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An Amazing Complete Novel



The Laws of Chance

By MURRAY LEINSTER

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Cover Painting by Rudolph Belarski—Illustrating "The Laws of Chance"

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"You know what I do with stowaways? Jim asked sternly

STELLAR SNOWBALL

By JOHN BARRETT

A precious cargo of magnetic elenium, a girl stowaway, and a pirate sure keep things humming on the freighter Cyrex!

WHEN the last signal light of Tira had vanished astern, Jim Grant switched the rocket controls to automatic, took off his shirt, and leisurely scratched his back.

After all, there were some advantages to owning your own freighter, even if it was risky flying solo on an inter-stellar run. At least you could relax. You didn't have to

worry about a snoopy company inspector fining you for piloting a ship in your shorts.

Best of all you didn't have one of those irritating "No Smoking" signs dangling in front of your face all the time. With a contented sigh he lifted a pipe from the drawer of the chart table. He was just reaching for the tobacco humidor when the cabin resounded to three sharp knocks.

The pipe clattered to the deck. He jerked himself out of the chair, grabbed a ray pistol from the drawer and faced the slowly opening door to the freight compartment. A pretty blond head came into view.

"May I come in—or are you dressing?"

Before his stunned mind could react, the door swung wide, revealing a trim, scantily clad feminine figure.

Jim glanced down at his fuzzy chest and hairy legs. He felt the heat flow into his face, and, with the gun still in his hand, he made a swipe for the shirt.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded.

And then he got the gun tangled up in the shirt sleeve and she started laughing.

"Just an ordinary stowaway," she said, nonchalantly making herself comfortable in a chair on the opposite side of the cabin.

Jim wrenched at the gun and tore the sleeve completely out of the shirt. She can't make a fool out of me, he told himself.

"You know what I do with stowaways?" he asked sternly.

She smiled at him.

"You look funny in a one-sleeved shirt."

"Listen, lady, don't try to fast talk me. When we land, I'm handing you right over to Earth's custom officials. They'll put you on the first return ship. Furthermore, you'll pay me a one-way fare."

"When you say 'lady,' it sounds like an insult," she observed dryly. "Anyway, we're going to be cooped up here for two days, so you might as well call me Claire."

Jim clamped shut his jaws on the words that boiled up inside him. If only she were a man. Twice before this had almost happened. Tiranian hoofers, tired of entertaining the rough, loud-voiced miners, had tried to stow away on the *Cyrez*. Both times he had discovered them before the ship left the planet on its interstellar run to Earth.

Jim glared at her—the full lips, half smiling even now as she stared through the port, and the dark eyes. Then his anger simmered down. This girl was dressed like a hooper, but she didn't look like one. The cynical, worn-out look around the eyes was missing. She glanced at him quickly.

"Hadn't you better stop staring at me and tend to your navigation? You're about ten points off course."

Jim swung around to the compass. Suddenly he stiffened and turned back.

"How do you know what the course should be?"

For an instant she lost her self-assurance.

"I—I— Well, that's simple navigation. Anybody who's made the trip once would know the course."

"I see." Jim sat down in the pilot's chair and regarded her. "Well, it so happens that when I'm carrying a magnetic cargo like Elenium, I don't take the regular course." He watched the girl's face carefully. "You probably don't know it, but there's a gaseous cloud between the Solar System and Omega Orionis—sort of like a gigantic, slow-moving pinwheel. The astronomers think that in several million years it might contract into a star."

"My! How thrilling! I always wanted to be an astronomer."

Her eyes widened as she said it, but he had the feeling she was faking. He went on slowly, as if he were giving a small girl a lecture, keeping his eyes on her face.

"The big passenger and freight ships go through the edge of the pinwheel, but the *Cyrez* is small and I don't have a demagnetizer, so I go through the center. With these modern time-warp drives a small magnetic disturbance is cumulative, and the center is like the center of a cyclonic wind-storm—less chance for disturbing magnetic effects on the cargo."

She nodded respectfully. "I see."

Jim stood up.

"That's the wrong answer. You should look blank and tell me I have nice muscles or something. Who are you, anyway?"

SHE looked him straight in the eye and began talking like a mechanical recorder.

"I am Claire Jamison. I work in the floor show at Tiranian Club No. 568, and I'm sick and tired of looking at miners who won't shave and want to dance with me in overalls."

She tossed her blond curls pertly and walked to the side port.

Jim couldn't help but glance at the long shapely legs. He smiled.

"I suppose you got that coat of tan from a spotlight."

She did not answer; merely lifted her chin a little higher and stared into the star-speckled void.

Jim shrugged. What the devil, he thought. Why should I care who she is. She's a stow-away. The immediate problem was how could they live together for forty-eight hours

without this disconcerting intimacy. He looked at the figure by the port and was suddenly conscious of the inviting curves of her body. He swore to himself. The least she could have done was to wear a sack coat or something. Well, there would be no involvements. He would see to that. He picked the pipe off the deck and dusted it off. Savagely he crammed in the tobacco and lit up.

She turned around, wrinkling her nose. "I don't like pipes. They smell."

"That's fine," he snorted. "That's perfect. I'm going to move back into the freight compartment, and smoke my pipe steady for the next two days."

He gathered up his pants and shirt and tucked the humidor under his arm.

"Wait," she said. "How close does this course take us to Vanis?"

"Vanis? What do you know about Vanis?"

"Do you always glare like an ogre when people ask questions?"

"Most of the time." He puffed on the pipe. "Vanis is about a forty-five minute flight from here on the warped time scale. Why?"

"Then a ship taking off from Vanis now would intersect our course in about half an hour or so."

"That's right, except that ships don't take off from Vanis. It's a dead star. On the maps it's just an unknown."

But the girl went on as if she hadn't heard him.

"And if it did take off, it should be on the visiplate now."

Jim's pipe sagged. It occurred to him that there might be some men in white coats looking for this girl. Then he saw her move quickly to the visiplate, and with the skill of an expert, focus the complicated mechanism on Vanis.

He stepped up beside her. A cold shiver ran up his spine. On the flickering screen he saw the clear image of a green, rocket ship. The automatic coordinates showed that it had already covered a quarter the distance between them and Vanis and would intercept their course.

He tossed his belongings on the table.

"All right. Out with it," he said roughly. "What's behind all this?"

The girl faced him and he saw the nonchalance was completely gone. Her face was white.

"That's the *Mantella*—Del Kaeton's ship," she said weakly.

"I know it is. Furthermore, I know that Del Kaeton has a reputation among space miners that smells from here to Betelgeuse. How did you get tangled up with him?"

"It's all rather involved."

She tried to smile, but her lips were trembling.

"You better sit down." He pulled over a chair. "Now, begin at the beginning, and cut out all this embroidery about Tiranian Club No. 568."

She glanced down at her abbreviated costume and flushed.

"You don't have to act superior. You're mixed up in this yourself."

"I'm not mixed up in anything," Jim contradicted. "I carry cargoes for a fair price. I don't monkey with contraband and I steer clear of guys like Del Kaeton."

"But you don't usually carry Elenium."

"I'm carrying Elenium merely because the regular company freighter broke down at the last minute, and the cargo was urgently needed back on Earth."

"But the freighter didn't break down," the girl said. "Del Kaeton sabotaged it."

Jim frowned.

"How do you know?"

"I have proof—here." She tapped the little pocket of her brief skirt. "Del Kaeton's plotting to flood the whole Tiranian mine system. My father's a mine superintendent. He found out about it."

Jim blinked.

"Isn't that a pretty big order—flooding the mines?"

"Not so big. A few men near the water valves at the right time and some atomic explosive. Del Kaeton won't worry about the lives of a million miners if he stands to make some money."

"It doesn't sound very lucrative. What does he do then? Get a contract to pump out the water?"

"Oh no. He found a poor grade of Elenium ore on Vanis and he's set up a jerry-built mine. It can't compete against the Elenium Company, but with the Tiranian mines flooded, he'll have a monopoly."

JIM whistled. It sounded like Del Kaeton all right. He tried to figure out how much of a crimp a Del Kaeton monopoly on Elenium would put in Earth's manufacturing. The light, highly magnetic metal was used in practically every alloy of Earth's metals.

A fraction of an ounce in a ton of steel, with proper heat treatment, produced an alloy with a tensile strength close to two million pounds per square inch.

But extracting and refining costs were high, even today. Elenium Mines was operating almost as a public trust. With Del Kaeton on the producing end, prices would really soar. Jim tapped his pipe against his teeth.

"If this is true, it's very bad business."

"If it's true?" The girl's dark eyes flashed. "They've got my father. That's how true it is. Del Kaeton's men took him to a hideout in the mountains south of the mines. He'd be dead by now if Del Kaeton didn't know I had this." She tapped her pocket.

"Then why didn't you tell me all this before, instead of prancing around like an imitation strip tease artist?"

She smiled cynically.

"You haven't got one of those frank, beaming countenances that invites a young lady's trust and confidence, Mr. Grant."

Jim rubbed his chin, and was suddenly acutely conscious of a day's stubble prickling his fingers. He pulled away his hand.

"How did Del Kaeton know you were on my ship?"

"He doesn't. He just knows I got away. Yours is the only ship that's left Tira in a week. I guess he put two and two together."

Jim walked to the visiplat. The green ship was approaching rapidly. Del Kaeton evidently had some special kind of super-charger. In a real chase the *Cyrex* wouldn't have a chance. He turned to the girl.

"I suppose the *Mantella* carries guns?"

"My father says it's practically a battle rocket."

She was rubbing her hands nervously.

He picked up the small ray pistol and hefted it.

The girl stood up, wide-eyed.

"Haven't you even got a cannon? I thought all space ships carried big guns of some sort."

"You read too many stories," Jim grunted. "The way I figure it, people who carry a lot of armament are always getting themselves into a jam where they have to use it."

"But he'll kill us." She was leaning forward, gripping the edge of the table. "Can't you see? We're the only people that can expose him. He'll wipe us out without a second thought."

Jim gazed at the image in the visiplat and chewed his lip.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, do something! Change your course anyway, and go through the cloud. This way we're actually going to meet him."

He stepped over to the stellar chart and studied it closely. Finally he turned around.

"I don't like to do it. This Elenium is magnetic. Without a demagnetizing machine in the hull, it disturbs the positive charge of the cloud. The negative poles of the Elenium bars sometimes cause it to condense in front of the ship. At our speed even a thin vapor is like a brick wall."

The girl shook her curls impatiently.

"But the freight crews always load Elenium bars with opposite poles together to neutralize the magnetic effect."

"That's a nice theory," Jim said, "but some bars are more strongly magnetized than others, so it never works out quite right."

He leaned across the control panel and pushed a lever. The cabin tilted suddenly as the *Cyrex* made a sharp turn to port.

The girl grabbed at the stanchion in the center of the cabin to keep herself from falling.

"Are you going through it?"

"I'm going to come in close and see what effect the Elenium has."

IT came sooner than he expected. The ship bucked up like a rearing charger. At the same time the needle on the acceleration meter dropped. The cabin became uncomfortably warm.

Jim pulled back the lever. The *Cyrex* swung to starboard. He shook his head.

"No use. We're traveling at such a terrific speed that even the friction of a thin gas would burn us up."

"You could slow down. There wouldn't be so much friction then. We might even lose Del Kaeton in the cloud."

Jim fiercely banged the ashes out of his pipe.

"Not a chance. If I know Del Kaeton, he has a detection apparatus that could trace us through the Black Nebulae of Orion. How do you suppose he spotted us in the first place?"

He sat down in the pilot's chair and rubbed his fingers across his forehead.

"Are you just going to sit there, and let it happen?" she demanded angrily. "Good heavens, you've been a rocket pilot for years. Isn't there something? Some trick—some—"

He motioned her to be quiet.

"Let me think, will you. Just let me think."

Absently he reached for the humidor and began filling his pipe.

"You! You!" She was almost screaming at him. "Can't you even think without a pipe in your mouth? We've only got about twenty minutes."

He looked up at her. Her lips were thin and white, and there was a pained look in her eyes as if she were going to break into tears. He put down the pipe. For the next few minutes there was only the sound of thundering rockets. Then Jim stood up. She was staring at him, round-eyed, questioning.

"Don't get up any hopes," he said gruffly. "I'm going to try something, that's all." He stepped to the control board quickly and beckoned her to his side. "Keep an eye on our course and check Del Kaeton's in the visiplat. I'm going back into the freight compartment. If he get's within cannon range before I'm finished, let me know."

Ten minutes later Jim staggered back into the navigator's cabin. His arms and chest were wet with perspiration. He nudged her away from the panel.

"Okay, I'll take over."

He sat down in the pilot's chair, staring at the dials and taking big, deep breaths.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe nothing."

He pulled down the acceleration lever till it was jammed tight against the safety guard. The sudden spurt threw the girl against the chart table.

"Are you crazy?" she screamed. "We're heading straight for him. He's almost in range."

Jim tied the acceleration lever against the guard with a wire. "This ought to get us opposite the center hole of that pinwheel ahead of Del Kaeton. That's all I'm interested in just now."

There was a loud *whoosh* and the cabin lighted up as a rocket shell cut across their bow.

"He's shooting at us," the girl groaned.

Jim kept his eye on the acceleration meter. The ship was trembling under the excessive surge of the motors. Again the bright flash flooded the cabin with light. The *Cyrex* lifted and plunged. Every needle on the dials wavered. Jim swallowed. That one must have scraped metal off the underside of the hull.

He reached for the rudder lever.

"Grab a stanchion," he called out. "Here we go." The ship made a sickening swerve. Chairs, books, everything loose in the cabin shot across the deck and piled up against the starboard bulkhead as the *Cyrex* headed into the center of the gaseous vortex like a thread into the eye of a needle.

The girl fought her way back to the visiplat.

"Where's the *Mantella*?" Jim asked.

"Directly astern." She sobbed. "He's gaining." Then her head came up and she glanced wildly around the cabin. She grabbed his shoulder. "What's happening?" The ship was glowing with a pale, greenish light.

Jim pointed forward. The whole sky ahead was dancing with a million points of bright light. They parted and swirled away as the rocket approached as if some invisible plow far ahead were tearing open a path.

"Can you still see Del Kaeton's ship?" he asked.

The girl looked down at the visiplat.

"He's disappearing," she cried out. "There's a cloud forming behind us."

"Good."

Jim got up from the controls and stepped up to the visiplat. The outlines of the *Mantella* were fading fast in a thick white cloud that grew denser every second. Then, as he watched, the cloud seemed to contract and solidify. Its whiteness became more brilliant. Now it was emitting streams of light. Jim sucked in his breath. The girl shot him a worried glance.

"I didn't expect such a violent reaction," he said. He looked ahead. The brilliant dancing spots were still parting in front of the *Cyrex* and whirling past the ports.

"What is it?"

Jim licked his lips nervously.

"I guess I speeded up the formation of a star—about a hundred million years. I turned the Elenium bars so that all the positive poles pointed forward. The particles of this gas cloud have a slightly positive charge. That's what kept them apart. The forward part of the *Cyrex* is positive now so they fly away from it."

HE LOOKED out of the ports at the flickering pinpoints of light and across his mind there flashed a vision of the gigantic disturbance he had created. The *Cyrex* was a bar magnet, and though Eleni-

um was the most strongly magnetic metal ever discovered, its effect was multiplied thousands upon thousands of times by the time-warp drive of the ship. He slowly became aware that the girl was talking to him.

"—make sense. If it's negative the particles should cling to the after end."

"They can't," Jim said. "The rocket blasts blow them off. The blast must shatter their positive charge, somehow. They cohere behind us in a nucleus. The mass has gravitational force and attracts other particles, giving it even more gravitational force—sort of a snowball effect."

The girl stared into the visiplat.

"Then what happened to Del Kaeton?"

He rubbed the back of his hand across his cold forehead.

"I don't think you'll have to worry any more about Del Kaeton. He's now part of the center of a new star, stewing in his own juice at a temperature of several thousand degrees centigrade."

Jim saw the girl shudder. He began picking up the books scattered over the deck. When the cabin was neat once more he

looked at her. She was still standing by the control board, fussing now with a shoulder strap.

She saw him looking and reddened.

"My strap must have torn when you made that fast turn. It's really a very flimsy costume. I guess I'll have to borrow some of your clothes."

He grinned.

"It looks pretty good to me," he said. He tossed her his shirt. "By the way, Miss—ah—Jamison, are you really a dancer?"

"Not professionally." She began emptying the stuff out of his shirt pockets.

He sat down in a chair.

"The pilots' club has some nice dances. Tomorrow night, in fact. If you—" He began to stammer.

"I'd love to," she agreed quickly.

He settled himself in the chair, avoiding her eyes. Unconsciously he began fumbling with his pipe, filling it with tobacco. Then he noticed what his hands were doing. He hesitated and looked up at her.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

She smiled.

"I'll get you a match," she volunteered.