

IMAGINATION

*Stories
of Science
and Fantasy*

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William L. Hamling
Editor

Frances Hamling
Managing Editor

Malcolm Smith
Art Director

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MILK RUN

By

Robert Donald Locke

Captain Jock Warren came out of his drunken stupor to check the flight of his ship. What he found aboard made him dash for blessed oblivion!

Two hours before the vessel plunged into minus point, building up for a hundred and fifty parsec jump through hyperspace, Capt. Jock Warren was so high on narcol he couldn't read his own manifest. Not unusual on this milk run. After two hours inside of minus point, his sober gray cells were functioning like blaster tubes—but by then, it was too late. The skags had taken over control of the ship.

—Charlie Guhn's Log.

THE Star Rover, a rusty freighter that shuttled between Rigel and the home system, hovered above a transfer station some two million miles out from Rigel's twelfth planet, awaiting port clearance. Every crewman knew the skipper was oiled,

but they knew the entropy barrier would set him back a full day, shocking him into cold alertness.

Second Officer Charles Guhn knocked at the captain's cabin, entered and saluted: "Sir, cargo's loaded and customs cleared."

The skipper, his face bagged like the Coal Sack, his blood-cracked eyes possessing chilling steel-blue irises that could blister a supercargo's hide at fifty paces, was unable to focus on the papers handed him. He growled, "Blast off, Mr. Guhn! Blast off!"

"Aye aye, sir," Guhn paused, then reported: "I thought you should know, Captain. We just brought on some skags. Some archeology outfit's shipping the things to Earth for further study."

"Blasted mummies. Next, we'll be hauling heathen idols." Captain

Warren glanced at his chronometer. "Shove-off time, is it? Go to the bridge and tell Mr. Caldwell I said to make her grunt."

This was his final utterance. His massive head slumped back into narcol stupor, his sotted brain dreaming of days when every space lane was a new frontier and adventure lurked on all unknown planets.

On his way up to the bow, Charlie Guhn poked his head into the wardroom, thinking it possible First Officer Mark Caldwell might be getting off one last message to the brunette on Rigel. But no one was in the lounge. Guhn followed the catwalk over the pulsing auxiliaries and mounted the starboard companionway to the bridge. There, he found the astrogator, pouring over a set of star charts.

"The old man says shove off," Guhn greeted him. "Got your DS done?"

Caldwell grinned, without looking up from his desk: "A DS is just a formality the rule book says you've got to enter in the log. Hyperspace's too slinky to obey normal laws. That's why we cut it in fifty parsec slices—to see how far we've drifted."

"You brain boys and your double talk."

"Not at all. Normal Einstein space is curved. Hyperspace isn't. Very simple."

"Simple like wombat chess, huh?"

"You can politely remove yourself to the deck," Caldwell replied. "I've got to get our junk pile coasting through the midnight black. Any women on board?"

"None your speed, Romeo . . . unless you like skags." A split second dodge through the hatchway eluded the waste basket hurled at him.

After his calculations looked satisfactory, Caldwell unhinged his solar plane compass. Its needle pointed not to Earth, but to that vast imaginary plane in the galaxy to which the home system was horizontal and to which a line drawn through the sun and Polaris was nearly perpendicular. Once a heading was determined, it was possible by quadrangulation to arrive at an effective course.

The transparent stardome that enveloped the bridge admitted the light of a thousand molten suns from this crowded corner of space. The astrogator looked at the clusters and thought how glad he was to leave the hot dry climate of Rigel's dusty barren worlds, not to mention the primitive women. Now, Arcturus was an exciting run, he'd heard. A spaceman's Paradise, with an exotic native culture and a nitrogen-major atmosphere. Not like the damned helium envelope of the Rigellian sys-

tem, in which a man's voice rose to female pitch.

Caldwell rang the engine room: "Prepare to blast."

"Aye aye, sir. Curium piles on 40 plus."

"Open rear vents."

"Rear vents opened."

"Attention, deck. Close all ports."

Throughout the vessel, shutters descended to screen out the cosmic radiations that would bathe the hull as light speed approached. Alarm bells rang. The astrogator's slender hands caressed a set of blue-sheened knobs, while a dozen dials glowed with sudden green light. Bulbs dimmed as power from the auxiliaries added their load to the direct blasters. The Star Rover shuddered violently and bulkheads screamed as tortured metal leaped forward through the void.

And in the hold, the skags still slept.

ON deck, Charlie Guhn sickened briefly as acceleration took hold. Still, free space takeoffs weren't as tormenting as shaking off six to eight gravities in a surface departure. More, on some of the big planets. He wondered vaguely why the skipper preferred a narcol stupor to reality. Who knew? Perhaps thirty years of probing the black void and the deeper black of hyperspace would gnaw away

any man's defenses. It took a wife and kids to anchor a man to a world. Guhn, himself, was grateful for his family on Earth and the days he would spend with his feet planted firm on terrestrial soil. He was privileged in a way Capt. Jock Warren could never know.

When the acceleration stress decreased he descended to the hold feeling suddenly chilled. Close to the beryllium bulkheads heat was lost more readily than in other sections. Guhn made his way through the dimly lit, lightly storaged passages, skirting bales of priceless *baka* silk, hogsheads of delicious platinum-hued wine from grapes grown in the soil of Rigel IX, and lead-sheathed crates of long-lived curium isotopes, native to Rigel's fourth planet.

He approached the compartment that contained the skags. Here he halted, sensitive to the enigma which had baffled the galaxy. The strange frozen skags constituted the first and only evidence of a non-humanoid culture yet found.

They were known to have been intelligent. Their cities, lacy things of steel and plastic, still reached for clouds on the slag-red sands of Rigel IV, silent and deserted. In vaults beneath cities' surface had been discovered the last few inhabitants, perfectly preserved in death.

Controlling his repulsion, Char-

lie Guhn studied the three skags lying in composed attitudes within their globe-shaped transparent shells. Blue tentacles stuck out of bulbous heads like medusae. Inhumanly majestic faces, but lacking nostrils and ears, were supported by strong granite bodies with abnormally long arms and legs. At first glance, they appeared to be perverted human mutations. In their repose, they seemed almost alive.

Unable to look longer, Guhn climbed the nearest ladder. At the top, a crewman commented to him: "Must've been frightful in life, them skags. We'd had a battle, then, sir; a real bloody battle."

The ship's speaker vibrated with Mark Caldwell's magnified voice: "Attention, all hands. We are entering minus point."

In his cabin, Capt. Jock Warren mumbled in his narcol stupor but his burly body never stirred.

VETERAN astrogator though he was, Mark Caldwell always dreaded the approach of minus point. You never could predict what effect the Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction might produce just before the jump into hyperspace when the laws of the Einsteinian universe broke down. But only at minus point could warper coils take over from blast engines.

At minus point, which set in at

186,100 miles a second, time started to reverse itself and flow backwards. Bending of the space-time continuum distorted entropy, causing an indescribably extended vessel and occupants to actually grow younger. Because human minds were unable to function during this period of cellular regeneration, robot pilots took over immediately. Two hours past the barrier, the crew would awake—at least two hours younger than at the moment of plunge.

Relays shuffled and clutches locked, clamping the Star Rover's directional controls, while Mark Caldwell fed the ship's heading figures into the mercury vat memory of the pilot. Then, he prepared for the big sleep. When consciousness returned, his brain would no longer be fogged.

The astrogator's sensitive fingers closed the last switch. Around the plowing freighter, the void strained and twisted in the flux of new forces, squeezing the vessel out of the universe as a grape is squeezed from its skin.

IT was at that moment of passing the barrier, that the skags—after a million years in the dreambarren sleep of suspended animation — awoke from their life in death. The time-reverting effect of minus point returned their bodies to that instant in the forgot-

ten past when they had retreated into mass oblivion.

First to be jolted into life in the Star Rover's dim gray hold was the mind of K'Gol. Tentacles rustled in violent wriggling activity, then massive eyelids opened to reveal cold purple eyes. As inhuman strength massed in his limbs, K'Gol stood erect, found the release to his prison shell and pressed the button. The transparent envelope collapsed, leaving him free.

Thought vibrations brought perplexed messages from the two other skags.

K'Gol studied his surroundings and said: "We have failed. The gas nebula penetrated and we are in the realm of the dead."

"We are dead, yet we breathe."

"Let us look around. We must arrive at the truth."

Stumbling along with heavy tread, the skags made their way from compartment to compartment until they found a ladder, by which they mounted. Only the faint throb of the auxiliary engines, now supplying the warpers, was to be heard. On the deck, K'Gol found two erect bodies in sculptured attitudes, the unconscious shapes of Second Officer Charles Guhn and a boatswain. All three skags halted, racked by uncontrollable revulsion at sight of the alien species.

K'Gol's limbs glowed with yellow light and he reached forth to

death-shock the monsters. But the skag behind him warned: "They may be harmless. Perhaps, we should wait until they awaken."

They explored the ship from bow to stern, stopping only to wonder at the warper coils which they would have designed differently. "It is clear. We are prisoners in a vessel-between-the-stars."

Presently, they found a control that opened the starboard view ports. Their eyes were greeted by the wrenching chaos of hyperspace. "It is a new dimension. Our captors are highly advanced and their minds are impervious to our probing. We must take over, before they recover." The skags hurried through the freighter, gathering up all possible weapons and locking them in the hold. Then, K'Gol mounted the bridge and familiarized himself with the instruments and controls.

MARK Caldwell's mind snapped back into full consciousness. For a moment, he thought that waitress at Arcturus had followed him; then, the vision suddenly changed into something horrible and he found himself facing a living skag who stood watching him with curious eyes. Caldwell's skin crawled and he started to cry out. A muscle jerk caused his arms to fail and a yellow glow simultaneously exuded from the

skag, bathing the astrogator in needle-like flame that paralyzed.

Skag and human studied each other, unable to communicate directly and each filled with horror and disgust at the other's sight. Then, having made his captive helpless, K'Gol examined the star charts on the desk, only to discover a million years had exploded the constellations like dust clouds, and the suns were unfamiliar. Again, man and skag faced each other. Without communication, the skags could not learn the ship's destination and so, although they were in power, they were as helpless as their captives.

* * *

Charlie Guhn had been thinking of Earth's green fields, a moment before the Star Rover entered minus point. Now, his mind was snapped back to terrifying reality with the knowledge that the starboard ports were unshuttered. No human found it easy to gaze at hyperspace and the officer rushed to close the ports, wondering who was responsible. He made his way to the hold and there discovered the collapsed envelopes of the skags.

His first thought was for the captain. But as he neared Jock Warren's cabin, his hackles rose as if in warning: there was a new odor in the air, slimy and deathly ancient. Then at the far end of

the passageway, he saw the back of a tentacled head rise from the steps to the engine room. Yellow flame seemed to pursue him along the corridor as he fled. An emergency hatch that led past the fore-castle to the lifeboats afforded him temporary escape and seconds later he found refuge in a lifeboat.

When his trembling ceased, he started to formulate plans to regain the ship. In the lifeboat, he discovered two force band pistols which he stuck in his belt. If worse came to worse, he could bolt the ship, risking the unknown dangers of a hyper-universe in preference to the skags.

* * *

As the narcol-induced fantasies faded from Jock Warren's brain, the skipper became aware his ship had passed minus point. Well, the old tub was on her way now and he'd have to put in an appearance on the deck . . . show the lads the old man wasn't scuttled. He splashed cold water on his face, afterwards rubbing his red-blotched skin with a rough towel. Feeling better, he hummed a vulgar space chantey he had learned as an Alpha Centauri midshipman, following which he danced a brief jig that evoked memories of an early cruise to Procyon and a lovely blackeyed wench.

Now completely spruced up, the captain buckled the triple prongs

of his white belt, donned his gold-braided space cap and stepped out of the cabin.

A live skag stood at the end of the hall waiting for him.

Doubt and disbelief wrinkled Jock Warren's brow as he stared at the apparition. He knew he was sober because the Star Rover had passed minus point. His mind groped for an explanation of the skag. There was no explanation—but there was a *solution*.

The captain backed into his cabin, locked the door and then searched through his wardroom locker until he found that most precious of all liquids, a flask of narcol. Several good strong slugs slushed down his parched gullet, before his space-hardened nerves approached reasonably good shape.

His skin flushed and his arteries warmed by the narcol, he became convinced once more that he had suffered an hallucination. Fantasy or no fantasy, there remained only one way to learn for certain. Jock Warren strode into the corridor. There the skag waited. "Blast it!" the captain rumbled. "You're a balmy hallucination. Out of my way, you scummy dream of a scummy planet!"

He lurched towards the creature and his arms attempted to brush away its cobwebby image. Sudden contact with its cold firm flesh electrified him. "Mister

Guhn!" his voice rose. "Avast, Mr. Guhn!"

The echoes rolled through the ship without answer.

When the dead silence renewed itself, Capt. Jock Warren lifted his narcol flask and drank deeply. The skag watched with impassionate curiosity.

FAILING in his search for Rigel on the star charts, K'Gol tried to contact his companions who were exploring and making secure the remainder of the vessel. The skag concluded that the only hope lay to negotiate a truce with the monsters who had built the ship. His companions replied:

"That's your task, K'Gol. We must learn the language of these hideous creatures or teach them ours."

"I have captured one here, who appears to guide the vessel," beamed K'Gol. "Let me attempt it with him, first."

Blue light flamed from the skag, bathing Mark Caldwell's head and throat. Discovering the paralysis lifted, the astrogator rotated his head to exercise stiffened muscles. K'Gol pointed at the individual white dots on a star chart: "Kuuuh-gu." The tones were like a goat chewing tin plate.

"Kuuuh-gu," echoed Mark Caldwell. "Oh, you mean stars. Stars."

The skag waved to include the

bulkheads and deck. "Saaah-gos."

The astrogator repeated: "Saaah-gos. Must be ship."

"Must be ship," said the skag.

Hysterical laughter gripped the officer. From the skag's throat emerged identical sounds, uproarious cackles; but the brilliant eyes barely flickered.

* ,

From his place in the lifeboat, Second Officer Charlie Guhn had heard no sound for several hours. He felt cramped in a gray microcosm where it was hopeless to escape. His mind turned to the cause of the skags' revivification; it was his knowledge of physics that provided him the correct answers. The transparent shells surrounding the skags were of time-impervious materials. Upon entering minus point, the creatures retrograded in time to a point previous to their suspended animation.

What did they want? What did they plan? Without these answers, Guhn had no means to deal with them. Rather than dispatch the lifeboat, the deck officer resolved to attempt snapping the entire vessel back into normal space. He lowered himself to the foc'sle quarters. Here, the bodies of six crewmen neatly piled together stunned his eyes. At first, he supposed they were dead but a confirmatory touch of their flesh showed they were

not. Tortured faces stared at him, as if trying to project a message.

Guhn stole along the portside catwalk to the engine rooms. Finding no one, he mounted to the deck. Upon hearing the heavy tread of stumbling feet, he flattened himself against a bulkhead niche and waited.

Suddenly, words roared out in the still passageway, sung in a strong-timbered brogue:

*"Oh, our officers are eager
And our crew is full of fight!
And we're blastin' off for Vega
Where we'll drink and fight all
night!"*

It was the captain's voice, bursting with life and very merry.

The chant was taken up by another voice, a throbbing metallic speaker with slurred tones:

*"Cause we've got to get her o-o-
over,
O-o-over that hyper hooomp!"*

Holding his body flat in the niche, Charlie Guhn saw the skipper walk by, keeping time to his own melody by waving his massive arms. Abreast of him reeled a skag, drenched with narcotic fumes. Guhn stepped out behind them, gripping the trigger of the force band pistol.

"Captain Warren! Step aside."

The skipper wheeled and his face flooded crimson:

"Mr. Guhn, may I ask what you're doing off your watch?"

"Sir, that's a skag. They've taken over the ship."

"You're hysterical, Mr. Guhn. Damned right he's a skag. Been a skag for a million years. You hear that? Best dream I've ever had. We're going to get him back to Rigel . . . next trip out. Drinks like a blasted fish, the fellow does."

Incredulity fought fear in Charles Guhn's brain, until the alternate waves of emotion caused his collapse. Capt. Jock Warren bent over and raised him. The two men's faces came close together. The skipper's eye closed slowly, once, twice: "We'll be all right if the juice holds out."

The skag bent over too in an inebriated effort to assist. Then, the skipper and his million-year-old companion locked arms and hoisted the flask of narcol.

* * *

From Charlie Guhn's Log:

The skags were friendly enough, once barriers broke down. They had suspended their civilization when a helium cloud passed through their system. Helium was

poisonous to their composition and the skag culture may have to be transferred to a nitrogen-major planet.

On termination of the voyage, Mark Caldwell, astrogator, promptly applied for transfer to the Arcturus run. Second Officer Guhn refused to sign again and took a berth on the Earth-Mars shuttle. Capt. Jock Warren posed for a "Captain of Distinction" testimonial for the narcol people and retired on his earnings, protesting a higher fee paid to a skag for a similar portrait.

When last heard from, K'Gol and his skag companions had settled down to conferring with terrestrial scientists, making and discarding countless plans to revive the Rigel culture, and drinking narcol.

Frankly, they didn't seem to be in any hurry about reviving their brethren. Maybe, they felt they had a damned good deal all by themselves. Who knows the mind of a skag?

THE END