

ROCKET STORIES

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HOME IS THE SPACEMAN

BY GEORGE O. SMITH

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

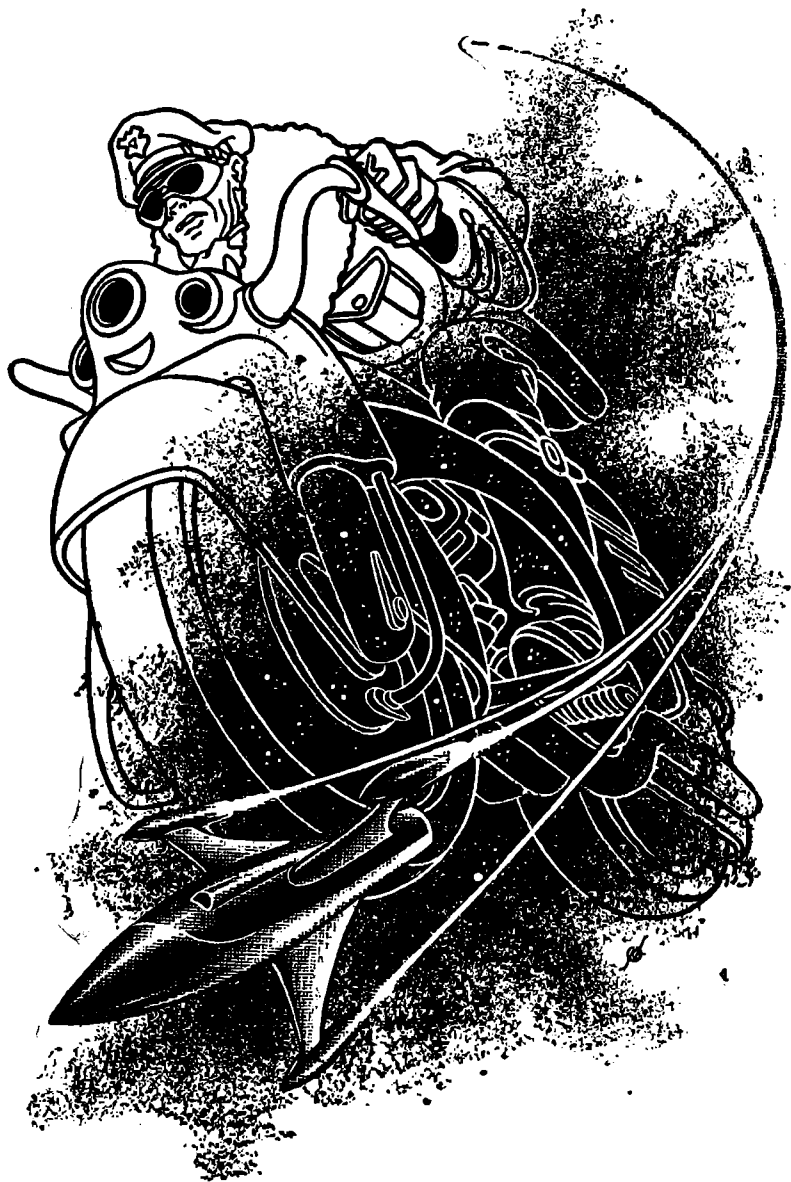
Enright was coming home, which should have been good, since he was the first Earthman ever to go faster than light. But when he'd been gone eighteen months in a ship that was supplied for only ten days, the authorities were just a trifle curious. . . .

Test Pilot Billy Enright looked down at the Earth so far below and decided that home had never looked so good to any man. He and his experimental spacecraft had exceeded the speed of light, he had crossed the monstrous gulf between stars, and for eighteen months Billy Enright had walked upon the earth-like planet of another star. He had driven faster, gone farther, and stayed away longer than any other human, and now he was happy to be arrowing down towards Mother Earth and home.

Mingled excitement and joy tickled his stomach. There would be one royal explosion when he

called in for landing instructions; he was going to create as much fuss as Tom Sawyer had caused a couple of hundred years ago when he and his boys turned up at their own funeral services. For Billy Enright had been overdue for eighteen months on a flight-plan calling for a twelve-hour program. He had probably been listed as "Missing" for more than sixteen of the eighteen months.

It would be more dramatic if he just barrelled down unannounced and walked in to the commandant's office with an air of unconcern. But on the other hand, the story he had to tell about his flight and the explana-



tion of his overdue return wanted a large audience whose minds had already recovered from the first shock. So instead of letting shock pile upon shock, Billy Enright flipped the radio on and called:

"Interstellar Spacecraft One calling Mojave Base. I. S.-1 calling Mojave. Test Pilot Enright requesting landing instructions. I. S.-1 over."

Forty seconds later—Enright was still so far from Earth that the radio waves took twenty seconds to travel in each direction—his receiver chattered into life and an excited voice spluttered, "Billy Enright—where the—er—Mojave Operations to I. S.-1. Look, Enright—we—My God!"

There was an abrupt click and another, calmer voice took over. "Captain Enright from Mojave. Commodore Hogan here. Are you all right? Any distress? Hogan over."

Enright snapped the "talk" button and said: "Enright to Commodore Hogan. Good morning, Commodore. I am not in distress. I am in more than fine shape and glad to be coming in. Please slip me the landing instructions so that I can kiss Mother Earth softly and gently and walk away from my ship, will you? Also will you please notify my parents that I am all in one healthy piece and that I

will be seeing them as soon as I can? Enright over."

Billy Enright spent the next forty seconds wondering what kind of a stew was going on down at Base. He made a mental bet that there were wires burning and tables being pounded.

Commodore Hogan's voice came back. "Mojave to I. S.-1. You will land on Runway Nine. Ceiling and visibility unlimited. Wind Northeast at four miles. Barometer twenty-nine point seven. Traffic: Luna Three taking off, one Orbital Station Shuttle in flight pattern. All other traffic being held. You will land, Captain Enright, and then you will seal your spacecraft for investigation and inventory. You will not log in at Operations, but present yourself to the Officer of the Day to deliver your report and explanations. You will not converse with anyone or discuss your—ah, adventures, until you have been granted permission. Confirm this, Captain Enright. Hogan over."

Billy grabbed the microphone and snapped, "Enright to Base. Look, Commodore, I confirm the landing instructions and will comply with the personal orders, but aren't you overlooking the fact that an experimental mission, undertaken with calculated risk, with success highly controversial, cannot be subject to

strict timetable? You sound as though I'm being charged with awol." Enright pronounced the initial letters as a word.

The reply came, as formal as before. "Mojave to Enright. There has been no formal charge of being absent without official leave logged against you, Captain Enright. All official action will be held in abeyance until your account has been reviewed by the Court of Inquiry, which will convene upon your arrival. Mojave Operations, Commodore Hogan in command, over and off!"

Billy Enright grunted. Commodore Hogan was a boiled collar and if he wanted to play this game as though he had caught one of his men buzzing a State Capitol Building instead of being delayed on a mission across the galaxy by half-a-hundred light years, then he, Billy Enright, was more than willing to go along.

Enright set the interstellar spacecraft down on the runway without a bump and rode the brakes to a stop. With a resentful flourish he parked his hat at an angle on his skull, ironed his cheerful features into a mirthless stoneface, and left his ship. He sealed the spacelock carefully. Then he dropped to the concrete parking block and waited for the official spaceport car

to come along the taxiway for him.

The driver greeted him with a grin. "Glad to see you back, Captain." He held out a hand which Enright shook firmly. "How was it—out There?"

The other man in the car frowned and snapped, "Captain Enright, do not answer! Mister Forrester, you will open and show me your right hand!"

Enright grunted. He knew the other man and so he said, "Look, Tom, I'm not playing any games. Or should I address you as Executive Horne? I did not pass Ed Forrester any notes, data, or pictures. I was merely shaking hands."

"We're all under orders," said Horne. "And your orders are to say nothing to anybody. Even me."

"Call me Captain Clam," said Billy Enright. "Is there any ruling against you passing me a cigarette?"

"Er—Mister Forrester, you will witness this. I have been asked for a cigarette. I am going to comply. However, you will note carefully that Captain Enright did light this cigarette and smoke it, thus burning its contents and obviating any possible exchange of information from me to him. Agreed?"

Enright blurted: "What the hell am I, a prisoner of war?"

"No comment. Please follow your orders," said Executive Horne. He did hold out a lighter for Enright, who puffed deeply with appreciation. The car delivered them to the Administration Building of Mojave Spaceport by the time Enright finished his smoke. He snubbed the butt carefully and handed it to the driver, along with a small pile of gray ash. "Preserve these remains, Mister Forrester. At least until I have been paroled. Affirmed, Executive Horne?"

"Affirmed. Now, come along, Captain."

He led Billy Enright into the building and upstairs, along a corridor and into a large conference room. Enright looked at a long table, around which were most of the big gold braid of Mojave Spaceport, a couple of space admirals from his project—Operation Interstellar—and three men in conservative business dress. The man at the head of the table was Space Admiral Meldrum, who had been the first man to set a foot on the Moon some forty years ago.

"Gentlemen, this is Captain William Enright, test pilot of the Interstellar Spacecraft One, Operation Interstellar. Captain Enright, the Board of Inquiry." The admiral named them around the table. The only one Billy knew was Commodore Hogan;

the rest he only recognized by name, other than the top brass of his own project. He nodded affably, then Billy frowned and asked:

"This looks formidably formal, sir. Am I to be represented by someone appointed in my favor?"

Admiral Meldrum shook his head. "This is no Court Military," he said. "This is a Court of Inquiry. You would have faced this court if you had returned home on schedule, to deliver your report. There have been no charges made formally. If your explanation is adequate, there will be none. This meeting will be informal. If you can show just cause for returning eighteen months late from a twelve-hour mission, no charges will be made. Now, Captain Enright, please deliver your report, beginning at the beginning?"

"Certainly. At 1200 hours, on 4 March 2014, I took off from the Earth in the first spacecraft capable of driving faster than the velocity of light. I—"

"One moment, Captain," asked one of the men in civilian dress. Enright blinked and saw that the man's name was Harness. E. D. Harness, Senator, Chairman of the Committee on Special Affairs and so forth. Enright nodded, and the senator went on: "My scientific knowledge is

sketchy. I was taught that nothing can exceed the speed of light."

"You were taught prior to Bergenholm's discovery of the nullification of mass," smiled Enright. "Mass increases, in accordance with Einstein's equations, as the velocity approaches the speed of light, so that the mass becomes infinite when the velocity of light is reached. But when mass is nullified, or reduced to zero—" Billy Enright spread his hands amusedly, "—you can multiply it all night and a hundred billion times zero is still zero."

"And the drive?"

"A standard reaction motor of the rocket type. Since the ship's mass is zero, its inertia is also zero and therefore the thrusting force of an infant can move zero mass and inertia if need be."

Senator Harness nodded. "Then with any kind of reaction thrust you could achieve infinite velocity because the mass and inertia are zero?"

"If we were passing through a completely unresisting medium, what you say would be true. But even the deepest part of interstellar space still contains a good many atoms per cubic centimeter. We found this almost-perfect vacuum a resisting medium to a spacecraft going faster than light."

"And so what was your estimated velocity?"

"About sixty-three light years per hour," replied Billy Enright.

The senator nodded as though he were satisfied, but he asked one more question: "Captain Enright, do you know the main purpose of your mission?"

"Certainly. Until the discovery of the faster than light drive, mankind was forever trapped on the Earth. One by one we have landed on the several planets and their satellites only to find them hopelessly airless, poisonous of atmosphere, utterly cold and inhospitable, or deadly to human life in other ways. The explosive increase of Earth's population made it necessary to find another frontier, another hope for colonization and expansion. The massless space drive offered this hope to us. My mission was to test the drive, to test the crossing of interstellar space, and if at all possible return with some tale of hope."

Commodore Hogan grunted. "Must have been some sweet paradise you found, Captain Enright."

Admiral Meldrum rapped the gavel on the table. "Please. No personalities, Commodore. Why do you take that sarcastic tone?"

Captain Enright may have good reason for his delay, you know."

The commodore grunted again. "The I. S.-1 was stocked with only enough food, water, and air for a trip of ten days' duration. I ask you all, how did Captain Enright sustain himself for an eighteen-month jaunt? Unless, of course, he landed and made himself at home for a year and a half. Or, he may be able to explain all about subjective and objective time!" he snapped, whirling back to face Billy Enright.

The young spaceman shrugged. "No," he said. "The Einstein Equation of time versus velocity is also obviated when mass is reduced to zero. No, Commander Hogan, I did not get involved with this at all."

"You made no stop for repairs, no delay because of technical difficulties?"

"No."

"Captain Enright, please outline your orders carefully."

Billy Enright cleared his throat and took a sip of water. "At 1200 hours I was to take off, heading for a small, insignificant Type G-Zero dwarf in Hercules, the exact coordinates I've forgotten for the moment. This star was selected over the more familiar celestial objects because it was closest to the Sun in size and radiation, and therefore

many believed that it was most likely to have a set of planets similar to the planets of Sol. I was to test the drive and make observations on the process of exceeding the velocity of light, recording them. I was to approach this star—"

"Sixty light years distant?" interrupted Commodore Hogan.

"Yes."

"An hour's trip each way," said the commodore pointedly.

"—I was to ascertain if this star had any planets, and if so, whether there was one at about ninety million miles from the luminary. If this was so, I was to approach and attempt to land. Then contingent upon the success of the previous set of 'ifs' I was to tackle the following. I was to take samples of the air and the water and the ground. I was to measure the temperature. I was to dig up a plant or two and I was to see if I could catch a small animal alive. I was to remain on that hypothetical planet for no longer than six hours. Then I was to take off and return to Earth."

"I see. And in the case of emergency, either there or en route?"

"I was to turn immediately and return to Earth."

"And you did not."

"Commodore, may I point out

that mine was a mission of rather extraordinary nature? I was a volunteer. Willingly I put myself in a position that no other man had ever been in before. I went into the Deep Unknown, across the limitless depths of galactic space, and my return was subject to considerable doubt. Now, the fact that I have returned at all is in itself a statement of success, even though I may have been delayed."

"I am sorry, Captain Enright. But your statements have not yet given us one reason for your delay. In fact, everything you have said indicates that you could, at any time in the past eighteen months, have returned. Instead, you seem to have deliberately remained out of touch with the people who entrusted you to perform a difficult mission."

Billy Enright drawled, "Well, not exactly, Commodore. I did send an explanatory message, but that was in deep space and I am afraid that the radio waves will not reach the Earth for about fifteen years more."

Commodore Hogan faced Admiral Meldrum. "I consider this to be rank insolence and insubordination. This man was entrusted with a billion-dollar spacecraft, the first and so far the only one of its kind. It took five years of hard work to build

it and another three years to fit it out for its maiden trip. This Captain Enright went out with the hopes and prayers of all mankind, but instead of following orders he apparently went galivanting all over the galaxy. I presume that his idea was that his very return would cause us to forget his absence for a year and a half. I—" Commodore Hogan whirled and faced Billy Enright. "Captain," he asked acidly, "did you take off as ordered?"

"I did."

"And you did go into deep space on course?"

"I did."

"And you approached this star, found this hoped-for planet, landed, and—er—then was captured by some tribe of savages who kept you prisoner?"

"Hardly. I did not reach my destination star and so I still do not know whether it has any planets."

"You were unavoidably detained?"

"You can put it that way."

"Suppose you tell us in what manner, before I ask that a formal charge of absent without official leave be logged against you."

Captain Enright nodded. "I took off under normal rocket take-off procedure, dropping my first stage after nine minutes. At the start of the second stage,

the mass-nullifying field was turned on, which brought my velocity up to the estimated constant velocity of sixty-three light years per hour. Once my velocity reached its constant, I turned off the reaction motor to conserve fuel for my return, leaving only the tiniest trickle of power running from an auxiliary rocket to maintain speed. I made observations and recorded them as directed.

"Then," said Billy Enright, "when I was out about fifteen minutes, I caught sight of a teardrop shaped spacecraft closing in from one side and catching up from behind. It was painted in bright enamel in panels. From the pointed tail there came a faint halo of pale blue light. It caught up with me as though I were standing still, and as it came alongside, a bright green searchlight stabbed out and swept along my hull, stopping near my astrodome.

"Then to my complete shock and dismay I heard a gruff voice snap: 'Pull 'er over to one side, Buster!'

"Wondering what to do, and how he could talk to me, I blubbered, 'Huh?'

"He said, 'Just pull her over and don't give me that *huh* stuff.'

"I told him, 'But we're in free flight. I can't.'

"At this point he swore in an unintelligible voice and the green searchlight turned to bright red. It must have been a tractor beam because he started hauling and I could see the stars spinning and I could feel a definite deceleration forward that almost pulled me out of the astrodome and into space itself. Then there was a metallic clink and in another half minute a tall man in polished leather came in and waved me back to the pilot's chair.

"'Realize you were doing sixty?'

"'Sixty?'

"'Sixty light years per hour in a forty light zone. Let's see your license!'

"'License?' I asked blankly.

"He pulled out a pad and started to scribble. 'Sixty lights in a forty light zone and driving without a license. Boy, oh boy! Say! What kind of a crate is this anyway?'

"'It's a standard reaction drive with mass nullifiers.'

"His eyes gleamed brighter. 'You know that free flight is just plain coasting?'

"'Of course,' I said angrily.

"'Spacecraft running out of control,' he said, scribbling some more.

"'But you can't do this to me,' I cried.

"The gleam in his eyes grew hard and scornful. 'Suppose you're the best pal of the Sector Senator, play knolla with the Commissioner of Spacelanes, and will get me patrolling a beat along the Lesser Magellanic Cloud, huh?' He looked down at his pad and grunted again. 'Better come with me,' he said sourly. 'We couldn't accept your bail, with no known address and not wearing a license. Boy, you've had it!'"

Captain Billy Enright took a deep breath and grinned. "No, gentlemen, my delay was legal, not technical. They slipped me eighteen months, by the time they'd finished adding up the charges. I was not gallivanting, I was doing time at what they please to call 'Educational Labor.'"

Everybody looked a bit slack-jawed. Commodore Hogan leaped in front of Billy Enright and waved a finger under his nose.

"Of all of the incredibly fantastic—" his voice failed. He took charge of himself. "You took charge of himself. 'You sent a radio message?' he asked calmly.

"Yes. The whole thing is coming in via radio."

"And you expect us to swallow

this bucket of foul fish unsupported for the next fifteen years? I suggest that you spend the intervening time in jail so we'll know where to send our apologies."

"Won't be necessary," smiled Billy Enright. "I've proof here." He dipped into his hip pocket and took out a small plastic folder. He flipped it open to display an ornate metal shield that glowed with some inner light completely beyond Earth science. He showed it around the conference table and then said, "Gentlemen, what they call 'Educational Labor' means just that. Due to my incarceration for eighteen months, I have qualified for the position of Sector Patrolman. And so help me, the first man that tries deep space without qualifying for a license gets heaved into the clink. And whether or not this Human Race is going to be permitted to colonize our nearer stars depends only upon how fast we cotton to the idea of becoming a junior member of the Galactic Council.

"Good day, gentlemen."

Sector Patrolman Billy Enright walked out of the Board amid a stunned silence. Home had never looked so good.
