

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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	The End of the Journey	4
	<i>by Edmund Cooper</i>	
	Grandma's Lie Soap	22
	<i>by Robert Abernathy</i>	
	Shades of Davy Crockett	38
	<i>by Theodore Pratt</i>	
<hr/>		
H. L. Herbert <i>President</i>	The Man Who Had Spiders	45
	<i>by Roger Dee</i>	
<hr/>		
Leo Margulies <i>Publisher</i> <i>Editorial Director</i>	Passage to Anywhere	54
	<i>by Sam Merwin Jr.</i>	
<hr/>		
	The Vapor Horn	76
	<i>by Ethel G. Lewis</i>	
	A Woman's Right	85
	<i>by Robert Silverberg</i>	
	For Men Must Work	96
	<i>by F. B. Bryning</i>	
	Universe in Books	110
	<i>by Hans Stefan Santesson</i>	
	Young Man With a Trumpet	114
	<i>by Frank Belknap Long</i>	
	The Cybernetic Kid	117
	<i>by John Jakes</i>	

Kelly Freas
Cover Design

the
end
of
the
journey

by . . . Edmund Cooper

Even so brave a man as Captain Mauris knew there was much to fear in a journey to a star. But stern indeed is a spaceman's code.

Motion does not tire anybody. With the earth as our vehicle we are traveling at 20 miles a second round the sun; the sun carries us at 12 miles a second through the galactic system; the galactic system bears us at 250 miles a second amid the spiral nebulae . . . If motion could tire, we ought to be dead tired.

Sir Arthur Eddington
THE NATURE OF THE
PHYSICAL WORLD

IT WAS twenty hours, ship's time, after firing point. A million miles astern, the earth shone coldly like a small green moon. On the navigation deck of the *Santa Maria*, a profound silence was disturbed only by the steady but discreet ping of the radio probe.

Captain Mauris leaned back on his contour-berth and waited patiently for his soul to catch up with his body. His sensations at the beginning of each deep voyage were invariably the same. His body had learned to adapt to a force of 10 G and to a stellar acceleration whose graph was a mad ascending curve.

Somehow we've always thought of the Atlantic Ocean as a bridge with a very shining curvature. Perhaps that's why we become uncommonly elated when we can introduce to our readers a new young writer of talent from the British Isles. Edmund Cooper lives where the Union Jack waves proudly over five centuries of seafaring valor, which may explain his preference for a "seafaring" audacity in dealing with interplanetary themes. Mr. Cooper is also addicted to chess and psychiatry, but he is happily married notwithstanding.

But his spirit, while hardly weak, retained the old subconscious reluctance. It didn't much care for the big jump. It would hang tenaciously on to the illusion that Captain Mauris would presently wake up to find himself at home in bed.

He rarely did; because, more often than not, the dream became the reality. Recently he had calculated that he had slept on Earth not more than nine thousand times in his life, whereas he had voyaged among the stars for nearly twice that number of Earth-nights. It was the sort of calculation that he did not care to remember—which was principally why he could not forget it.

Which *was* the dream—Earth or space? After twenty hours of space-flight in planetary drive—which nowadays the younger men humorously called first gear—Captain Mauris was not too sure of the answer. He had long ago ceased to have physical space-sickness, but he had never lost the spiritual variety. And lately it had seemed to intensify. Perhaps he was just getting old. Perhaps he really would make this the last trip . . .

The captain sighed, and took refuge in the monumental assumption of Descartes: *I think, therefore I exist*. He began to wonder if the same could be said of his boatload of physicists. With a sardonic smile, Captain Mauris decided that he had seen terrestrial positronic robots which could lay a greater claim to individuality.

Ever since the dim distant days of the twentieth century, when the scientific caste system had been formalized, physicists had tended to become less and less human. Now they were hardly more than semi-substantial extrapolations of their own theories.

They were a race apart. Watching them board the *Santa Maria*, listening to their conversation, Captain Mauris had actually wondered whether they might not be the new type *omega* robots which, according to rumor, were now past the experimental stage. But he had seen two of them playing chess so badly, and a third so delightfully green with space-sickness, that he had regretfully concluded that they were human. Even *sigma* robots played chess excellently; and clearly there was no reason why the robot engineers should endow their offspring with uncontrollable nervous systems.

The physicists, then, were unfortunately human—a sad comment on the sort of civilization that allowed robots to take charge of global production, while turning the best human brains into secondary electronic calculators.

The captain's private soliloquy was interrupted by Phylo, the first officer, climbing down from the astrodome.

"Dead on," said Phylo. "Heading straight for *Zeta* of the Great Bear. When do we change gear, Captain?"

Captain Mauris gave him a sour

look. "While I command the *Santa Maria*, Mr. Phylo, we will not change gear."

"Sorry, sir. When do we use the stellar drive, then?"

"I think," replied the captain, "that I will shortly inquire if the physicists are still alive, and if so, when they will be prepared to take the bump."

Phylo laughed. "I hope you're disappointed, sir."

"Meaning what?"

"I hope they're still kicking. I should hate to have to return to Earth and explain why we knocked off six top S.F.P.'s."

"The world," said Captain Mauris soberly, "might even smell somewhat sweeter for the loss of a few space-frame physicists. Man is becoming just a little too clever."

"I wonder why you volunteered for the trip, then," said Phylo slyly. "A voyage with S.F.P. men for unspecified experimental purposes hardly promises to be uneventful. Besides, there's the triple danger money—just like the old days when they first tried out the stellar drive."

"Of the few parts of the world that remain unspoiled by civilization, the Amazonian hinterland is the most attractive—for me," said Captain Mauris obliquely. "One of these days, Phylo, I shall buy myself ten thousand acres in the middle of nowhere. And then, the only time I shall ever take my feet off terra firma will be when I climb into my hammock. The reason I signed on as Master of the *Santa*

Maria is quite simple. It represents almost five thousand acres."

"If," said Phylo drily, "we survive whatever tricks the S.F.P.'s are cooking up."

"Exactly," said Captain Mauris. "But it is my firm intention to survive."

Phylo gazed through the plasti-glass anti-glare dome at a swarm of hard, unwinking suns. Finally, without looking at Mauris, he said softly, "I think there's also another reason, sir."

"Do you, now!" The captain's tone was not encouraging.

Phylo took a deep breath and ploughed on. "They told me back at base that you were the first skipper to successfully use the stellar drive."

"A slight exaggeration," said Mauris with a cold smile. "I was merely the first captain to return and collect his pay envelope. However, proceed."

"I notice," said Phylo uneasily, "that there's a parallel set of gears—I mean dual controls—on the main panel."

"Well?"

"I don't understand the calibrations on the dials under the lightometer. Nor do I understand why the second bank of meters should have all their throw-in switches locked and sealed."

"An interesting little mystery," observed the captain noncommittally. "As you have obviously given some thought to it, what conclusion do you draw?"

"Well, sir," said Phylo hesitantly, "bearing in mind that the *Santa Maria* has a cargo of S.F.P.'s, a skipper who successfully tested the stellar drive, a set of new instruments, and the fact that we are under sealed orders, I think there's only one possible conclusion."

"I should be interested to hear it," said Captain Mauris.

"There have been rumors," continued Phylo, "of a galactic drive. My guess is that the *Santa Maria* has been fitted out for a trial run. What do you think, sir?"

"I think," replied Captain Mauris, glancing at the bulkhead electrochron, "that I shall shortly break the seal and discover what the Fates have in store for us. I'll tell you this, though—I don't think we shall be experimenting with a galactic drive."

"Why not, sir?"

"Because," said Captain Mauris with a thin smile, "the United Space Corporation has already developed it—as a logical extension of the stellar drive."

Phylo gazed at him in sheer amazement. "It's the first I've heard of it, sir."

"I know," said Mauris imperceptibly. "It's still on the secret list. But as I traveled as a paid observer on the test jump, I can definitely assure you that the galactic drive is a fact."

Phylo's voice was filled with awe. "Would it be indiscreet to inquire what distance you logged?"

"Not now," said the captain. "I

think—in view of our position—that it will do no harm to give you the facts. We—er—had a little jaunt round *Beta Centauri*."

"*Beta Centauri!* Sir, I never would have—"

"A matter of seven hundred light-years for the round trip," added Mauris complacently.

"How long did it take?" demanded Phylo incredulously.

The captain permitted a note of pride to enter his voice. "Three hours, twenty-seven minutes, ship's time—starting and finishing in the neighborhood of Pluto's orbit."

"Were there any—any casualties?"

"All of us," said Captain Mauris soberly. "We couldn't stop laughing for two days. But I forgot. There was one serious casualty: Egon, the navigator. His star maps were damn near useless, of course. He swore we'd never get home. And when we finally hit the System, the relief was too much for him. He was the only one who didn't stop laughing. And from what I hear, he's still enjoying himself."

Phylo couldn't make up his mind whether or not Captain Mauris was having a private joke. After a moment or two, he said in a matter-of-fact voice, "I wonder what the hell is going to happen on this trip, then?"

"Probably," said Captain Mauris "we shall cease to exist."

II

FOUR hours later, in the privacy

of his cabin, the captain of the *Santa Maria* broke the seal on a slim envelope and read his instructions. He skipped impatiently through the conventional wording until he came to the part that mattered. He went through it carefully, word for word, three times. The final paragraph gave him a certain grim amusement. He read it again:

While the normal articles of space-travel obtain for this experimental voyage, there must of necessity be a fluid definition of the Safety Clause. Clearly the primary responsibility of the Master for the safety of his ship and all personnel must be to some extent subordinated by the actual programme sanctioned by the Field Testing Executive of the United Space Corporation. It is not implied, however, that the prerogative of Master's Discretion will inevitably be superseded by test requirements. If the Master should satisfy himself, and the authorized scientists concerned, that the danger factor is sufficient to render the ship's safe return as improbable, therefore neutralizing the validity of the experiment, he is entitled to cancel the test programme and return immediately to base. A Court of Inquiry will then evaluate the circumstances leading to such a decision. It is, however, earnestly hoped that scientific and ship personnel will so co-operate as to bring both the experiment and the voyage to a successful conclusion.

"Why the devil," said Captain Mauris to himself, "do they use a lot of big words to tell me that I'm merely acting wet-nurse for a bunch of S.F.P.'s? *If the Master should satisfy himself, and the authorized scientists concerned . . .* Very funny! The whole idea is not less than one hundred percent suicidal; and then they talk about a sufficient danger factor!"

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," called Mauris.

It was Kobler, chief of the S.F.P. team. He was a thin pasty-faced man of perhaps forty. His mouth looked as if it would split if he tried to smile.

Mauris motioned him into a chair, and reached for two glasses and the decanter. As he poured the drinks, Kobler glanced at the ship's articles lying on the desk.

"I see you have been studying the scriptures," said the physicist.

"I was merely trying to find out," explained Captain Mauris equably, "what authority, if any, I possess—in case of an emergency."

"And have you found out?" inquired Kobler, sipping his whiskey.

"Yes."

"Are you satisfied?"

"No. From the point of view of getting a clear-cut definition, it's as woolly as hell."

"I shouldn't worry, if I were you," said Kobler pleasantly. "If anything goes wrong, you'll probably have a megasecond in which to think a last beautiful thought."

"That," retorted Mauris thinly,

"is why I would have liked sufficient power to over-rule you people—just in case I happened to anticipate the hypothetically fatal megasecond."

"Sorry," said Kobler, "but I'm the boss-man. That's the way it has to be for this sort of thing. You'd better resign yourself to praying for my spiritual guidance."

"I don't know why you people need a space-captain," said Mauris testily. "You could have programmed the *Santa Maria* to take you to dissolution point under her own steam."

Kobler smiled, and his face didn't crack. "You may not believe it," he said ironically, "but we space-frame gentry have nice orderly minds. We're very conventional really. Besides, even a space-captain has his uses. Incidentally, how did you enjoy the hop round *Beta Centauri*?"

"So that was why they wanted me to go," said Mauris. "I wondered about it."

"You were lucky," said Kobler. "They wouldn't let me go because some idiot mathematician suggested that the ship might surface too near a sun, or something damn silly like that. It seems that my brain was considered too valuable to be fried."

"Mine evidently wasn't," observed the captain.

"You, my friend, are unique," said Kobler drily. "You are a veteran of the stellar drive and the

galactic jump. We regard you as a curio, a kind of talisman."

"I am flattered," said Captain Mauris. "And now, I think, we had better discuss ways and means."

"You know the destination?" asked Kobler.

The captain inclined his head towards the papers on the desk. "According to the *Field Testing Executive*," he said calmly, "it is *Messier 81*."

"What do you think of it?" asked Kobler smugly.

"I think it might be—interesting," said Captain Mauris with sarcasm. "I don't think I've ever visited a spiral nebula before."

Kobler grinned. "One million six hundred thousand light years," he said. "Quite a little hop when you come to think of it."

"How long do you think it will take?"

The physicist's grin broadened. "I don't know," he said happily. "Probably just that hypothetically fatal megasecond."

Mauris restrained himself with an effort. "I'd appreciate a brief exposition of the theory," he said. "It might be useful."

Kobler helped himself to more whiskey, leaned back in his chair and regarded the ceiling. "Essentially," he began, "it involves my private theory of matter, which also involves the stress characteristic of space and the so-called temporal regression."

"Proceed," said Mauris. "For a

moment, I thought you were going to get complicated."

Kobler ignored him. "You understand, of course," he continued, "that matter is a form of locked-up energy?"

"Yes."

"Good. I now have news for you. Energy is simply a form of locked-up space. There is, from the physicist's point of view, quite a reasonable amount of energy in the cosmos: there is also the devil of a lot of space. Now there is, as well, the curious phenomenon of the expansion and unwrinkling of space alongside the actual diminution of energy."

"You wouldn't be throwing overboard the first and second laws of thermodynamics, would you?" interrupted the captain mildly.

Kobler admired his own fingernails complacently. "Child's play," he said. "Entropy and the first and second laws are all washed up. Funny thing, when I was a student I instinctively knew there was something wrong . . . But back to the point. I have established a definite coefficient—the practical application of which means, my friend, that we too can adopt the charming habit of energy. We can *submerge* in space. Just as energy, when it thinks nobody is looking, opens a little door into the fifth dimension and smartly side-steps all detection by *becoming* space, so we can play the same trick. Only we can go one better: we can *become* energy again. Which, in

effect, means that we can knock the mainspring out of time.

"You see, Captain Mauris, by becoming virtually non-existent, we escape the temporal regression. That, in a simpler fashion, is why you were able to hop round *Beta Centauri* and swallow seven hundred light-years. And of the three hours twenty-seven minutes it took, you spent most of the time surfacing so that Egon could panic over his star maps."

"That is true," said Mauris. "But—if you will forgive a simple space-captain for pointing out the obvious—we were functioning in a known energy system. By making the new target M eighty-one, you are postulating a jump clean out of the local energy pattern."

"Not *out* of, but *through*," corrected the physicist. "On the *Beta Centauri* trip you were still slightly limited by a temporal regression. This time, the deceleration will be so sharp as to make a total breakthrough. We shall make a neat hole in our own space frame and enter sub-space. We shall become a pattern of space on the frame of sub-space. Then we shall localize our return break-through when a pretty little instrument that I have programmed for M eighty-one recognizes the surface energy pattern."

"Suppose the programming fails."

Kobler laughed. "As it is the first true cosmometer, there is the possibility. But you can take it from me that it is theoretically perfect."

Captain Mauris thought nostalgically of the Amazonian hinterland. After nearly a minute's silence, he said, "It's nice to feel that somebody's confident, anyway."

"Space has a very definite direction," pursued Kobler. "Its vortices are the galactic leaks. In some respects, we can regard the sub-echoes of nebulae as stepping-stones. In the extra-galactic jump, it's chiefly a question of defining the direction/deceleration crisis — or, in plain language, of making the right hole at the right time."

"I expect you'll want to clear the System before the—er—experiment begins," ventured Mauris.

"Naturally," said Kobler. "By the way, would you like me to tell the crew what it's all about?" He looked slightly worried.

"I was going to suggest a brief lecture," replied Mauris. "But since you have explained the background to me so lucidly, I think I might save you that little job. I'll tell them we're going to make a nice little hole in the balloon of space and pop up again sixteen hundred thousand light-years away. That should make for some interesting discussion."

"You think they'll panic?"

The captain shook his head. "They'll just laugh politely, and think I'm getting too old for the job."

"So far as I can see," said Kobler, downing the remainder of his whiskey, "everything is predictable—except the human reaction."

"It makes for a nice philosophical problem," observed Mauris.

"What does?"

"Whether or not we can be conscious of our own non-existence."

Kobler gave him a look of respect. "That's the crux of the matter," he admitted. "You see, the *Santa Maria* and all aboard will cease to be a system of molecular organizations."

"Conversely," said the captain in a matter-of-fact voice, "it will become the abstract memory of an energy pattern which will be re-synthesized out of space—when and if your infallible cosmometer correlates the pattern of M eighty-one with that of its own environment."

Kobler sat up. "I didn't know you were a physicist."

"I'm not," retorted Mauris drily. "But I'll tell you something else, too. It's going to be damn cold!"

III

PLUTO'S orbit was a hundred million miles astern, and the *Santa Maria* had achieved a satisfactory clearance of the System. For the last ten hours, she had voyaged under her stellar drive. Through the dark plastiglass portholes, men occasionally stared at the long star-torn silence of total night.

The navigation deck was a scene of activity and tension, for deceleration point was rapidly approaching. A fat copper cylinder had been battened to the deck in front of the

main control panel; and the second bank of switches, with their mysterious calibrations, had now been unsealed. Kobler had lovingly supervised the installation of his cosmometer, and was now displaying sufficient humanity to fuss about it much as an anxious father nursing his first-born.

Phylo, the first officer, was surreptitiously biting his nails. He was definitely unhappy. His appreciation of the science of physics being rather more limited than usual for one in his position, he had come to believe simply that the approaching experiment was merely the most elaborate method yet invented of committing suicide.

Of all the personnel of the *Santa Maria*, Captain Mauris was the most calm. He was very busy breaking several regulations. He lay on his master's contour-berth and watched all the extra berths that were needed by the physicists being bolted down. Kobler had decided, after much consultation, that the entire S.F.P. team should foregather on the navigation deck for the experiment. Half a dozen extra berths had then been hastily erected, giving the impression of a surrealist hospital.

Normally, Captain Mauris would have regarded the invasion with frigid resentment. But now he watched the proceedings with a benevolent air.

It was his duty as Master of the ship to present at all times an aspect of confidence. With the aid

of a bottle of Scotch and a somewhat prehistoric corncob pipe, he was fulfilling this obligation admirably. He was also sweating, for he had discarded his uniform jacket in favor of two old polo-necked jerseys. Doubtless the *Field Testing Executive* would strongly disapprove of his unconventional approach, but then the F.T.E. were millions of miles away.

Having taken what he considered to be a sufficiency of spirit, the captain was now engaged in chewing glucose tablets. Phylo watched him with silent awe.

Eventually, Kobler looked up from his cosmometer. "Nine minutes to go, Captain," he said formally.

Mauris glanced at the bulkhead electrochron and nodded. "Five hundred seconds," he said pleasantly, "and then sixteen hundred thousand light-years. Science is quite wonderful."

Kobler was nettled. "What are you eating—nerve pills?"

"Glucose," said Mauris affably. "I've been dieting on whiskey and glucose."

"Why?"

"Because," explained Mauris, "I intend to keep both warm and energetic."

"There should not be any drop in temperature," said Kobler. "In any case, the thermostat will fix it."

"The non-existent thermostat," corrected Mauris gently. "But I was not thinking of coldness that can be measured in degrees centigrade."

"There is no other," said Kobler authoritatively. "Neither is there any need to keep your strength up. There will be no fatigue."

"Nor was I thinking of physical fatigue."

Kobler shrugged. "Every man to his own superstitions," he said.

Captain Mauris smiled. "Would it be indiscreet to suggest that yours are non-Euclidean?"

Kobler turned away in disgust and spoke to one of his aides. "Get everyone in their contour-berths and switch the auto-announcer on. We might as well let the brain take over."

Captain Mauris made a last attempt to be helpful.

"It is well known," he said placidly, "that smooth motion never made anybody tired. But I am not so sure about smooth stillness. It may be very fatiguing. Perhaps it may even be possible for a non-existent man to be too tired to maintain his non-existent bodily heat. Would you care for some glucose?"

Kobler did not turn round, but his shoulders shook convulsively. Captain Mauris interpreted the movement as one of silent laughter.

"One minute to deceleration-point," boomed the auto-announcer.

Men with strained faces lay strapped on their contour-berths awaiting the indefinable shock of total stillness. They stared with unseeing eyes at their neighbors, the bulkhead, and the fat ominous copper cylinder. Phylo's lips were

quivering. Captain Mauris, in spite of his light-hearted precautions, felt a strange icy finger probing his heart and even Kobler's massive confidence wavered as the critical moment drew near.

"Forty-five seconds," said that damnably calm automatic voice. "Thirty seconds . . . fifteen seconds . . . ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one—*zero!*"

And then there was nothing—no lurch, no pressure, no sudden stress. Only a great vacancy, a sensation of utter darkness, and a sharp instantaneous dream of un-being. And then only the bare memory of the dream.

In the dimensions of physical space, the *Santa Maria* and all aboard her had ceased to exist. Where, before, a tiny metallic capsule—a caravel of explorers—had surged out from the dust-like brood of planets circling one of innumerable suns, there was now nothing.

The track of a strange silver bullet, coursing at a fantastic speed that was yet a mere snail's pace through the long deserts of the home galaxy, had stopped suddenly. There was no wreckage: there were no survivors. For what had existed in the apparent reality of space-time was now as if it had never been . . .

Captain Mauris was alone. He was alone because there was nothing else. He was alone with the illusion of his own existence. The stillness had settled like a slow inward frost.

His premonition was justified. In a vacancy of non-sensation, there was yet the overwhelming weight of a curious fatigue. It was as if, at the moment of deceleration, the material cosmos had suddenly become too tired to hold together. As if Mauris himself must support the tiredness of a phantom universe.

"So this is what it's like to be dead," he mumbled in a sleepy voice. He was surprised. He was pulled up with a sickening jolt. He had heard his own voice, reverberating as in an empty room.

The voice that followed was less of a shock than this disturbing mockery of survival. "Captain Mauris! Captain Mauris! Soon you will be too tired to be dead, too cold to be an illusion. For you are condemned to be reborn."

It was a woman's voice, low, musical; drifting without urgency through the deep canyons of unbeing.

Mauris listened, appalled. It was a voice he recognized, the voice of a woman he might have married: a familiar voice, belonging to one he had never known.

"Who are you?" he called desperately, hearing the words echo on a wall of blackness.

There was laughter tumbling through the emptiness of stars.

"Mary Smith," said the voice, "Betty Jones and Margaret White. Marie-Antoinette, Cleopatra, Helen of Troy."

"I am mad!" cried Captain

Mauris. "The stars are dark, and still there is something left to dream."

"You are unborn," said the voice gently. "Have patience."

Captain Mauris tried to move and could not. There was nothing to move, no location to be changed.

"Who am I?" he shouted wildly.

"Captain Mauris."

"There is no Captain Mauris," he protested savagely. "He is unborn, therefore he has never lived!"

"You are learning," came the answer, softly. "You are learning that it is necessary to wait."

"Who am I?" he demanded urgently.

The laughter came like an invisible tide, sweeping him on its crest.

"Punchinello," said the voice gaily, "Prometheus, Simple Simon, Alexander the Great."

"Who am I?" he called insistently.

"You are no one . . . Who knows? Perhaps you will become the first man. Perhaps you are waiting to be Adam."

"Then you are—"

Again the dark surge of laughter.

"I am the echo of a rib that has yet to sing."

"The rib is nowhere," said Mauris, drowsy with the effort of words. "It belongs to me, and I am unborn . . . Nowhere."

"Limbo," whispered the voice.

"Nowhere," mumbled Mauris.

"Limbo," insisted the voice.

"No . . . where," repeated Mauris weakly, fighting the cold fatigue

of stillness, the weight of unbeing.

He could feel the laughter gathering, and knew that it would drown him. Desperation fought against the blind weariness sucking him into the heaving tide of sound. He tried to remember what it was like to pray.

"Oh, God," he whispered, "if I cannot die, let me become alive. Let there be light!"

Once more, the laughter struck. And the whirlpool opened.

IV

THERE were no stars yet, but the light came like a pallid finger, probing the interior of the stricken ship. Captain Mauris looked about him at dim shapes; and the sensation of wonder grew, while fear plucked its familiar music from his taut nerves.

There was something wrong—desperately wrong. Suddenly, he understood. Everything had been reversed.

The copper cylinder, which had been bolted to the deck on the port side of the main control panel, now lay on the starboard side, its smooth fiery surface crumpled like paper. Below it, on the deck, lay beads of still liquid copper rain.

The starboard electrochron, with its numerals reversed, now lay on the port side, above the gaping hole where the lightometer had been.

Captain Mauris turned his head to look at Kobler; but Phylo's berth now lay there in place of the physi-

cist's. The captain knew without moving that his first officer was dead. Phylo stared at the deckhead, his features locked in a permanently vacant smile.

Glancing round at the S.F.P. chief, in Phylo's old place, Captain Mauris saw that Kobler's body was entirely relaxed. His eyes were closed; and in death, he had the appearance of one who is concentrating very hard. Judging from his expression, thought Mauris, he had been trying *in extremis* to discover his error.

The navigation deck of the *Santa Maria* was a mausoleum—through the looking-glass. Everything—even, as Mauris discovered, the parting in his own hair—had been reversed. He knew, without feeling the necessity to confirm it by exploration, that he was the last man alive.

The *Santa Maria*, with the sole exception of its captain, was manned entirely by the dead.

"Poor devils," said Captain Mauris aloud. "Poor devils, they couldn't take the stillness. It made them too tired—dead tired!"

The sound of his own voice, normal now, gave him a greater grasp on reality. With ponderous, heavy movements, like a drunken man, he undid the straps of his contour-berth and struggled wearily to his feet. He went across to Kobler, feeling for his pulse with a forlorn hope.

"Dead tired," repeated Mauris slowly. He gazed ruefully at Kob-

ler's pale face, set in a last frown of concentration. "*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*"

Mauris felt neither regret nor satisfaction. There was no joy in knowing that he had the final word, that Kobler would never laugh that one away.

Presently he pulled himself together, and made a cautious tour of the ship. He was as methodical as if it was a monthly routine inspection, and checked everything from the conditioner to the recycling plant.

The ship, he noted ironically, was in perfect condition but for two small details: the planetary and stellar drives were completely wrecked. Apart from the fact that the landing retard and auxiliary brake rockets were intact, the *Santa Maria* was at the mercy of normal gravity fields.

There were only two reasonable possibilities. She might coast merrily in the void for ever, or drop eventually into a sun. The alternative was too improbable for consideration; for the chances of falling into the gravity field of an hospitable planet were several billion billion to one.

Finally, Captain Mauris was confronted with the task he had been subconsciously shirking. Steeling himself against a paralyzing reluctance, he climbed up into the astrodome and looked at the stars.

He did not need star charts to

tell him that this was not the home galaxy. As he gazed at the sharp, unfamiliar patterns, an already tight band seemed to constrict round his heart. Perhaps Kobler had succeeded. Perhaps the galaxy M 81 had been entered by a terrene ship for the first time . . . Much good it would do the United Space Corporation!

With a grim smile, Mauris recalled that final paragraph of the ship's articles. *If the Master should satisfy himself, and the authorized scientists concerned, that the danger factor is sufficient . . .* It was really very funny! Probably, sixteen hundred thousand light years away, on a speck of cosmic dust, the *Field Testing Executive* had already set up their officious Court of Inquiry to consider possible reasons for the loss of their experimental ship.

Then suddenly he realized that if the *Santa Maria* had indeed reached M 81, the planet Earth was not only sixteen hundred thousand light years away, it was also sixteen hundred thousand years ago.

He had a sudden image of the *Field Testing Executive* with ape-like faces, sitting and jabbering pompously round a mud pool in some prehistoric steamy jungle . . . And Mauris laughed. He laughed loudly, raucously. He laughed until he cried—until weariness, in a sudden triumph, toppled him senseless on the deck. And there he lay, sleeping like a child whose nightmares materialize only when he is awake.

He never knew how long he slept. He was eventually awakened by a sharp agonizing pain in his stomach. At last, through a fog of bewilderment, he diagnosed it as hunger. He staggered along to the mess-deck and operated the food delivery controls. A minute and a half later, he pulled a nicely roasted chicken, complete with potatoes and green peas, from the electronic cooker.

He ate ravenously, and followed it up with cheese and biscuits, coffee and liqueur brandy. The brandy was a special bottle that had been optimistically saved for a celebration banquet. As he sipped it luxuriously, Captain Mauris thought of all the guests who were unable to attend. Gravely, he included Kobler, Phylo and all the rest of the *Santa Maria's* personnel in the toast: "Absent friends!"

Then he took the old corncob pipe from his pocket and lit up. Presently, Captain Mauris was feeling almost human.

He spent the rest of the 'day' launching dead bodies into space. Wearing his combination pressure suit, Captain Mauris lugged them one after another through the airlock and gave them a shove. Kobler, Phylo and the rest went sailing smoothly out into the starry darkness. To each one, Captain Mauris gave a personal farewell, as if he might have been expecting an answer.

Presently, the *Santa Maria* was surrounded by a slowly dispersing

shoal of flying corpses whose presence was only inferred where they blotted out the background of unwinking stars.

Finally, when all that unwelcome furniture had been jettisoned, the captain went back to the navigation deck and made the ship accelerate for three seconds on her auxiliary rockets, thus leaving the shoal behind. Having accomplished his disagreeable task, Mauris felt much better.

But as he clambered into the astrodome for a further check on the unfamiliar star positions, it dawned on him that he had probably looked on a human face for the last time.

Nine 'days' later, by the ship's electrochron, Captain Mauris became convinced that he would not have to wait much longer. The star on the port bow had grown to the size of a penny. Presently, it would grow to the size of a football. Presently, the *Santa Maria* and her captain would reach the end of their journey—in the purification of celestial fire.

He had already resigned himself calmly to his destiny and was, in truth, a little pleased that Fate had arranged a definite appointment with death for him. It was certainly preferable to drifting aimlessly for months, waiting until the food supply was exhausted, waiting until he went mad or plucked up enough courage to make the appointment on his own initiative.

The condemned man continued

to eat hearty breakfasts, and settled down to enjoy, in his last days, what he had never yet experienced throughout his life—a period of sustained leisure. A period of rest and tranquility, interrupted by nothing more serious than the push-button operations necessary for providing first-class meals.

Captain Mauris spent more and more time in the ship's library, projecting the micro-films of books he had never had the time to read. Intuitively, he went to the old writers, ranging at a leisurely pace through fiction and non-fiction, from Plato to Dickens, from Homer to H. G. Wells. He also browsed through the Bible, and amused himself by translating its profound convictions into the sort of language that Kobler used.

By the eighteenth day, Captain Mauris was confused, disappointed, excited and afraid. The now brilliantly blinding sun had changed its position from port bow to starboard quarter. Its place on the port bow had been taken by what seemed to be a green marble.

Captain Mauris knew it was not another sun, and tried desperately not to allow himself to hope that it might be a habitable planet. Better to die by falling into an alien sun than survive, a castaway, on an unknown planet in some alien galaxy. His reason said so, but his emotions remained unconvinced.

It was then, for no reason at all, that he suddenly remembered the voice and the dreamlike laughter

he had experienced in the total darkness, the absolute stillness of the galactic jump.

And Captain Mauris had a premonition.

V

ON THE twenty-fifth day the possibility became a certainty. The *Santa Maria* was falling towards the green planet. There remained the problem of choice between two courses of action. Captain Mauris could either allow the ship to continue her free fall until she vaporized on hitting the atmosphere—if any—or exploded on ground impact. Or else he could apply the auxiliary brake rockets and the landing retard, thus making a bid for survival.

The period of tranquility was over. He was in a state of chronic indecision. He was afraid in the very core of his being. He was afraid to make up his mind. The captain went uncertainly to the messdeck, seeking consolation and enlightenment in the liqueur brandy. He did not find it—drink wasn't the answer.

Eventually, he was drawn back to the navigation deck as by a magnet. He climbed into the astro-dome and regarded the green planet. It was expanding rapidly, almost visibly. With trembling fingers, Captain Mauris adjusted the manual telescope. He gazed through it at a startlingly close panorama of oceans, continents and islands. He

stared hypnotically for a while, and felt the beads of cold moisture grow on his forehead.

At last he came down, and went to drink more brandy. It solved nothing, because he was still sober enough to face the choice.

Suddenly, he could stand it no more. He lurched unsteadily to the navigation deck, reached the control panel and threw in three switches almost simultaneously. Reflex-radar, altimeter and positioning gyro were immediately synchronized with the auto-pilot. Whether the reversed instruments functioned correctly or not, Mauris neither knew nor cared. He had rid himself of an intolerable weight.

He had made a decision.

Immediately, he, who had accepted so much responsibility in his career, felt an overwhelming need to escape the responsibility of attempting to survive. He fled to the library and, forcing himself to try and forget the decision, placed a random micro-film in the book projector. It was *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius.

He looked at the words, and they had no meaning for him. He was too busy awaiting the shock of the first automatic blast of the auxiliary brake rockets.

After an eternity of hours that seemed years, he felt a sharp surge as the motors produced a field of double gravity, piling on the ship's own synthetic $1/3$ G force.

Mauris fell sideways from his chair and lay on the bulkhead,

groaning heavily. The rocket burst lasted five seconds, and he felt crushed by its relentless force. Abruptly, it ended: he slithered painfully to the deck.

Then the old habits reasserted themselves. The Master's place, in a power maneuver, was on the navigation deck. Captain Mauris picked himself up and made his way forward.

The second automatic power maneuver hit him before he could reach a contour-berth. A field of 5 G slammed him against the bulkhead of the navigation deck. He had fallen sideways about ten feet. He lay there spread-eagled, unconscious.

The auto-pilot had positioned the ship accurately. The ship's attitude, controlled by the gyro-manipulator, had brought the green planet dead astern; and with rockets blazing, the *Santa Maria* dropped backwards to that rapidly expanding surface. On the screens of the external visualators, the silvery shapes of mountains and hills, of rivers and forests leaped into a growing reality. The fleecy shapes of clouds passed like fantastic birds.

But Captain Mauris lay inert against the bulkhead; the accelerating G force crushing his unconscious body to the hard metal.

He awoke with every muscle aching from the tremendous stress of ordinary physical deceleration; but he awoke with a sensation of profound peace.

He picked himself up and climb-

ed into the astrodome. The stars were no longer sharp unwinking points against a backcloth of jet. They twinkled, dancing to the whim of atmosphere.

Looking down, Captain Mauris felt his heart thump violently. The *Santa Maria* had made a perfect automatic landing on what appeared, in the semi-darkness, to be smooth grassland. A few yards away, he thought he saw dimly the ripple of running water.

The United Space Corporation had laid down a cautious and definitive procedure for the exploration of strange planets. But, as Mauris told himself lightly, the United Space Corporation would not begin to exist even in its own galaxy for another sixteen hundred thousand years.

Casting discretion aside, Captain Mauris made his way aft towards the air-lock. He seized a combination pressure suit and climbed into it impatiently. Then he entered the pressure chamber. He closed the door behind him and threw the switch. The needle remained steady, indicating that the external pressure—the planetary atmosphere—was at par.

Captain Mauris was surprised. He began to feel that it was part of some obliging dream. He pressed a luminous button on the bulkhead, and the heavy door of the entry-port swung open. The captain took a nylon ladder from its locker and secured one end to the stanchions of the entry-port. He tossed

out the bundle of ladder and watched it drop through the misty atmosphere. Then slowly he climbed down.

Captain Mauris stood still and gazed at the terrain through a deceptive half-light. What he could see of it was so reassuringly normal as to be quite improbable. It might have been country in the temperate zones of Earth.

He tried to think of the fantastic chances against landing on such a planet after the *Santa Maria* had crippled both her stellar and planetary drives in the extra-galactic jump. Logically, there was no chance. What had happened was merely impossible.

Luck, thought Captain Mauris. *Or is it something else?*

With sudden inexplicable determination, he tried to tempt Fate for the last time. He released the safety valve on his pressure suit. Nothing happened. With an audible laugh of triumph and amazement, he began to take off the headpiece. Presently he stepped out of the pressure suit, his oxygen cylinder unneeded.

Captain Mauris stood on an unknown planet and took in the unmistakable scents of summer. He felt drunk—drunk on the sheer fantasy of reality.

As he gazed about him he saw, over a patch of woodland, gray streaks of light pushing back the darkness, dulling the stars. And fifty yards from the spaceship, he discerned the edge of a stream whose quiet murmur seemed sud-

denly to communicate with his awakened sense of hearing.

Giving a wild cry of pleasure, Mauris forgot all about space-frame physicists and the extra-galactic jump. He ran swiftly to the banks of the stream, knelt down and splashed the warm living water over his face. Then, impatiently, he tore off his stale clothes, and waded into the dark refreshing water.

And as he bathed, the intensity of light grew over the distant trees, turning their leaves to gold.

At last he came out of the stream, refreshed and exhilarated. He felt a warm breeze against his body, felt the blood coursing more rapidly through his veins.

He did not bother to dress, but walked wonderingly towards the increasing light.

The vault of darkness was being pushed slowly back, while the stars seemed to slip behind an invisible curtain.

Captain Mauris watched the landscape come quietly to life. Then he looked up at the sky.

"And darkness," said Captain Mauris, as he gazed at the fading stars, "darkness was upon the face of the deep."

He stood there, feeling the years roll back, feeling the vitality of youth drive back some secret winter. At length he turned round to look at the space-ship, to assure himself of the reality of the journey. There was nothing to be seen. The thin vein of water flowed quietly through a vacant land.

Surprised at his own calmness, his lack of distress, he turned again towards the patch of trees. And from the direction that he would learn to call east, there rose the crimson edge of a new sun.

He remembered then and suddenly understood the message of a woman's voice in a dream of absolute stillness.
