

# STARTLING STORIES

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Alfven experimented  
with the materializer

# Stars Over Santa Claus

By WILLIAM MORRISON

*It is more blessed to give than to receive—even when  
you use a materializer a hundred light years in space!*

**H**URLEY paused in his shaving and asked almost casually, as if it didn't matter to him in the least, "Anything materialize in the past half hour?"

"Only this, sir," said Alfven respectfully, and held up a feathery body for

him to see. By the light of the blue sun overhead it was a ghastly sight.

"What in space is that?"

"It started out as a turkey, Captain Hurley. They thought it would make a nice gift for the season. But the head

and one wing were lost, and the body was twisted in transit, and it doesn't look so appetizing. All the same, it's still edible—I think."

"If you think so, you'll have a chance to eat it," grunted Hurley. "Or else feed it to the Domes. Those creatures will swallow anything. By the way, you haven't been using my blowtorch, have you?"

"I always shave with my own."

Hurley rubbed his face thoughtfully. "This one feels a little hot. By Pluto, that's the last straw. When men a hundred light years from home start sneaking in the use of their captain's blowtorch, and don't have the common decency to tell him they need another, an expedition's really demoralized."

"Shall I have them materialize a replacement for you, sir?"

"This one's still good enough to use. Just doesn't keep to the right wavelength and give a cool enough shave any more. And I think we have better work for our materializer to do."

"Frankly, I think so too, Captain."

Hurley gave him a sour look. "Then why make a fool suggestion like the one for a replacement? Trying to please me? Alfven, you're a good kid, but you've been spoiled by that blasted Politeness course they give nowadays. Respect your captain and obey his orders—I go along with that. But only up to a certain point. Only up to the point where you still treat him as a human being, and not as a tin god. The trouble with you, sonny boy, is that you respect me too much."

"Yes, sir," said Alfven respectfully.

Hurley snorted. "I should have taken my wife along. Regulations or no regulations, I should have brought Clara with me. She'd have put an end to this confounded formality around here."

"I hear that Mrs. Hurley has great talents along that line, sir."

"You've heard right. Too bad she was tied up taking care of a sick kid. She's a lot better captain than I am. She's the best captain I ever heard of, bar none."

So even the captain was homesick. Alfven kept a discreet silence. He was younger than anyone had a right to be

on an expedition of this kind, a mere twenty-five, and he looked practically infantile. His face was so pink and smooth that sometimes Hurley wondered whether he really used his blowtorch to shave or just pretended to. But it wasn't his youth that Hurley held against him. It was, as he said, that blasted Politeness, which was drilled into them in school, and served as a barrier against laxness of all kinds.

It was an old tradition, and even young Alfven admitted secretly that it was a stupid one. Back in the old days, it had been customary to dress for dinner in the fever-infested jungles of both Earth and Venus, to shave every day, and to maintain a pose of all-powerful majesty, both in order to awe supposedly inferior peoples and to keep a grip on a possibly rebellious crew. But the supposed inferiors had taken the absurdly formal behavior as a sign of insanity more than anything else, and the old crews had bitterly resented the airs that their captains gave themselves. The old tradition had not exactly been a success.

So it had been modified. Part of it, the old custom of shaving every day, had been kept. Now, of course, instead of sharp-edged razors, they used tiny induction heaters, tuned to the proper frequency for human hair. These efficient little gadgets, popularly known as blowtorches, burned the beard off a face smoothly and coolly, leaving it with a faint non-irritating tan. The part of the tradition that had to do with formal dress, on the other hand, had been discarded as too inconvenient. And the relationship of captain to crew had been changed. No longer was it one of master and near-slave. Now it was more like that of a group of gentlemen, among whom one happened to be First among Equals.

ACCORDING to regulations, the captain no longer gave orders, he merely addressed Requests. But on trips too far from home, some of the older captains, like Hurley, had a tendency to forget themselves and, especially in

emergencies, to tell their men what to do. Once in a while they might even curse mildly. But not much. They too had been subjected to a course in Politeness during their refresher training periods, and they couldn't quite break the shackles.

Alfven turned to his materializer, which had begun to work again, and made a slight adjustment of the tuning dial. He himself had begun to realize the disadvantages of the official Politeness some months back. It set a wall between officer and men, prevented them from sharing their hopes and fears. The intensity of Hurley's feelings had led him to talk of his wife, Clara. But Alfven felt slightly embarrassed as he listened, and he showed no inclination to encourage further discussion of the lady on Hurley's part.

Yes, the old reticences persisted, despite what they had gone through together. And they had gone through plenty. They had swept through a hundred light years of stellar space, they had narrowly by-passed a dark high-frequency emitting star, and they had finally come to rest on this bare and rocky planet in a crash landing that had killed half of their crew.

Fortunately, they had saved most of their instruments, particularly the materializers. It was these alone that permitted them to survive. It was too bad that the apparatus didn't work as well as it should have.

Another battered turkey was materializing, and Alfven looked at it in amused disgust. The intentions of Contact back home were undoubtedly good. But Contact's intelligence was nothing to brag about. It might better have used the apparatus to transmit more spare parts.

Rayton came in, a tired old man of thirty-five, stared at the turkey, and wonder of wonders, recognized what it was. "Why send us that?" he said in amazement. "We have enough to eat."

"Contact is being thoughtful. Christmas is coming."

"Pluto, you're right. Another month, isn't it?"

"Twenty-nine days."

"I wonder if we'll last that long."

"Of course we will. We're going to set up a colony here."

Rayton laughed, somewhat bitterly. "We're setting up a cemetery. Do you know how many men we've got left unhurt? Ten. At the present rate, they won't last another two weeks. Why don't they send us more weapons?"

"They can't. As you know, the materializer doesn't work right."

"Is it the distance? I thought there was supposed to be no trouble up to a thousand light years."

"There usually isn't. But in our case there are interfering stresses in the transit path. The transmitting waves are distorted most of the time, and the major part of what they send us is ruined. The result is that Contact has to use at least half our transmission time merely to send repair parts for the purpose of keeping the materializer in working condition. And it spends most of the other time sending indispensable supplies. Weapons are in last place."

"And half of them, when they do come over, are useless. Frankly, Alfven, I think that this new-fangled method of establishing an advanced base and sending supplies by means of materializers is stupid. Space ships may be slower, but they're sure."

"Accidents happen to space ships too. And materializers do work most of the time. We happen to have picked a planet in a bad part of space."

Rayton looked at him as if it were the fault of his youth and inexperience that the apparatus didn't work. "Have you tried using different sorts of equipment?"

Alfven nodded. "I've tried all the standard circuits. And I've varied the size of the materializer, using parts they managed to get to me. Big ones are even worse. I'm working now on a small model that I hope will be less subject to distortion."

"Send a letter to Santa Claus," said Rayton cynically, "and maybe he'll tell you what to do."

"It won't exactly be a Merry Christ-

mas," admitted Alfven. "But I think that we'll be able to stick it out."

"If you mind can't turn out anything more brilliant than that, you'd better stop thinking," snarled Rayton, forgetting his own course in Politeness. "Personally, I can think of nothing better than to be out of here."

"The Domes make you nervous?"

"They certainly do. They keep reminding me of those imaginative pictures of men of the future—great brain-packed skulls, with wonderful minds that can probe yours at a glance. It doesn't do any good to tell myself that appearances are deceiving, that their heads are packed not with brains, but with complicated digestive organs, and that there's hardly a thought in a car-load. They just make me feel uneasy."

"I sometimes feel the same way. I suppose we'd both get over it if we understood what made them tick."

"Not much chance of that," said Rayton. "If we had a psych expert as good as Franelli . . . But there's no use wishing. I could write a letter to Santa Claus too, asking him to cure Franelli, but I'm afraid it wouldn't do much good."

"Yes, it's too bad that he was so badly hurt in the crash."

**W**HICH brings up another thing," Rayton went on. "Our injured are never going to get well here. Either we haven't got the proper means of treatment, or there's something in the air that prevents cure."

"It's the captured Domes," said Alfven thoughtfully. "Our men can see them across a partition, and the sight isn't reassuring. The creatures sit there motionless, and our invalids wonder what's going on in those impressive heads. We should get rid of them."

"We ought to blast them."

"We can't do that. The other Domes would hear of it and probably launch an all-out attack."

"That's just a guess."

"We can't take a chance. We'll have to find another way to handle them."

"Let them go free," suggested Rayton.

"After they've had a chance to fight

against us, and have acquired a taste for it?"

Rayton gritted his teeth and stared at the materializer, where another turkey was slowly making its appearance, this one stripped of its feathers.

"Look at that, will you. We face insoluble problems on all sides—and they send us mangled turkeys."

"They try," said Alfven defensively. "Their intentions are good."

"Intentions, my eye. Is the communicator working without distortion?"

"Perfectly."

"Then send Contact a message from me, personally. I'll tell you what to say."

"Whatever you wish. Within the limits of Politeness, of course."

Rayton made a disrespectful comment about Politeness, and turned away. Young Alfven sighed. The man was obviously badly demoralized. He wondered if it were Rayton who had used the captain's blowtorch.

While waiting for the next object to materialize—fortunately, it was a spare part for the materializer itself, and not another turkey—Alfven thought of that letter to Santa Claus, alias Home Contact. In a way, he would have to send one, for Contact would certainly expect a message of thanks and good wishes for its thoughtfulness in sending the turkeys. Politeness called for at least that.

He considered, too, the things he would ask for, the things the expedition needed if they were to live to eat those turkeys. They could all have been accommodated within the confines of a single space ship. A wife for Captain Hurley, new materializer supplies with innumerable spare parts, weapons, doctors, psych experts, and possibly one or two other specialists. And on the trip home, the ship would take back the sick and wounded, the captured Domes, and the demoralized. That wouldn't leave much of an expedition, but at least it would leave a happier one.

From outside came the hoarse and impolite call, "Alfven!"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Get out of your cell fast and give us a hand. We need you."

It was the first time he had been called from his important station at the materializer to assist in repelling the Domes. It made him realize exactly how serious the situation was. He set the instruments for automatic control, hoping that the tuning wouldn't shift, and hurried out.

In front of the expedition's camp, set at the top of a high hill, a long thin line of Domes advanced. They looked slow and topheavy, but they were quick to utilize every bit of cover on the steep slope, and as they darted from behind one rock to the next, they let loose with their slingshots, sending an endless shower of small and medium-sized stones at the defenders. The latter hugged the ground, and tried to laugh off the occasional hit that couldn't be avoided.

"They're in large numbers this time, aren't they, sir?" said Alfven.

"It's the biggest crowd we've seen yet. That's why I needed you. Next thing you know, I'll be putting the injured in the ranks to help fight them off."

"Would it be worth while to increase the deadliness of our weapons?"

The captain shook his head. "From the point of view of putting them out of commission, it's just as good to wound them as to kill them. From the point of view of saving ammunition, it's better to keep our weapons at low potential, and shock instead of kill."

"Contact really could have supplied us with more effective weapons, sir."

"I don't know what Contact could have done," said Hurley wearily. "The more effective the weapons, and the more damage we do, the more they counter-attack, and the worse it is for us. We could have taken along atomics that would have enabled us to blast half the planet, but then the other half would have ganged up on us and wiped us out in no time. Our only hope is to fight them off without doing enough damage to get them angry. And we can't do that for too long."

"Yes, it's a difficult spot," agreed

Alfven, and with his blaster caught a Dome sprinting from one rock to the next. The creature fell down rubbing its thin legs, waved its arms unhappily for a moment, and then subsided.

The Domes seemed to be putting on speed, as if determined to get them for good this time. Stones fell around them faster than ever, and here and there Alfven saw one of the defenders stepping up the power on his blaster, forgetting common sense in the desire for revenge, the desire to hurt as badly as their comrades were hurt. That too was a sign of demoralization, and it worried him.

**H**ALF an hour later, when the Domes had finally been beaten off, and teams went out to bring in the wounded as prisoners, Alfven returned to his materializer. Several more spare parts had arrived, one of them so badly twisted that it was useless, and another turkey was in process of solidification. He turned his eyes away from it, and thought of a name for the Polite idiots at Contact. Then, suddenly, a low humming noise came to his ears, so faint that at first he could hardly be sure he was hearing it.

He got up and turned down the corridor where the sick and wounded were cared for, whenever the camp was not under attack, and the defenders could spare them some attention. From the left, the imprisoned Domes glared at him from behind transparent sheets of thin neometal. At the right, a man was sitting up in bed, giving himself a shave.

"Hello, Dr. Franelli," said Alfven casually. "Feeling better?"

"I'm not sick." He spoke with the stubborn aggressiveness of a man who has received a severe blow on the head and never recovered.

"Glad to hear it. By the way, that's the captain's blowtorch. It's good to know that you can walk far enough to get it. Does the wavelength suit you?"

"Not quite. But a man has to shave. First rule of Politeness."

"Of course. Where's your own?"



"They tell me that the ship crashed. It disappeared then."

"Too bad. You know, the captain's been wondering who used his blowtorch. He's very touchy these days, too. Perhaps I'd better return it before he finds out that you've used it."

The sick man shook his head. "I like this one. I've decided to keep it."

"Come now, you know that's against all the rules of Politeness. You can't take away a man's personal property."

"A blowtorch isn't as personal as that. He can materialize another one for himself."

Alfven sighed. The man was a little out of his head or he wouldn't have acted that way, but there was no denying that from the point of view of common sense, he was right. All the same, the captain wouldn't like it. He might even try to remove his property from the sick man with polite force. The expedition had reached the point where tensions smoldered behind the Politeness, and even an incident as trivial as that could cause a blow-up.

"I'll tell him what you suggest," said Alfven. And then, for the first time, a warning yell came as a welcome relief. The Domes were attacking again, and he was needed to repel them.

This time, when he joined the defense line, he was not as lucky as before. A stone, descending in a swift parabola, caught him on the shoulder and left a bruise that would last for days. He felt a momentary impulse to step up the power of his own blaster and get the so-and-so who had hit him, but he resisted it. Later, however, when he felt how stiff his arm became, he was almost sorry he hadn't.

That night there was something new. Screaming awoke him, and he leaped from his soft plastic cot near the materializer, to find himself one of a dozen men rushing down the corridor. The invalids were awake too, and it took no more than a glance to see how frightened they were. They were staring through the transparent neometal at the Domes who were making the racket.

The noise died down, and Hurley said,

"Now, what on earth—or on this blasted planet—set them off?"

"Might be a psychological attack to disturb our sleep," suggested Rayton.

"Don't be absurd, Rayton. They don't know that there is such a thing as psychology."

"I'm not being absurd, sir. And that's hardly Polite language."

"It may not be Polite, but it fits what you said. You talk like an idiot."

Rayton flushed. Alfven said hastily. "It sounded as if they were terrified. Captain."

"They were. Look at the tears rolling down their heads."

"But if their heads contain digestive organs, those may not be ordinary tears. They may be what we might call tears of laughter, and their howling might actually be laughing."

"Could be," admitted Hurley. "We can't tell without knowing what set them off. Anybody been down this corridor?"

No one answered. After a while Rayton said, "Perhaps they scented an attempt to rescue them."

"We haven't seen any signs of it outside. All right, men, let's get back to sleep and do some resting. Those of you on guard stay at your posts."

Alfven returned to his own cot, but he did not sleep. Something that had happened on the other side of the corridor had set off the Domes. And of all the invalids, only Franelli had shown enough energy to wander about. Also, Franelli had the captain's blowtorch, and a passion for using it.

He thought that over, then got up and went down the corridor again. Franelli was sitting up in bed, trying to give himself another shave, which he obviously didn't need. The thing was becoming an obsession with him, and Alfven pushed him back into place, turned on a sleeping ray, and took away the blowtorch.

**T**HERE was no more screaming in the night, but when morning arrived, Alfven directed the captain's blowtorch at one of the Domes. A yell

immediately burst forth from its lips, and its arms began to move convulsively. At the same time, the muscles around the lips began to quiver in the same way as when the creature scented food.

Hurley and others were running toward him. Alfven turned to meet them, saw the angry looks on their faces.

"I've learned what makes them scream, sir," he said hurriedly.

"I can hear that you have. What is it?"

"I found Franelli using your blaster yesterday. He's rather shaky, and did not adjust it properly. That's why it's a little out of tune. And sometimes he didn't direct it straight at his face. I think he managed to hit the Domes with a few accidental blasts. That's what set them to screaming."

"And the wave-lengths we use for shaving have an effect on the internal digestive organs in their heads?"

"That's what I think, sir."

"Pleasant or painful?"

"I think both, sir. They laugh and try to get away at the same time."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Perhaps not, sir. But have you ever been tickled, sir?"

Hurley said thoughtfully, "I see what you mean. What do you suggest, Alfven?"

"That we set our blowtorches for distance, Captain, and use them as mass weapons. They're not at all deadly, and they won't arouse the resentment of a whole planetful of Domes. But they should be very effective."

Later, he discovered that they were. Once a Dome had tasted the effect of a blowtorch, he wanted no more of it, and ran as fast as his slender legs would take him. For the first time in weeks, Hurley smiled.

"It's more blessed to give than to receive," he said. "Let's give it to them, boys."

Alfven's eyes narrowed thoughtfully in his boyish face. "You have an idea there, Captain Hurley."

"I should say I have. Look at them run!"

After that, the news spread, and the

number of attackers fell off. On the fourth day, there were none at all. On the fifth, they lined up the captive Domes, gave them a good taste of vibrations, and sent them running wildly out into freedom.

From then on, Alfven was able to work at his materializer without the previous sense of impending doom. Now they were sure that they would live until Christmas—at least that most of them would live, and there was a good chance even for the more severely injured among the invalids.

Contact kept sending turkeys which it managed to squeeze into a crowded materialization schedule, and soon they had enough for two Christmas dinners. The one on Christmas Eve wasn't bad, but none the less, the celebration was rather tame. Contact had been inspired enough to try to send a couple of bottles of ethanolic stimulant, but these had broken in transit, and their contents spilled somewhere over a distance of a hundred light years.

The invalids remained with the expedition, almost as sick as before, while homesickness tore both at them and at the men who still managed to go about their duties. They had won a reprieve, but they were still doomed. It was the glummiest holiday celebration that Alfven or the captain had ever known. Some of the men didn't even make a pretense that they had enjoyed it, and went to bed early. Alfven was the last one to remain up.

In the morning, Captain Hurley had what began as a dream. He dreamed that he was back on the farm where he had spent his childhood, and that he was being awakened by the crowing of a rooster. When he started up, the dream turned into a hallucination. The rooster was standing on his stomach, crowing right into his face.

He threw off the covers and the rooster with them, and was just about to lift himself from the pillow when a hearty voice roared in his ears.

"Get out of bed, you pot-bellied space-wart, before I dump you out! A fine sample of a ship captain you are!"



Hurley leaped, hit the floor, and bounced forward. "Clara!"

"It's me, all right," said Mrs. Hurley, as he grabbed her and gave her a squeeze that would have cracked the bones of any other woman. "But I've taken a look at that sheepish hangdog face of yours, and by Pluto, I wonder if what I see is my husband."

"I'll prove my identity," beamed Hurley. "You can take my fingerprints. . . . So they finally sent a space ship."

"Space ship, your foot," said Clara, speaking with all the freedom of a skipper who had never taken a course in Politeness. "That young fellow you've got working for you brought me over a lot quicker than that."

Hurley turned toward the doorway and saw Alfven standing there, smiling, but obviously tired and sleepy. "That's right, sir," agreed Alfven. "I used the materializer."

Captain Hurley blanched. "But I saw what happened to those turkeys! And they were dead to start with, Clara, you might have—you're strong, but you might have been twisted into—"

**N**O danger, sir," said Alfven. "I wouldn't take the chance of getting you angry by killing your wife. I made perfectly sure it would be safe before asking Contact to get in touch with Mrs. Hurley and see if she'd want to be transported here."

"You worked on it all last night?"

"Last night was merely the climax, sir. I've been working at improving the materializer for almost a month now—ever since you made that remark about it being more blessed to give than to receive."

"I made that remark?"

"It was when we gave the Domes a touch of our blowtorches. And then it suddenly struck me that was what was wrong with our materializers. We received, but we didn't give."

"Am I stupid, or is it just that you don't know how to explain things?"

Clara laughed uproariously. "Why don't you come right out and admit it, son? You think we're all stupid."

"Not all, ma'am. It's simply that you lack scientific training. You see, when we were merely receiving, there was a one-way transmission of a high material-current density through space. Slight distortions mounted up and badly twisted everything from turkeys to spare parts. But when we gave things back to Contact, we sent a strong material-current in the other direction. In other words, we balanced a strong positive current with a strong negative one."

"I get it. When Contact sent you a new part, you returned an old one at the same time. You worked the materialization both ways."

"Exactly, sir. First I built up a return materializer with special parts I asked Contact to send, and then I started experimenting. I had a little trouble the first two weeks, but then things began to work well."

"It was almost like transforming the bad part at this end into a good one, and the good part at Contact into a bad one," Hurley said.

"A little oversimplified, sir, but the general idea is correct. After I had acquired some experience with inanimate objects, I went on to small animate ones. Several of our turkeys came over alive."

"I didn't know that."

"I meant it to be a surprise, sir, and refrigerated them as soon as they arrived. Last night, however, when I knew that things were working perfectly, I started to materialize things in earnest. First I brought over that rooster, merely as a test run, to be sure that my apparatus was in perfect order. I shipped a specimen of native fauna back to balance. When I saw that things were going well, I had Contact materialize Mrs. Hurley."

"He sent an invalid back to balance me," said Clara.

Alfven nodded. "We'll need psych experts, physicians, and possibly other assistants. We can send the most badly injured back to balance them. And for those men who are going to remain here, we can bring their wives over too."

"Son," said Captain Hurley. "I

thought at first that you were one of those impractical young squirts who know formulas and nothing else. I take that thought back. You're a genius."

Alfven didn't deny it. He merely blushed and said, "Thank you, sir."

"Young and foolish sometimes, but a genius none the less," said the captain. "You deserve a reward."

"No, sir, in this case I think that virtue, so to speak, is its own reward."

"You don't even want to go back for a vacation on Earth?"

"Not at all. From now on, Captain, I think I'm going to enjoy it here." And then, to the captain's surprise, a new face appeared in the doorway. It was a young girl, a *very* young girl in the captain's eyes, and a pretty one by his or any man's standards. She was flushing prettily as Alfven said, "This is Ellen, sir. Mrs. Hurley has already made her acquaintance."

"Huh?" exclaimed the captain brightly.

"They want to get married," said Clara. "You ought to be able to understand that, you old space-bum. They've brought a license, and it'll be perfectly legal. Legal, but funny. They're going to have *you* perform the ceremony."

Hurley gulped. "Of course I'll do it. With pleasure. But I'm kind of over-

whelmed, young fellow. I never suspected—"

"I don't like to talk about my own affairs, sir. Politeness rather forbids it. But you didn't think I could go on experimenting night after night and losing sleep without an incentive, did you, sir?"

"You've got one of the nicest incentives I've ever seen. But I'm surprised. I thought you just loved science—"

CLARA nudged him, and he stopped. There was nothing scientific in the look young Alfven was giving his Incentive. And suddenly it struck Captain Hurley that a great many things were going to materialize on this planet, including a young generation that would get here without benefit of the ingenious apparatus that had brought his wife.

"We have a few things to talk over, my good man," Clara said. "Let's leave these young people alone."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Alfven respectfully. "I've already sent a message of thanks to Santa Claus—that is, Home Contact. And I've received a return message. It says simply, 'You're Welcome. Merry Christmas.'"

"That's the spirit. Merry Christmas!" said Hurley, and walked off with his gift.

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