

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

No. 34

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AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

MARGARET ST. CLAIR has become one of those authors whose name is a hallmark of quality, since her first appearance in science fiction during the war years. Lovers of fantasy know her under another name, as well—Idis Seabright. She also writes detective fiction, and authored one of the best fictional treatments of Jack-the-Ripper we have ever seen.

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STAROBIN

by Margaret St. Clair

illustrated by FREAS

Something had to be done to spark the Pilot Recruitment Service. People needed the exquisite Llewellyn artifacts, which had to be brought across space, and a Pilot shortage was approaching. One man could give the campaign that spark—Starobin, the great spaceman who vanished years ago; if Starobin could be found, and brought back...

“HE WAS ON the edge of Brocchi’s cluster in Vulpecula when he disappeared,” Ellen read aloud from the sheet of typescript. “There was a sort of demon in him. The things it takes a crew of four to do, he did single-handed. Starobin never took anybody with him. Only after he had died did we realize how many worlds he had visited. It wasn’t the entries in the history books he wanted, it was the stars. There was a demon in the man.”

Ellen let the sheet drop on Toby’s desk. “Nice copy,” she said.

“Yeah. Thanks. And then of course there’ll be the usual stuff about ‘don’t be earth-bound...give yourself the STARS!’ and the tie-up with the Pilot Recruitment Serv-

ice. We found a picture of Starobin we’re going to use; he looks noble and slightly cross-eyed in it. It ought to bring the little bounders tumbling in, eager to sign up with the Service.”

“How’s the campaign coming, anyhow?”

Toby made a face. “Not so well. There’s been a lot of publicity lately on pilot injury, and mortality statistics—especially in the Earth-Llewellyn run. The kids are scared.”

“It oughtn’t to be allowed,” said Ellen vaguely. She prodded at her hair which, this morning, had been lacquered into a structure rather like a blonde pagoda, with small green animals adorning the edges. “What will happen to us if there aren’t enough pilots for the Llewellyn serv-

ice? The Llewellyn artifacts are wonderful, delicious. Sometimes I think they're all that keeps me alive."

"THAT'S WHAT everybody says," replied Toby. "With some help from the pharmaceuticals, of course."

"Yes, they help." She picked up the copy again. "When did he die?"

"Nobody knows. The last anybody heard of him was ten years ago, when he was just margining on Brocchi's cluster, the way it says in my blurb. Since then, Starobin's rest has been silence." He coughed, perhaps to draw attention to his joke.

"Then—how do you know he is dead?"

They looked at each other. Toby's eyes had begun to glow. "If he's not dead..." he said slowly.

"How old was he when he disappeared?"

"Forty-two. Even now, he'd be a long way from being an old man."

Once more they looked at each other. It was Toby who said, at last, "We could send a ship to bring him back."

"What would be the point of that? Outside of curiosity, I mean."

Toby had got up from his desk and was walking up and down. "I'm surprised at you, woman," he said over his shoulder. "The Recruitment Campaign. Search for Staro-

bin, Pioneer Star-rover.' It would be fabulous publicity."

ELLEN HAD picked up one of the ambiguous Llewellyn artifacts and was manipulating it absently. It became a vase, a cup, a piece of abstract sculpture, an arrowhead, a ceramic rabbit, before it reverted to its primary identity, a marble ash-tray. "How could you trace him? You'd have all space to look for him in."

"Well, we might have trouble; but we know exactly when and where he left Earth. We know how much Earth has moved in the meantime, and can make allowance for variation in magnetic fields and gravity. We know what kind of a craft he had, and how it was, and how it was powered. We know how much he weighed, and what his pulse was, and what his metabolic rate. We know all about him."

"Except what his demon was," Ellen murmured.

"Eh? As I was saying, we know all about him. For practical purposes. Now, his departure has left traces in the continuum. Events are inefaceable. With the data we have, we can use the Sparrow Marker to pick up his traces. And follow him back."

"Sparrow Marker?" Ellen yawned.

"I guess you don't tune the science channels. Sparrow Marker is called that because



This world was a paradise—at first...

it's capable of marking the sparrow's fall. In other words, it enables one to pick up the track of any past event, provided one has certain basic data about it.

"Following Starobin with it would be like laying a course for a space ship along a single strand of spider web. But it could be done."

"And then?"

"We'd find Starobin and bring him back. And you'd get your Llewellyn artifacts."

THE ECONOMIC considerations that made heavy armor unfeasible for the ships on the Earth-Llewellyn run didn't apply to the Starobin Rescue Ship. She was protected against everything the engineers could imagine. Her passengers would be almost as secure as they would have been on Earth, though less comfortable. Besides, they could sleep a lot.

The passenger list was short: Toby (he wanted to go, but public opinion would have compelled him, even if he had been reluctant); Erickson, the Sparrow Marker man; Cheng, the mechanic; and Brown, the astrologer. There hadn't been as many candidates for passage as one would have expected. The "star hunger" Toby wrote about didn't seem to be acute. Despite the purpose of the Rescue Mission, there were only four bunks installed, which might argue a

certain lack of optimism in the designers.

At the next-to-the-last moment, Ellen decided that she wanted to go. She had drifted into one of the ambiguous relationships with Toby that were the current fashion; perhaps she didn't want to be parted from him, perhaps... She herself couldn't have told what her motives were.

Since she was also in some sort of a relationship with a man named Mortimer, a high-up in the Pilot Recruitment Service, she was able to use his influence to bump Sparrow Marker Erickson out of his post. There was no reason to think that substituting her for Erickson would be unfortunate. Ellen was intelligent; and after four weeks' intensive training, she knew most of the things about the Sparrow Marker that Erickson had known. And the publicity—under the stimulus of the ship's building, the recruitment rate into the Pilot Service really had picked up a bit—the publicity her inclusion got for the expedition was marvelous.

LA TE IN June, amid verbal paroxysms, the Starobin Rescue Ship left earth. They had picked up the traces of Starobin's own ship without too much difficulty, and on planetary drive they slipped through the solar system and out into space. This part was

easy, pleasant, like sight-seeing; but once they were on the space drive and headed toward Brocchi's cluster, the weary time began.

There is always some psychological stress in being in space. Ellen was troubled by a persistent sense of psychic emptiness. She had brought along her favorite artifacts; the pharmaceuticals helped more. Two or three times in the night she would waken from her cold dreams to swallow a pill. Even when Toby came to her, the emptiness persisted. Meantime, the spiderweb-thin red line that denoted the ten-and-a-half-year-old course of Starobin's ship unrolled itself steadily across the flat white face of the Sparrow Marker.

THEY WENT off space drive and into deceleration, long before they reached the cluster. Ellen, better now, spent much time watching the cluster grow in the direct viewers. "Looks more like a coat hanger than anything," she said to Toby. "Funny that all those stars should just remind me of a coat hanger."

"Un-hunh." Toby had endured the trip better than she; its main effect on him had been to make him morose. "Listen, don't you think you'd better concentrate a little more on the Marker? From here on, we're very likely to lose Starobin's track, since we

haven't any idea where he went."

"There's an automatic signal on the Marker if the line breaks," Ellen objected. Nonetheless, she went over and seated herself by the instrument's face.

The line broke, forty-eight hours later. The Rescue Ship had to cast about maddeningly for it, while Brown cursed and Toby chewed his fingernails. They picked it up on an unlikely hunch of Ellen's, a long way from where Starobin had seemed to be going. Still, there was no doubt that it was his line.

The stars of the cluster had grown dazzlingly bright. Ellen snapped the dark screen in place across the direct viewer to shut out the glare. Even so, she felt she could still see it—cold white, hard blue, and dull and dangerous red.

STAROBIN seemed to have been heading for a white and yellow double star. They couldn't be sure. The line broke; they picked it up again. It was the double star.

"He's going to land on the planet, I think," Toby said.

"Which planet?" Ellen asked.

"There's only the one in the system." Toby was still morose.

"Why do you think he picked that particular planet?"

"How should I know? He

must have been acting at random. Star-rover pi-jaw aside, he couldn't have been doing anything else. One man's life isn't time enough for him to have landed—just landed, kicked the dust with his boots, and taken off again—it isn't time enough for him to have landed on more than a tiny fraction of the planets in Brocchi's cluster alone."

"Were his reports scientifically valuable?"

"Mainly from the point of view of random sampling. He didn't do things scientifically."

Ellen sighed. "What's this planet like?"

"Can't you read the data on the dials? It's bigger than Mars, smaller than Venus, and about as near to its primary as Earth is. It has a breathable atmosphere. The double primary will make it some different from what you're used to, but not a lot. Worlds are pretty much the same, through space."

"The stars, like clams—" said Ellen. She began to giggle hysterically.

"What's that?"

"Oh, a quotation."

"What's the matter with you?"

"I hate this. I hate space. It's nothing but a terrible repetitive emptiness."

"You shouldn't have come if you feel that way about it. Why did you come?"

THEY FOLLOWED the red line of Starobin's landing on down in a spiral. It was night when they made the first light, grazing contact with the planet. Ellen, who was sitting before the Marker, gave a cry. "He's here! He's still here!"

"What?" Toby demanded.

"Well, his ship is." She pointed at the Marker's face. The thin red line had been replaced by a solid reddish blot. "The line turned blue, and violet, and orange, and then red again; that means a temporal telescoping. Then the blot came; that means he's still here."

There wasn't any argument about waiting until morning. They all wanted to see what they had come so far to find. They left the rescue ship as soon as they could.

The stars of Brocchi's cluster burned like jewels against the sky. Ellen shivered. "Over toward the left, I think."

STAROBIN'S ship was much smaller than the one that had set out to rescue him. Grass had grown up around it; it had been in the same place a long time. The port was open.

"Starobin!" called Toby. He swallowed. "Starobin!"

His voice came back flatly from the ship. No answer. Ellen said, "Let's go inside. He may be dead."

The ship's tiny interior was

dusty, but there was no body in it. The fuel tank was empty. The bunk might not have been slept in for ten years.

"What happened to him?" asked Ellen. "Wait. I'll go back to Sparrow Marker and see if I can pick up his individual track."

She started to go. A voice behind them said, "He's not here; he took another ship."

They all jumped. "Who are you?" asked Toby.

The man came forward. He walked limpingly; his hair was white. They couldn't make out much more than that in the light of the torches. "Oh—call me Mike."

"Whose ship? Where did he get it?"

"My ship. He took it from me."

They were silent. At last Cheng, the mechanic, said, "You mean he stole...?"

"Well, he didn't get it by persuasion," Mike said reasonably.

"But... You've been here ever since? Ten years? The bunk doesn't look as if anybody'd been sleeping in it. And where did he go?"

MIKE DIDN'T answer. "Do you know where he is?" asked Ellen.

"I know where he thought of going," Mike answered reluctantly.

"What kind of a ship was it? Maybe Ellen could pick it up in the Marker."

"Marker? What's that?"

Ellen explained.

"Oh. No, I couldn't tell you. It's been so long ago; I've forgotten a lot of things." He rubbed his head.

"You don't remember what kind of a ship your own ship was?" Toby was incredulous. "Well, then, where did he say he was going to go?"

"...Why should I tell you?"

"We'll pay you."

"What good would money be here?"

"Oh—we'll take you back to Earth with us."

"It's been so long I'm not sure... What did you want Starobin for?"

THEY TOLD him, locking at each other, correcting, interrupting. Mike said, "You want to find Starobin so he can help you recruit youngsters into this Pilot Service business. And the Pilot Service is important because it brings back the Llewellyn artifacts."

"You make it sound so vulgar," Ellen protested, a little angrily. "As if they were just playthings. Why, the artifacts are charming, delicious, wonderful..."

"The flower of your culture. Just about the finest things you have on Earth." Mike cleared his throat. "Well, young lady, that may be why the others are hunting Starobin, but it's not why you

want to find him. My guess is you have motives of your own."

Ellen turned aside abruptly, out of the light of the torches. Her head was bent. "Never mind her motives," said Toby. "We want to know where Starobin was heading."

"You won't find out from me."

Ellen stepped forward again, into the light. "Make him tell, Toby. Are we going to go back to earth and say we couldn't find Starobin because the man who knew where he was wouldn't tell us? Make him tell."

Toby grasped the white-haired man's thin arm. He shook him. "Tell us." He twisted the arm.

Mike laughed. "How can you make me tell? There's an infinite number of places where he might have gone, and only one where he did go. All I have to do is to tell you the wrong place."

"You'll tell," Toby answered grimly. He gave the old man's arm a twist and shoved him in the direction of the Starobin Rescue Ship. "We're going to take you with us. And if it turns out you lied to us—we'll take it out of your hide."

MIKE'S BEING aboard made them miserably overcrowded. Only the astrogator had much to do; and after he had worked on the coordinates of the stars to

which Mike affirmed Starobin had been heading, and fed the course data into the computers, there wasn't much for him to do either. Like the others, he lay in his bunk and swallowed tranquilizing pills. Like the others, when the depressing effects of being tranquilized got too much for him, he took one of the "jag" pharmaceuticals, which directly stimulate the pleasure centers in the brain, and was then ready to start the cycle over again.

Their target star was deep within Brocchi's cluster. Mike didn't seem much troubled by the possibility that he might have given them the wrong one. Since he hadn't any regular bunk, he slept on the floor—or in whatever bunk might be temporarily vacant. Though he was offered a reasonable share of the pharmaceuticals aboard, he generally declined.

A SORT OF friendship sprang up between him and Ellen. They talked a good deal, in a desultory way. She did most of the talking—about Earth art, and science, and culture; about the wonderful goods and services Earth gave her children these days—or, when she was in a less solemn mood, she talked about herself. Mike almost never talked about himself.

"What was Starobin like?" she asked one wake-period. She was lying in her bunk.

Mike sat beside her on the floor.

Mike considered. "I didn't know him very well."

"I suppose robbery doesn't exactly constitute friendship," Ellen answered, with a ghost of humor. "But..."

"Well... He was a man who was hunting something. He seemed to me to be a man who was searching for the fulfillment of an aesthetic ideal. Almost an intellectual ideal."

"What ideal?"

"He drove himself," Mike said, ignoring her question. "There was certainly something masochistic about the way he drove himself. He seemed to feel that if he put himself under enough pressure, suffered enough hardships, exerted himself enough, he'd be sure to find what he was hunting."

"What was he hunting? I asked you before."

"It isn't easy to say. I don't think he knew himself. Perhaps for a place where he could lead a serene, beautiful, significant life. Harmony and order. A place where the simplest acts would be meaningful. I guess it really was an intellectual ideal."

"There's nothing intellectual about that," Ellen answered a little scornfully.

"Isn't there? There could be. Earth wasn't any place for a life like that, Earth or the humanoid colonies. He had to find it somewhere else."

"Earth's...all right."

"Not for a beautiful, easy life."

There was a noise from the bunk. Ellen may have been crying. After a moment she said, "I'm going to take a euph pill. Would you like one, Mike?"

"Thanks, I don't care if I do," Mike answered, departing from his usual habit.

He took the pill from her. They swallowed in companionable silence. He reached out and took her hand; they both dozed.

THE STAROBIN RESCUE

THE SHIP had been on planetary drive most of the time since they left the double sun on whose planet they had picked up Mike. Now their goal was in sight—the planet whose coordinates Mike had given them.

"Two planets," said the astrogator. "It can't be the inner one; that's entirely too near the primary. Whereabouts on the outer one do you want me to try for a landing?"

"Ask him," Toby answered. He gestured toward Mike.

"How should I know?" the old man replied. There was a small, tight smile on his lips.

Toby looked at him levelly. "I think you do know," he said. "I don't know how you know, but you do. Tell Brown where to try to put down the ship."

"Oh, as to that... I'll pilot, if you want me to."

Brown stood aside. Mike took over the controls. With amazing expertness, he began to bring down the ship.

IT WAS DAYBREAK when they landed. Moments before, when they had gone into a braking orbit, Ellen had said, "This looks like a lovely world."

"I expect Starobin thought so," Mike had said.

From the air they saw a swarm, a flight, of islands, lying like brown leaves against the blue-violet seas. "Not much in the way of large land masses," said Brown, the astrogator. "Still, it won't be hard to find a man here. If he didn't want to be found."

"If he didn't want to be found," Mike echoed.

Toby glanced at the older man's profile sharply; but Mike's face was relaxed and self-confident. Mike set the Starobin Rescue Ship down on one of the largest islands, as delicately and precisely as a man putting an egg in a basket of eggs.

The usual moment of numbed silence followed the shutting-off of the blasts. Then Ellen said, "Open the ports. I want to go out."

The automatic samplers had already said that what she wanted was safe. The ports swung wide.

The ingredients of paradise are simple. Trees with pale scarlet flowers. The glint of

salt water, the low thunder of surf. Tall cycads that lean slantwise into the fresh, scented wind. And against the violet horizon, a low-lying bank of cloud, molten rose in the light of the rising sun.

"Oh," Ellen said.

TOBY HAD followed her. "How lovely," he said. "A little garish. But lovely all the same."

The others had left the ship too. Toby turned to Mike. "Take us to Starobin."

"Find him yourself," Mike answered. "You brought me here by force. If you don't find what you want..."

"I'll take it out of your hide." Toby caught Mike's wrist and began pressure and twisting. "You'd better do as I say."

As well as he could, Mike shrugged. "A man my age isn't much afraid of being hurt. But come along. I meant to show you. It's only that I don't like you, Toby. It's remarkable how you represent everything I don't like. But come along."

He led them into the island, away from the beach. The way was slightly uphill, past bushes that were masses of waxy white flowers and taller shrubs that drooped with pendant greenish-purple fruit. The fresh sweet wind blew steadily in their faces.

THE WALK was long. He was obviously taking them

to the center of the island. Once Ellen said, "This place is really the earthly paradise. Nobody could imagine anything more beautiful."

Mike, in front, twisted around to look at her. "You don't sound particularly happy, though."

"Oh, well, paradise!" she answered, trying to laugh.

The flora grew denser and wetter. In mossy rock pockets ferns spread their bronzy green leaves. There was a sprinkling of tiny purple flowers. At last Mike led them out on an elevated rocky ledge.

Opposite them, a mountain stream poured out across the rock and broke in a gentle cascade. Its waters were collected into a pool fifteen feet or so below. Three or four women were bathing in the pool. An arc of rainbow from the misty waterfall hovered over their heads.

They looked up, startled, as the members of the Starobin Rescue Mission came out onto the rock ledge. The women were certainly humanoid, probably human. Their skins were a velvety gold, their hair hung down their shoulders in rich black coils.

One of the women hesitated. Then she came out of the water and began to clamber up the rocks toward them. She could climb well.

She swung herself over the ledge and stood up. She was

beautiful, as beautiful as her island, as beautiful as her world. Only a carping critic would have said that she was a little over-ripe.

She looked at Mike, and smiled. "Starobin! Starobin!" she said in a high, bird's voice. She put out her hand.

"Hello, Amta," he said.

"**W**HY DID you lie to us?" Ellen asked when they had gone back to the beach.

"You were hunting me. I didn't want to be hunted," Starobin-Mike replied.

"But—what happened? What were you doing there on the planet beside the double sun? Who took your ship?"

"Oh, I took his. We got into a quarrel, you see, and I killed him. It wasn't murder. I buried him properly. His grave wasn't far from where you landed. And then I took his ship. It was better than mine."

"And then you came here. But—why did you leave? This place is like paradise. Why did you go back to where you had killed a man?"

"It wasn't remorse, if that's what you mean," replied Starobin. "I don't even know what his name was, or what he was doing there. He was probably a space-tramp."

"But why did you go back?"

"This place..." said Starobin, and paused. "I told you I—Starobin—was hunting an ideal. Beauty, serenity, significance. Here..."

"Wasn't that what you found?" Ellen demanded. Her face was white and lined.

"IT WAS MEANINGLESS. Physical pleasure, certainly. Beautiful, accessible women, beautiful natural surroundings, easy means of life. So easy. There was no content. Paradise was like a drug. Like the drugs you take."

"And you went back—"

"To a more austere planet. I was trying to break the paradise habit; I was trying to knit my life together again. I thought, if I could succeed, I would go back to Earth. Perhaps I might yet be able to do some useful work... I might have been able to do it. But then the Starobin Rescue Mission came in the Rescue Ship.

"You talked about Earth a lot on the way here, Ellen. You made me hate too many things about it. I realized why I'd run away from it. No. I won't go back."

He reached across to a bush and plucked one of the greenish-purple fruits. He bit into it. "Try one," he said to Ellen. "It's delicious."

"No. I don't want it. What are you going to do?"

"Stay here."

ELLEN BEGAN to cry. Starobin dropped the fruit half-eaten. He touched her gently on the arm. "Poor girl," he said sorrowfully, "poor girl, you're so unhappy. The pharmaceuticals and the artifacts and the whole glittering flood of goods and services you told me about—none of them help you with your dreadful emptiness. You thought Starobin might have something for you; that's why you came so far, hunting him. And he hasn't. All he has to offer is an ideal—that betrayed itself."

"Come back with us. Please come back."

"No. I wish I could help you. I can't. I haven't anything to help you. I'll just stay here, getting old rather quickly. But at any rate..." something positive, a wan gleam of human courage and pride had come into his face... "at any rate, I shan't help Earth to get any more Llewellyn artifacts."

Ellen held out her hand to him. He did not see her. Eyes half-closed, he was plucking another purplish fruit and putting it in his mouth.

She turned back to the ship. She was weeping bitterly. But even in her grief—for him, for herself—she understood that it was a sort of triumph that the Pilot Recruitment Service was going to have to get along without Starobin.