacesuited figures, three human forms in gleaming white armor. One of them, with a luminous crayon held in his gloved hand, scrawled carefully on the outside of the glass:

WE DEMAND ENTRY

I sighed. Young Jevons, the Senior Cadet, could never get his "E"s the right way round on these occasions.

"Mr. Craig," I said to the Fourth Officer, "go to the airlock and see who these people are and what they want."

"Ay, ay, sir!" he replied smartly.

"I hope that your *wife* finds all this amusing," said somebody.

I turned round, saw that it was Lynn.

"This could, I suppose, be regarded as a sort of anniversary." I said.

"How touching," she replied.

From outside the Lounge came the sound of the beating of a gong—twelve slow, solemn strokes. Over the intercommunication system came the chiming of a ship's clock—eight bells, repeated after a short interval. Again the strokes of the

gong sounded, closer, much closer.

A FANTASTIC figure marched into the Lounge. He was wearing a parody of uniform that had, pinned to the left breast, a half dozen fob watches in lieu of medals. On each arm were at least six wrist watches. He carried before him a velvet cushion, on which reposed a cheap, tin alarm clock whose ticking was clearly audible.

It was the Senior Watch-keeper.

"Attention all! Attention all!" he cried. "It has come to the notice of my royal master, King Chronos, Lord of the Split Second, Grand Marshal of the Millenia, that certain of his subjects are seeking to contravene his inflexible laws and, without having paid their just dues, have had the temerity to outrun light itself. Therefore, my master, Father Time, has deigned to visit in person the good ship *Game Fish* to ensure that these miscreants realize that it is later than they think!"

He did something to the

alarm clock and it shrilled loudly, then ceased. "Father Time!" he cried.

Father Time was as impressive as a bedsheet, a long white beard, a bald wig, and a cardboard scythe could make him. He was attended by the Houri—four stewardesses, suitably attired—and the Seconds, in long, black trousers, white turtle-necked sweaters. I wished that we could have carried our punning symbolism to its logical extreme and had twenty four of the one and sixty of the other—but even the Alpha Class ships can't run to that.

"And who," demanded Father Time, "is in charge of this rust bucket?"

"I am, Your Majesty."

"Don't they teach you manners in the Space Academy these days? Where is the moth-eaten carpet? Where is the worm-riddled throne?"

And why can't you stick to the script? I thought.

"The carpet has finally disintegrated with age," I said, "and the throne has collapsed. Will Your Majesty be seated?"

HE LET ME lead him to the black velvet draped chair at the edge of the pool. His Court arranged itself more or less decoratively around him. The Senior Watchkeeper handed the alarm clock to his master, drew from a pocket a sheet of paper.

"Can you," he said, addressing me, "deny that the persons named herein are intruders in Deep Space, unlicensed beneficiaries of the FTL Drive, planet lubbers of the most miserable category?"

He read the names.

"Seconds!" cried Father Time. "Seconds out of the ring! The hour has struck! There's no time like the present! Bring me these temporal trespassers! I'll stop their clocks for them!"

And so it went on. It was all, at first, good harmless fun. The victims' heads were shaved—in the case of the women it was only a symbolical shaving—and suffered the make-believe administrations of the court dentist. A vile-tasting fluid—the Elixir of Youth—was forced down their throats. They were thrown into the pool. They all enjoyed it—

until it came to the turn of Ribiera.

Something ugly crept in then.

PARTLY, it was Ribiera's own fault—he was the sort of victim who makes things so much worse for himself. He was frightened, and he was hating his persecutors, and they were hating him. I looked at him as he was dragged into the Lounge by two brawny Seconds. His uniform shirt was torn, his face was white and his eyes were gleaming fiercely. I liked the little man, but at this moment I found it hard to feel sympathy for him. The Halfway Day rites were something that we all had to go through—and, after all, it's only once in a lifetime of spacefaring.

"And what," demanded Father Time, "is this?"

"A farmer, Your Majesty," replied the Senior Watchkeeper. "He was found lurking among his lettuces, seeking cover behind the adamantine flanks of Ferdinand the Bull."

"Macerate him and feed him to his own algae," growled Father Time. "Thrash him

with sticks of celery until his screams would rend even the heart of a lettuce. Drown him in a butt of his own vile beer. But first, we would remind him that youth is fleeting and that Time takes his toll of all men. Proceed with the depilation!"

Two of the Seconds held the Bio-Chemist firmly. A third, who was also the Court Barber, advanced with the electric clippers. Ribiera was proud of his hair. He screamed something in his native tongue; it sounded like a curse. He began to struggle madly. It was all, of course, very amusing. It was even more amusing when the three Seconds and Ribiera fell into the pool with a loud splash.

IT WASN'T so amusing when the electric clippers, the flex of which had become wound around the little Mexican's neck, shorted with a bright blue flash. It was even less amusing when the limp body of the Bio-Chemist was lifted out of the pool and the Surgeon and the Nursing Sister pushed their way through the frightened passengers and officers to kneel by his side.

"It's nothing serious, Bill," said the Surgeon to me. "He'll live—but he'll not be able to enjoy his Halfway Day dinner tonight. Organize a stretcher party for me, will you? We'll get him along to his cabin."

So that was the finish of the Halfway Day ritual. I left the juniors to do the clearing up, went up to the Control and reported to Captain Saunders what had happened.

"It was my fault," I said. "I should have stopped it."

"Yes," he agreed, "it was your fault—but it was his fault, too. Ribiera will never be a spaceman if he can't take a little innocent horseplay."

"Horseplay?" I asked. "There was rather too much of a lynching feel to the whole sorry business."

"Rubbish," he said. "The man's not pulling his weight, and that's why people don't like him. Meanwhile—how are things in Hydroponics?"

"I checked up, sir," I told him. "There's nothing that can't run itself until tomorrow, and Ribiera should be on his feet again then. I'll be on hand when the Chef slices the

wherewithal for tonight's dinner off Ferdinand, and see that he leaves things clean and tidy."

"You might be a little less niggardly than Ribiera is," he told me.

V

IT IS AXIOMATIC that locks and keys exist only to inconvenience honest men. Those who are not honest will either have on hand the means for forcing locks, or duplicate keys. Either the Chief Steward or the Chef had a duplicate key to Hydroponics, but that was their own little secret. They were waiting patiently outside the Farm when I went along, and drew the issue of beef and the green salads under my supervision.

I had to hurry back to Control then. All the necessary observations had been taken and the final adjustments of course made, and the Reaction Drive was about to be shut down and the Mannschenn Drive restarted. There was no real need for me in Control, but the Commission's Regulations state that on such occasions every

senior officer shall be present.

We sat in our chairs and listened to the whine of the Interstellar Drive rising in pitch, watched the stars wink and slicker and vanish. We satisfied ourselves that all was well, then left the Control Room to the Officer of the Watch.

It was almost dinner time.

I went straight to my cabin, showered in the little, adjoining toilet cubicle, then dressed in mess uniform. I looked in to see Ribiera. He was conscious, but was looking rather sick and sorry for himself.

He said, "Mr. Gordon, please tell the Doctor that I must go see that all is well in Hydroponics."

"The Doctors says that you are to stay here until tomorrow," I told him. "Everything is all right in Hydroponics. I saw to it myself that the Chef and the Chief Steward took only what was needed for tonight's meal. The Farm is locked up now, and will stay that way until you get back to it."

"But the algae..."

"They're doing fine. Evan made a good job on that pump

you were complaining about—it's running without a murmur."

The gong sounded then, and I left him.

THE PASSENGERS at my table were already seated when I pulled myself into my chair. Lynn inquired about Ribiera, and I told her that there was nothing wrong with him that rest wouldn't cure. She said something unkind about the serious consequences of childish games, and I replied that no Service could be run without traditions, and before the stewardess had served the first course we were snarling at each other like a couple of strange dogs—Wells and Taine were listening with keen enjoyment.

The pat was followed by steak. Tissue culture steak is always good—provided that the culture is not so old that the cells are beginning to lose their specialization—and even our Chef couldn't ruin it completely. Moreover, he had contrived to provide with it a mushroom sauce. There was a vague memory in my mind of Mary McCarthy's having com-

plained to me before the start of the voyage that the dehydrated mushrooms had not arrived, but I assumed that she must eventually have found them.

"From the Farm?" asked Lynn.

"The steak? Of course."

"No. The mushrooms."

"As a matter of fact, no. They're dehydrated. The Commission has some very old-fashioned ideas about what can be done and what can't be done in Hydroponics. The Regulations state that only plants that play their part in the air conditioning may be grown. There is an amendment that covers yeasts but nobody's gotten around towards making one in favor of mushrooms."

"How absurd."

"I don't think so. Dehydrated mushrooms, after all, weigh very little, and why take up tank space for something that can be carried in dehydrated form?"

THEN, WITH dinner over, the Old Man made his usual Halfway Day speech, and

shortly thereafter we all adjourned to the Lounge. There was music, a good recording of one of my favorites—Bronstein's *Nine Planets Suite*. You know it, of course. You know the fire music of the first movement, Mercury—although I am assured by one of the few men I know who has visited that inhospitable planet that Bronstein most certainly did not have the Dark Hemisphere in mind. There is the second movement—all tumbling, crashing surf and shrieking winds—and the third movement, that echoes the rhythmic clangour of machines. The one that I love most of all is the last movement, the tenth, the Deep Space theme. It was better that night than I have ever heard it. The faintly-heard whine of the Drive was part of the music, and the music was part of it. It was as Bronstein must have imagined it, must have intended it—four dimensional. It was a nobody, not even Bronstein, could ever have heard it played.

ALL THE emptiness was there, all the loneliness.

The glimmer of distant stars was there and the brief flare of rocket drive, and all the wonder of the frail metal shells, with their human freight, driving across the vast reaches of the night.

The loneliness was there, but I was not alone. Lynn was with me. I repeat—she was *with* me. We were together, but we were not in the ship; we were floating slowly over a landscape that glowed in the light of a golden sun, over the surface of an unspoiled world that was, we knew, an Eden before the Fall.

I held her bright body in my arms, and her slim arms were around me, and what we did was of a deep completeness that I had never known before, that I shall never know again.

Unless...

Then she was falling from me, down through the lucent air towards a golden beach by a blue sea. I knew that I should follow, that I must follow. I knew that if we set foot on this world together—where is it? *when* is it?—there would be no going back, ever, for either of us.

I saw her falling, her slen-

der, glowing body turning slowly. She held out her arms to me. I knew that only a small effort of will was necessary for me to follow her—but I could not make it.

I remembered too much. I remembered all the little things left undone, all the loose ends yet to be tucked in. I remembered the unfinished Maintenance Reports and the Mate's Log that was all of seven days in arrears. I remembered all that would have to be put in hand before our arrival at Montezuma.

I remembered that I was, as I had told her, the ship's husband.

I remember that I was a fool.

SHE WAS gone then, and the bright, perfect world was gone with her. I looked dazedly around my cabin.

She was gone.

And, it seemed, I was the only sober person in the ship. All the others were, I thought at first, drunk—but it was not drunkenness. They were singing in the Lounge—a strange, rhythmic chant accented by hand clappings. I found Cap-

tain Saunders and shook him, trying to bully him into a state of awareness.

"The glory," he said. "The glory. The mountains of ice with the twin suns behind them, and the caravan, with its softly beating bells, winding through the pass..."

I left him in despair, tried to pummel some sense into Evan Lloyd. He babbled, of the cloudy, fiery pillar, of the crystal fountains and the healing stream.

I remembered then how my own sense of responsibility had pulled me back from the world of unreality—or reality. I made for the axial shaft, pulled myself along to Control. I punched the General Alarm button. In a matter of only seconds, it seemed, the Old Man was with me, wanting to know what was wrong and the officer of the watch was blinking bewilderedly at his two seniors, a badly frightened young man.

THAT WAS when the stink started, the big stink.

Poor little Diego was the scapegoat. It was his mushrooms that had done the dam-

age—the hallucinogenic fungi, the spawn of which he was carrying to his friends on Montezuma, some of which he had grown experimentally in Hydroponics. Neither the Chef nor the Chief Steward had any right, of course, to be in possession of a duplicate key to the Farm, and certainly they had no right to take anything from Hydroponics without Ribiera's knowledge.

They're odd things, those mushrooms. For centuries they have been known as producers of dreams and visions, as stimulators of the psionic powers. This, however, was the first time that they had ever been eaten in Deep Space, away from all Terrestrial influence. This was the first time that they had ever been eaten in a ship running with the time twisting, dimension warping Mannschenn Drive in operation.

But Lynn was gone. Not a trace remained of her. She could, in her drug-induced trance, have gone out through the airlock—but had she done so she would have stayed in the field of the ship; her body would have accompanied us

until the first change of acceleration. Too, Evan Lloyd assured us that the airlock door had not been opened since Father Time and his party went outside for the beginning of the Halfway Day ceremony.

Lynn was gone.

CLAD IN A spacesuit I crawled over every inch of the hull, searching in vain for some trace of her. With the others helping, I went through the ship from stem to stern, leaving no possible hiding place, however absurd, uninvestigated. The Old Man, I know still thinks that she went outside. He still thinks that she, a slim and fragile woman, went into the airlock and—all this with no spacesuit—opened the outer door and then still had sufficient strength to make one mighty leap into nothingness, carrying her frozen and asphyxiated body clear of the gravitational field of the ship and the temporal field of the Drive.

But this is not so bad as what he thought at first. He thought that I took her to the airlock and threw her out. Evan Lloyd, the strongest man

on board, went into the airlock with a bundle of the same mass as the average adult human body and proved that this was impossible.

And Ribiera?

He was lucky. He was to have faced trial on Montezuma on charges of barratry and sabotage, to name just two, but Phil Kent had been in telepathic communication with his friends in the Rhine Institute, and the Institute, as far as I can gather, demanded that Diego be dismissed at once from the Service and enrolled as a member of its research staff.

"You will find her," he said to me, as he walked ashore. "You will find her. I am sure of that, Mr. Gordon. And this will help you."

I looked at what he had given to me. It was a half dozen dried mushrooms.

I know what to do.

On the homeward passage, when the ship is, as nearly as I can judge, where she was on Halfway Night, I shall eat them. I shall make sure that

all my papers are in order. I shall remind myself that no man is indispensable. I shall tell myself that the ship is only a thing, and that the Commission is neither father nor mother but merely an employer of labor, an employer to whom I owe nothing.

THIS IS the time, and the place.

I have dreamed of Lynn, and I know that she is there, on that golden beach, waiting. I know that the world on which she waits for me is perfect as no planet in this Galaxy could ever be—but, even if it were not, her presence would make it so.

I must apologize to you gentlemen of the Rhine Institute. I know that you have been looking forward to hearing my story at first hand.

But you will have one consolation.

If this manuscript comes into your possession, you will know that my desperate experiment was successful.

