

# ★ PLANET ★

## ★ STORIES ★

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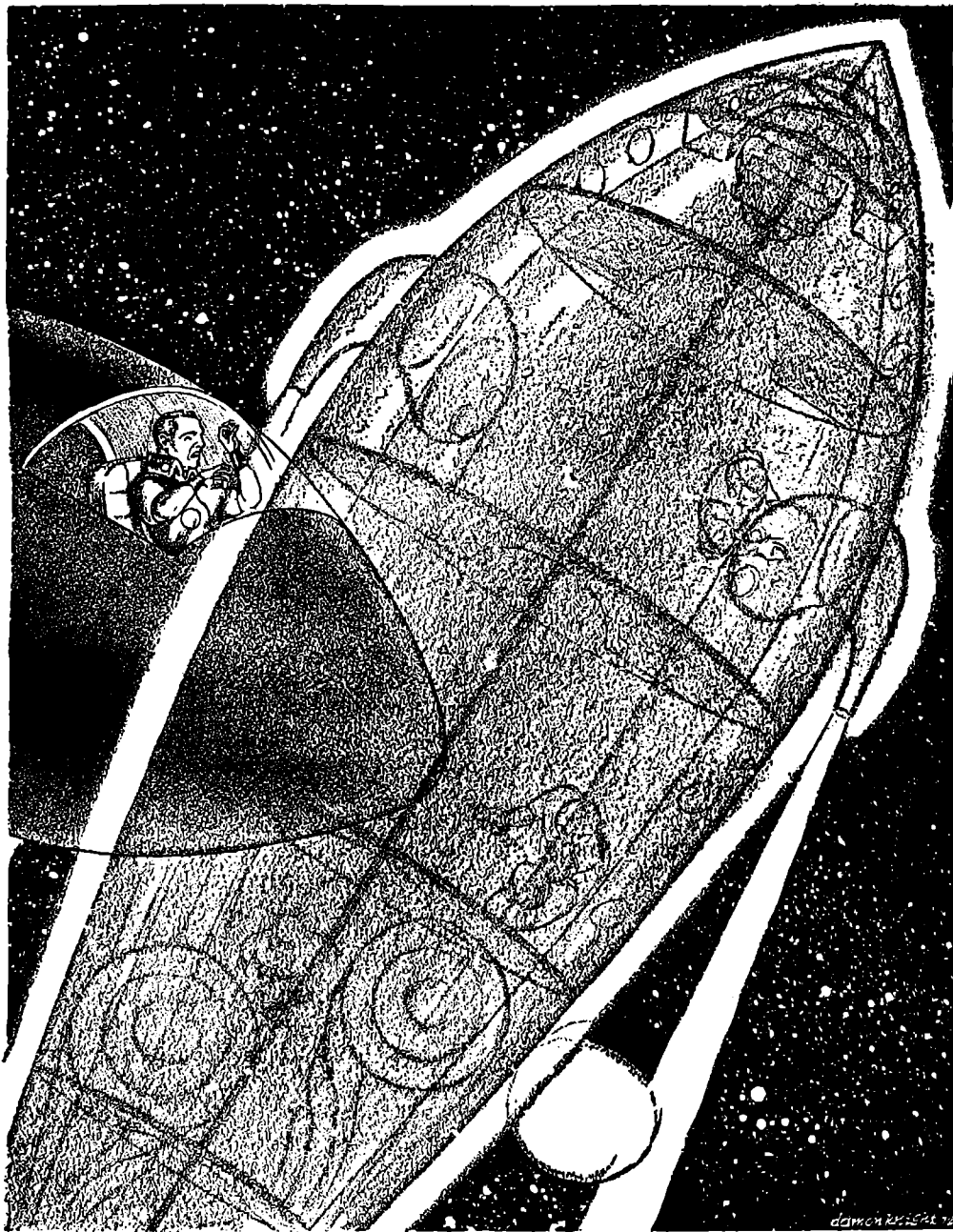
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# GALACTIC GHOST

By WALTER KUBILIUS

**The Flying Dutchman of space was a harbinger of death. But Willard wasn't superstitious. He had seen the phantom—and lived.**

*Illustrated by Knight*



**T**HE only friend in space Willard had ever known was dying. Dobbin's lips were parched and his breath came spasmodically. The tips of his fin-

gers that had so many times caressed the control board of the Mary Lou were now black as meteor dust.

"We'll never see Earth again," he whis-

pered feebly, plucked weakly at the cover.

"Nonsense!" Willard broke in hurriedly, hoping that the dying man would not see through the lie. "We've got the sun's gravity helping us drift back to Earth! We'll be there soon! You'll get well soon and we'll start to work again on a new idea of mine. . . ." His voice trailed helplessly away and the words were lost. It was no use.

The sick man did not hear him. Two tears rolled down his cheeks. His face contorted as he tried to withhold a sob.

"To see Earth again!" he said weakly. "To walk on solid ground once more!"

"Four years!" Willard echoed faintly. He knew how his space mate felt. No man can spend four years away from his home planet, and fail to be anguished. A man could live without friends, without fortune, but no man could live without Earth. He was like Anteus, for only the feel of the solid ground under his feet could give him courage to go among the stars.

Willard also knew what he dared not admit to himself. He, too, like Dobbin, would never see Earth again. Perhaps, some thousand years from now, some lonely wanderers would find their battered hulk of a ship in space and bring them home again.

Dobbin motioned to him and, in answer to a last request, Willard lifted him so he faced the port window for a final look at the panorama of the stars.

Dobbin's eyes, dimming and half closed, took in the vast play of the heavens and in his mind he relived the days when in a frail craft he first crossed interstellar space. But for Earth-loneliness Dobbin would die a happy man, knowing that he had lived as much and as deeply as any man could.

Silently the two men watched. Dobbin's eyes opened suddenly and a tremor seized his body. He turned painfully and looked at Willard.

"I saw it!" his voice cracked, trembling. "Saw what?"

"It's true! It's true! It comes whenever a space man dies! It's there!"

"In heaven's name, Dobbin," Willard demanded, "What do you see? What is it?"

Dobbin lifted his dark bony arm and

pointed out into star-studded space.

"The Ghost Ship!"

Something clicked in Willard's memory. He had heard it spoken of in whispers by drunken space men and professional tellers of fairy tales. But he had never put any stock in them. In some forgotten corner of Dobbin's mind the legend of the Ghost Ship must have lain, to come up in this time of delirium.

"There's nothing there," he said firmly.

"It's come—for me!" Dobbin cried. He turned his head slowly toward Willard, tried to say something and then fell back upon the pillow. His mouth was open and his eyes stared unseeing ahead. Dobbin was now one with the vanished pioneers of yesterday. Willard was alone.

For two days, reckoned in Earth time, Willard kept vigil over the body of his friend and space mate. When the time was up he did what was necessary and nothing remained of Harry Dobbin, the best friend he had ever had. The atoms of his body were now pure energy stored away in the useless motors of the *Mary Lou*.

THE weeks that followed were like a blur in Willard's mind. Though the ship was utterly incapable of motion, the chance meteor that damaged it had spared the convertors and assimilators. Through constant care and attention the frail balance that meant life or death could be kept. The substance of waste and refuse was torn down and rebuilt as precious food and air. It was even possible to create more than was needed.

When this was done, Willard immediately regretted it. For it would be then that the days and the weeks would roll by endlessly. Sometimes he thought he would go mad when, sitting at the useless control board, which was his habit, he would stare for hours and hours in the direction of the Sun where he knew the Earth would be. A great loneliness would then seize upon him and an agony that no man had ever known would tear at his heart. He would then turn away, full of despair and hopeless pain.

Two years after Dobbin's death a strange thing happened. Willard was sitting at his accustomed place facing the unmoving vista of the stars. A chance glance at

Orion's belt froze him still. A star had flickered! Distinctly, as if a light veil had been placed over it and then lifted, it dimmed and turned bright again. What strange phenomena was this? He watched and then another star faded momentarily in the exact fashion. And then a third! And a fourth! And a fifth!

Willard's heart gave a leap and the lethargy of two years vanished instantly. Here, at last, was something to do. It might be only a few minutes before he would understand what it was, but those few minutes would help while away the maddening long hours. Perhaps it was a mass of fine meteorites or a pocket of gas that did not disperse, or even a moving warp of space-light. Whatever it was, it was a phenomena worth investigating and Willard seized upon it as a dying man seizes upon the last flashing seconds of life.

Willard traced its course by the flickering stars and gradually plotted its semi-circular course. It was not from the solar system but, instead, headed toward it. A rapid check-up on his calculations caused his heart to beat in ever quickening excitement. Whatever it was, it would reach the *Mary Lou*.

Again he looked out the port. Unquestionably the faint mass was nearing his ship. It was round in shape and almost invisible. The stars, though dimmed, could still be seen through it. There was something about its form that reminded him of an old-fashioned rocket ship. It resembled one of those that had done pioneer service in the lanes forty years ago or more. Resembled one? It was one! Unquestionably, though half-invisible and like a piece of glass immersed in water, it was a rocket ship.

But the instruments on the control board could not lie. The presence of any material body within a hundred thousand miles would be revealed. But the needle on the gauge did not quiver. Nothing indicated the presence of a ship. But the evidence of his eyes was incontestable.

Or was it? Doubt gripped him. Did the loneliness of all these years in space twist his mind till he was imagining the appearance of faint ghost-like rocket ships?

The thought shot through his mind like a thunder bolt. Ghost Ship! Was this

the thing that Dobbin had seen before he died? But that was impossible. Ghost Ships existed nowhere but in legends and tall tales told by men drunk with the liquors of Mars.

"There is no ship there. There is no ship there," Willard told himself over and over again as he looked at the vague outline of the ship, now motionless a few hundred miles away.

Deep within him a faint voice cried, "*It's come—for me!*" but Willard stilled it. This was no fantasy. There was a scientific reason for it. There must be! Or should there be? Throughout all Earth history there had been Ghost Ships sailing the Seven Seas—ships doomed to roam forever because their crew broke some unbreakable law. If this was true for the ships of the seas, why not for the ships of empty space?

He looked again at the strange ship. It was motionless. At least it was not nearing him. Willard could see nothing but its vague outline. A moment later he could discern a faint motion. It was turning! The Ghost Ship was turning back! Unconsciously Willard reached out with his hand as if to hold it back, for when it was gone he would be alone again.

But the Ghost Ship went on. Its outline became smaller and smaller, fainter and fainter.

Trembling, Willard turned away from the window as he saw the rocket recede and vanish into the emptiness of space. Once more the dreaded loneliness of the stars descended upon him.

**S**EVEN years passed and back on Earth in a small newspaper that Willard would never see there was published a small item:

"*Arden, Rocketport*—Thirteen years ago the Space Ship *Mary Lou* under John Willard and Larry Dobbin left the Rocket Port for the exploration of an alleged planetoid beyond Pluto. The ship has not been seen or heard from since. J. Willard, II, son of the lost explorer, is planning the manufacture of a super-size exploration ship to be called *Mary Lou*, II, in memory of his father."

Memories die hard. A man who is alone in space with nothing but the cold friendship of star-light looks back upon

memories as the only things both dear and precious to him.

Willard, master and lone survivor of the *Mary Lou*, knew this well for he had tried to rip the memories of Earth out of his heart to ease the anguish of solitude within him. But it was a thing that could not be done.

And so it was that each night—for Willard did not give up the Earth-habit of keeping time—Willard dreamed of the days he had known on Earth.

In his mind's eye, he saw himself walking the streets of Arden and feeling the crunch of snow or the soft slap of rain-water under his feet. He heard again, in his mind, the voices of friends he knew. How beautiful and perfect was each voice! How filled with warmth and friendship! There was the voice of his beautiful wife whom he would never see again. There were the gruff and deep voices of his co-workers and scientists.

Above all there were the voices of the cities, and the fields and the shops where he had worked. All these had their individual voices. Odd that he had never realized it before, but things become clearer to a man who is alone.

Clearer? Perhaps not. Perhaps they become more clouded. How could he, for example, explain the phenomena of the Ghost Ship? Was it really only a product of his imagination? What of all the others who had seen it? Was it possible for many different men under many different situations to have the same exact illusion? Reason denied that. But perhaps space itself denies reason.

Grimly he retraced the legend of the Ghost Ship. A chance phrase here and a story there put together all that he knew:

Doomed for all eternity to wander in the empty star-lanes, the Ghost Ship haunts the Solar System that gave it birth. And this is its tragedy, for it is the home of spacemen who can never go home again. When your last measure of fuel is burnt and your ship becomes a lifeless hulk—the Ghost will come—for you!

And this is all there was to the legend. Merely a tale of some fairy ship told to amuse and to while away the days of a star-voyage. Bitterly, Willard dismissed it from his mind.

Another year of loneliness passed. And

still another. Willard lost track of the days. It was difficult to keep time for to what purpose could time be kept. Here in space there was no time, nor was there reason for clocks and records. Days and months and years became meaningless words for things that once may have had meaning. About three years must have passed since his last record in the log book of the *Mary Lou*. At that time, he remembered, he suffered another great disappointment. On the port side there suddenly appeared a full-sized rocket ship. For many minutes Willard was half-mad with joy thinking that a passing ship was ready to rescue him. But the joy was short-lived, for the rocket ship abruptly turned away and slowly disappeared. As Willard watched it go away he saw the light of a distant star *through* the space ship. A heart-breaking agony fell upon him. It was not a ship from Earth. It was the Ghost Ship, mocking him.

Since then Willard did not look out the window of his craft. A vague fear troubled him that perhaps the Ghost Ship might be here, waiting and watching, and that he would go mad if he saw it.

How many years passed he could not tell. But this he knew. He was no longer a young man. Perhaps fifteen years has disappeared into nothing. Perhaps twenty. He did not know and he did not care.

**W**ILLARD awoke from a deep sleep and prepared his bed. He did it, not because it was necessary, but because it was a habit that had long been ingrained in him through the years.

He checked and rechecked every part of the still functioning mechanism of the ship. The radio, even though there was no one to call, was in perfect order. The speed-recording dials, even though there was no speed to record, were in perfect order. And so with every machine. All was in perfect order. Perfect useless order, he thought bitterly, when there was no way whatever to get sufficient power to get back to Earth, long forgotten Earth.

He was leaning back in his chair when a vague uneasiness seized him. He arose and slowly walked over to the window, his age already being marked in the ache of his bones. Looking out into the silent theater of the stars, he suddenly froze.

There was a ship, coming toward him!

For a moment the reason in his mind tottered on a balance. Doubt assailed him. Was this the Ghost Ship come to torment him again? But no phantom this! It was a life and blood rocket ship from Earth! Starlight shone on it and not through it! Its lines, window, vents were all solid and had none of the ghost-like quality he remembered seeing in the Ghost Ship in his youth.

For another split second he thought that perhaps he, too, like Dobbin, had gone mad and that the ship would vanish just as it approached him.

The tapping of the space-telegrapher reassured him.

"CALLING SPACE SHIP MARY LOU," the message rapped out, "CALLING SPACE SHIP MARY LOU."

With trembling fingers that he could scarcely control, old Willard sent the answering message.

"SPACE SHIP MARY LOU REPLYING. RECEIVED MESSAGE. THANK GOD!"

He broke off, unable to continue. His heart was ready to burst within him and the tears of joy were already welling in his eyes. He listened to the happiest message he had ever heard:

"NOTICE THAT SPACE SHIP MARY LOU IS DISABLED AND NOT SPACE WORTHY. YOU ARE INVITED TO COME ABOARD. HAVE YOU SPACE SUIT AND—ARE YOU ABLE TO COME?"

Willard, already sobbing with joy, could send only two words.

"YES! COMING!"

The years of waiting were over. At last he was free of the Mary Lou. In a dream like trance, he dressed in his space suit, pathetically glad that he had already checked every detail of it a short time ago. He realized suddenly that everything about the Mary Lou was hateful to him. It was here that his best friend died, and it was here that twenty years of his life were wasted completely in solitude and despair.

He took one last look and stepped into the airlock.

The Earth-ship, he did not see its name, was only a hundred yards away and a man was already at the air-lock waiting

to help him. A rope was tossed to him. He reached for it and made his way to the ship, leaving the Mary Lou behind him forever.

Suddenly the world dropped away from him. Willard could neither see nor say anything. His heart was choked with emotion.

"It's all right," a kindly voice assured him, "You're safe now."

He had the sensation of being carried by several men and then placed in bed. The quiet of deep sleep descended upon him.

HE woke many times in the following days, but the privations of the passing years had drained his strength and his mind, had made him so much of a hermit that the presence of other men frightened him to the point of gibbering insanity.

He knew that the food and drink were drugged, for after eating he never remembered seeing the men enter the room to care for him and to remove the dirty dishes. But there was enough sanity in his mind to also realize that, without the gradual reawakening of his senses to the value of human companionship, he might not be able to stand the mental shock of moving about among his people back on Earth.

During those passing days, he savored each new impression, comparing it with what he remembered from that age-long past when he and his friends had walked on Earth's great plains and ridden on the oceans' sleek ships or flown with the wings of birds over the mountain ranges. And each impression was doubly enjoyable, for his memory was hazy and confused.

Gradually, though, his mind cleared; he remembered the past, and he no longer was afraid of the men who visited him from time to time. But there was a strangeness about the men that he could not fathom; they refused to talk about anything, any subject, other than the actual running of the great ship. Always, when he asked his eager questions, they mumbled and drifted away.

And then in his third week on the rescue ship, he went to sleep one night while peering from the port hole at the blue ball of Earth swimming in the blackness of space. He slept and he dreamed of the

years he had spent by himself in the drifting, lifeless hulk of the *Mary Lou*. His dreams were vivid, peopled with men and women he had once known, and were horrible with the fantasies of terror that years of solitary brooding had implanted deep in his mind.

HE awoke with a start and a cry of alarm ran through him as he thought that perhaps he might still be in the *Mary Lou*. The warm, smiling face of a man quickly reassured him.

"I'll call the captain," the space man said. "He said to let him know when you came to."

Willard could only nod in weak and grateful acceptance. It was true! He pressed his head back against the bed's pillows. How soft! How warm! He yawned and stretched his arms as a thrill of happiness shot through his entire body.

He would see Earth again! That single thought ran over and over in his mind without stopping. He would see Earth again! Perhaps not this year and perhaps not the next—for the ship might be on some extra-Plutonian expedition. But even if it would take years before it returned to home base Willard knew that those years would fly quickly if Earth was at the end of the trail.

Though he had aged, he still had many years before him. And those years, he vowed, would be spent on Earth and nowhere else.

The captain, a pleasant old fellow, came into the room as Willard stood up and tried to walk. The gravity here was a bit different from that of his ship, but he would manage.

"How do you feel, Space Man Willard?"

"Oh, you know me?" Willard looked at him in surprise, and then smiled, "Of course, you looked through the log book of the *Mary Lou*."

The captain nodded and Willard noticed with surprise that he was a very old man.

"You don't know how much I suffered there," Willard said slowly, measuring each word. "Years in space—all alone! It's a horrible thing!"

"Yes?" the old captain said.

"Many times I thought I would go completely mad. It was only the thought and

hope that some day, somehow, an Earth ship would find me and help me get back to Earth. If it was not for that, I would have died. I could think of nothing but of Earth, of blue green water, of vast open spaces and the good brown earth. How beautiful it must be now!"

A note of sadness, matched only by that of Willard's, entered the captain's eyes.

"I want to walk on Earth just once—then I can die."

Willard stopped. A happy dreamy smile touched his lips.

"When will we go to Earth?" he asked.

The Captain did not answer. Willard waited and a strange memory tugged at him.

"You don't know," the Captain said. It was not a question or a statement. The Captain found it hard to say it. His lips moved slowly.

Willard stepped back and before the Captain told him, *he knew*.

"Matter is relative," he said, "the existent under one condition is non-existent under another. The real here is the non-real there. All things that wander alone in space are gradually drained of their mass and energy until nothing is left but mere shells. That is what happened to the *Mary Lou*. Your ship was real when we passed by twenty years ago. It is now like ours, a vague outline in space. We cannot feel the change ourselves, for change is relative. That is why we became more and more solid to you, as you became more and more faint to any Earth-ship that might have passed. We are real—to ourselves. But to some ship from Earth which has not been in space for more than fifteen years—to that ship, to all intents and purposes, we do not exist.

"Then this ship," Willard said, stunned, "you and I and everything on it . . ."

". . . are doomed," the Captain said. "We cannot go to Earth for the simple reason that we would go *through* it!"

The vision of Earth and green trees faded. He would never see Earth again. He would never feel the crunch of ground under feet as he walked. Never would listen to the voices of friends and the songs of birds. Never. Never. Never. . . .

"Then this is the Ghost Ship and we are the Ghosts!"

"Yes."