

All
Stories
New

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There was a chance for a couple — man and wife — to stick it out for a term of service as Beacon Keepers on a hollowed-out asteroid IF they had hobbies. Well, Carradine loved to cook... and Sal decided that here was her chance to write THE novel. So it looked as if all would work out just fine...

SPACEMAN'S DELIGHT

by

A. Bertram Chandler

THERE WAS Carradine, who was Mate of the *Ceres Belle*, and Sal Perkins, who was editor of the women's pages of *The Martian Chronicle*. He was a tall man, Carradine—unusually tall for

a member of a service which tends to discourage excessive size in its officers. He was, however, thin to the point of skinniness so did not rob his ship of more than a few ounces of payload. Sal was slim, but

had to watch her diet carefully to stay that way. For the rest—she had auburn hair and deep brown eyes and everything that a desirable woman should have, and all in the right places.

Carradine wanted to marry her.

Carradine had left the Martian Mail Line because of her, had exchanged his fine, big ships for the little rust buckets owned by the Martian Mining Corporation and plying between the red planet and the Asteroid Belt, carrying stores and equipment out, metallic ores and other minerals home.

Carradine wanted to marry her, and she wanted to marry Carradine; but Sal had decided that the life of a spaceman's wife is not a good one, no matter what his trade. There was a waiting list a light year long for berths in the shuttle rockets running between Mars and the spaceports on Phobos and Deimos. There was a waiting list two light years long for pilots' jobs in the rocket planes that were the most commonly used means of public transport on Mars; and these waiting lists were filled with the names

of those who, like Carradine, had fallen in love with Martian girls and left the Martian Mail Line, thinking that service in the Corporation's ore carriers would give them more time with their women.

SAL WAS saying, "I want to marry you, Bill," as they sat together before the fire—an extravagance, but a pleasant one—in her apartment in Marsala. "I want to marry you, and badly. But I know you too well. Once you put that ring on my finger, you'll tend to lose interest in any job that will keep us together. You'll just let things drift."

"Perhaps you could show me," said Carradine slowly, "where to get a job. Perhaps you could tell me where to find one that pays the same money as I'm getting now. Perhaps you could tell me where to go looking for one in the few hours that it takes to get *Ceres Belle* discharged and loaded."

"Perhaps you could make a start by looking in the classified advertisements in the *Chronicle*," she said acidly. "At one time you used to go right through those pages eve-

ry time that you were in—now you've lost interest."

"Oh, all right," he growled. He picked up the paper from the low coffee table. He turned to the *Men Wanted* pages. Suddenly he stiffened. "Hello, the Astronautical Services Commission is running an ad... Tell me, Sal—would you be prepared to drop everything and come out to the Belt?"

"It all depends," she replied cautiously.

"The money's good. In a couple of years or so we should have saved enough to buy ourselves a small business of some kind."

"What is the job?" she asked.

BILL LOOKED thoughtful. "Beacon Keeper. As you know, the ships running through the Belt are dependent to a great extent upon radio beacons. Fully automatic beacons have been tried—but there are so many things that can go wrong to them, not the least common of these being damage by a meteorite. A single man has been tried—but he's far too liable to go round the bend. Teams of two, three,

four and even five men have been tried—and to the risk of madness has been added the risk of murder. There has been a buzz going round that the Commission is about to try a new approach. This is it."

"Either let me see the paper, Bill, or tell me."

"They're going to try manning the beacons with married couples. Oh, one could do a lot worse. The living quarters are hollowed out of the planetoids on which the beacons are sited, so are quite safe from meteoric collision. There's a hydroponics garden, and there are yeast and tissue culture vats. There's a fine supply of books and films and recorded music. Ideal homes in Space, that's what the beacons are. And the pay is fifteen hundred dollars a month—more than the two of us are making now—and there's nothing to spend it on."

"I could write my novel," she said.

"Yes. You could write your novel."

"Darling," she said, "this could be it. I want you to call the Commission at once—there's bound to be somebody on duty. We'll see if we can

have our interview this afternoon. Then, if it's successful, we'll go straight to the Registrar and make our relationship permanent, and you can put in your resignation from the Corporation."

"Are you sure, Sal?" he asked. "After all, you lead a full life here. You've got your job and you've got the city..."

"A provincial newspaper," she said, "in a hick town. Get on that 'phone at once. Sell yourself to them. Sell *us*."

SO IT WAS, a few weeks later, that Carradine and Sal were among the passengers in the Beacon Tender *Eddystone*. Like most of the other married couples in the ship they tended to resent the lectures that Captain Williams, *Eddystone's* Master, was all too ready and willing to give at the slightest provocation. After all—they were in love, and what did this grizzled bachelor know about love? When you are in love there is no boredom. Every word spoken by one's beloved is music, her every movement is the epitome of grace. Two together, shut up in a cave—a warm

cave, fitted with every modern convenience—and with the rest of mankind millions of miles away is the nearest approach to Eden that man and woman will ever know.

"It's the boredom that's the biggest enemy," Captain Williams was always saying. "You must have hobbies. That is essential. It can be putting ships in bottles, it can be carving soap—but you *must* have hobbies. If I'd had my way all you young people would never have had your contraceptive shots before leaving Mars—you'd find children the best hobby of all!"

"Spoken," said Carradine, on one occasion, "like a true bachelor."

WILLIAMS had replied, "I may be a bachelor, Carradine, but I can observe. I've had to clean up the mess on far too many of the beacon planetoids since I've been on this service. I've had to bury the corpses of murdered men, and I've had to carry raving maniacs under restraint. Others I've carried back who've spent the full two years strumming on the keyboard of a piano or

a typewriter and who have had not only the accumulated pay to look forward to but the proceeds of the sale of some masterpiece. But they, I'm sorry to say, have been few and far between."

"Sal is writing a novel," said Carradine proudly.

"You should have said *the* novel. It will be a good one, too."

"And what do *you* propose to do?" asked Williams. "Repairs and adjustments to the beacon won't take long—neither will writing up the Official Log. Unless you know far more about Bio-Chemistry than the average spaceman you'll be well advised to stick strictly to the book as far as Hydroponics is concerned—which will make gardening a matter of routine. You must do something besides making love and reading Mrs. Carradine's manuscripts."

"As a matter of fact," said Carradine a little stiffly, "I *have* got a hobby."

"Indeed? What is it?"

"I cook."

"He can, too, Captain," said Sal.

Williams smiled. "Cookery's

one of my hobbies, too. Every now and again I persuade the Chef to give me a free hand in the galley—and nobody's died yet. Next time I take over the cuisine, Carradine, you'll have to come along and swap recipes with me."

"The woman's place, I suppose, is at her typewriter," said Sal.

"Too right," replied her husband.

BEACON 343 is lonely.

Beacon 343 is in the thick of the Drift, where ships rarely venture. At long intervals, there will be the distant flare of rocket drive against the weird, light-spangled sky of the Belt, and it may be seen in the unlikely event of a member's of the Beacon's crew being on the surface of the tiny world. At long intervals, a strange voice will crackle from the loudspeaker, and there will be a brief exchange of question and answer.

"*Lili Marlene*, Hawkins, Master, from Ceres City to Phobos. Can you hear me, 343, can you hear me?"

"You are coming in both loud and clear, *Lili Marlene*."

Have you anything to report?"

"Nothing to report, 343.

Have you anything to report?"

"Nothing. But I have a request, *Lili Marlene*."

"Go ahead, 343."

"Please ask Captain Williams, of the *Eddystone*, to bring some more paper for my wife on his next call. It's for her novel. And ask him, too, to bring some more cookery books for me."

"It's as good as done, 343. All the best to you."

"And all the best to you, *Lili Marlene*. Give Mars our love."

BEACON 343 is lonely.

At long, but regular intervals the Beacon Tender *Eddystone* makes her rounds, nosing in carefully, carefully through the Drift, hanging at last above the rugged surface of the planetoid, her hull almost brushing the radio antennae. It is Williams, accompanied by one of his officers, who makes the landing and who hands over to Beacon Keepers their regulation stores and the extra items that they have requested. It is Williams who will sip in sometimes gen-

uine appreciation some homemade tippie brewed by a Beacon Keeper. It is Williams who, if time will permit, shares a meal with the lonely men and women.

And it was Williams who thought, for a long time, that the mixed crew experiment was working out well on 343.

The first time that he called he was received by both Carradine and Sal. When the three of them shed their spacesuits in the little living room he looked at the young man and woman curiously. They were fit, obviously. They were putting on weight, both of them. They were happy; they were pleased to see the Captain but would be pleased when he left them to their privacy. Carradine pressed a bulb of beer upon him which, Williams admitted, wasn't at all bad. Sal showed him a thick bundle of manuscript. Carradine produced a meal, cooked by himself, that was better than anything ever turned out by *Eddystone's* Chef—in fact, Williams thought, almost as good as anything that he could have done.

THE NEXT time that *Eddystone* called, Williams was

received only by Carradine. Sal was hard at work on her novel still—the clatter of her typewriter was clearly audible as Carradine and the Captain were talking in the living room, and sipping the quite palatable gin that Carradine had distilled.

Williams was rather shocked by her manner when she stopped work and came through. She had, quite clearly, reached the stage when she thought that all men were members of a conspiracy against all women. She refused a drink. She accused her husband of drinking while she was working and, by implication, accused Williams of aiding and abetting him. She refused to join her husband and the Captain in a meal. She went back to her typewriter.

"She gets that way," said Carradine. "The trouble is, she needs a hobby."

"She's got one, surely," said Williams.

"No," dissented the other. "Her novel was a hobby when she was a journalist—now she's making work of it."

"What about your cooking? (This is excellent lamb, by the

way—you must look after your cultures well.) Isn't that work too?"

"No," Carradine told him. "Maintaining the Beacon is work—this is just a hobby."

"Then why not let Mrs. Carradine take turns with the cooking? That will give her a hobby, too."

"We've tried that. But Sal's the worst cook in the Solar System, bar none—she always was. With her, it's like somebody who hasn't got green fingers trying to garden."

"Too bad," said Williams. "Thanks for the drink and the meal, anyhow. I must be going now."

"Sal!" called Carradine, "the Captain's leaving!"

The rattle of the typewriter ceased briefly.

"Goodbye," cried Sal, then resumed work at once.

ON HIS periodic visits to 343, Williams became used to not seeing Mrs. Carradine. Sometimes she would call out to him from her workroom; sometimes she never bothered. But there was always a drink for him and, if he wanted it, a meal. Carradine was ready

to eat at any time. He was putting on weight—had, in fact, developed an unsightly paunch. He was beginning to acquire the slightly greasy, slightly unhealthy look often exhibited by those who work with food.

But he was happy.

He had his hobby, and he was happy. He would have been just as happy, perhaps, if he had been alone on the beacon planetoid. He would be one of the few who would be genuinely sorry when their tour of duty was over—and now it was almost over.

Eddystone came nosing in through the Drift, her rockets flaring briefly as she avoided contact with those pieces of planetary debris that threatened collision with her hull. Her rockets flared again as she established herself in her orbit around the planetoid from which, like improbable vegetation, sprouted the metal antennae. A spacesuited figure was waving to the ship from the landing platform.

"We've timed our arrival just right," said Williams to his Chief Officer.

"How so, sir?"

"It's almost dinner time—

and Carradine is bound to ask me to share a meal with him. He's an excellent cook. I doubt that I'll ever get such meals again on 343—next trip, as you know, we bring their reliefs out."

"What about his wife?" asked the Mate.

"She doesn't cook. She's writing on a novel, or *the* novel. If it sells well, she should use the money to start a restaurant, with her husband in full charge of the galley. All the stores ready?"

"All ready, sir, in the airlock."

"The Third can give me a hand down with them. I'll send him back as soon as they're stowed."

SPACESUITED, using their pistol reactors, Williams and his Third Officer jetted from *Eddystone's* airlock, the bales and cartons dragging behind them on their towlines. The two men dropped to the landing platform, touched gloves with Carradine, then dragged the packages into the beacon's airlock. They removed their suits, checked the items, one by one, against the list held by

the Third Officer. Carradine scrawled his signature on the sheet.

Then... "A drink Captain?" asked Carradine. "And a bite to eat, perhaps?"

"Thank you," said Williams. "I think I will."

"What about the Third?"

"You know the Regulations as well as I do, Carradine. Not more than one officer to be absent from the ship at any time, in Space, except in cases of emergency."

"I'd better be getting back, sir," said the Third, tactfully and regretfully. He resumed his spacesuit. Williams and Carradine went through into the workshop, watched through the observation ports as the youngster jetted up to the waiting ship.

"Of course," said Williams, "what I have to avoid is giving the juniors the idea that you Beacon Keepers live like lords. There's enough wastage from the Service already. I let the Third come with me into 327. Welsh is the Keeper there—used to be with the Martian Mail, the same as you. He and his wife lead a cat and dog life, and are just sticking out for

the money. Neither of them can cook, either."

"You must," said Carradine, "have a good cook for this job."

HE LED THE way into the living room. He helped the Captain to strap himself into his chair. He returned with two bulbs of a pale amber fluid.

"Sherry," he said. "My own make. Not quite Tio Pepe, but not bad."

"Not bad at all," agreed Williams.

"We'll have a claret with the meal."

"How do you do it?" asked Williams admiringly.

"Is there any reason why one shouldn't grow grapes in the Hydroponics Room? And with modern forcing techniques..."

"Yes," agreed Williams. "There's far too much of people saying that you can't do this and that you can't do that in Hydroponics, when it's only a matter of working out the technique. The same applies to tissue cultures. Beef you can have. Poultry you can have. Mutton you can have. But pork? No. But why not?"

"Why not?" echoed Carradine. He went through to the galley. He returned with plates and eating utensils, two bulbs of red wine.

"Where's Mrs. Carradine?" asked Williams. "Isn't she joining us?"

"She's not eating these days," replied her husband. "Well, she is—but it's one of these special diets."

"Still working hard, I take it."

"Still working hard."

"PORK CUTLETS!" exclaimed the Captain. "Delicious! But how did you do it, Carradine?"

"There's such a thing," said the Beacon Keeper happily between mouthfuls, "as long pig..."

"Long pig?"

Suddenly Williams realized

what it meant. He dropped his knife and fork, let them drift unheeded. He fought to control his rising nausea.

"There's such a thing, too, as getting your own back," went on Carradine.

"I arrest you!" spluttered Williams. "Murder would have been bad enough, but *this*..."

"Finish your dinner," said Carradine, "and don't be a fool."

"And so it's too much for Captain Williams?" said Sal Carradine, coming slowly into the room. "I'm not surprised. I'm on a diet, Captain Williams, a strictly vegetarian diet. Do you know what this beast did? He said that he had to have pork for his cookery, so he took a tissue culture from his own thigh..."

Williams *was* sick.

