

MURRAY LEINSTER

If you read the mass-circulation slick magazines, you can't have missed the beautifully constructed stories by Will F. Jenkins that have graced them for years; if you read the magazines specializing in science fiction, you are certain to know Jenkins' alter ego and pen-name, Murray Leinster. Like Simak, Jack Williamson and just about no one else, Leinster's first appearance in science-fiction magazines began very shortly after the magazines themselves began to appear and he has evolved and grown with the field. Like almost no one but himself, he blends a brilliant and detailed imagination with warm human writing to produce such compassionate stories as . . .

The Journey



It was the year Joe graduated from college, and he signed on the Mavourneen for one trip out and back. He wanted to do it, he explained carefully to his father, just to get used to standing on his own feet and earning his living the hard way before beginning to practice the profession his father had paid to have him study for. His father admitted that it was normal for a young man to want to spend a certain amount of time making a fool of himself.

"It's a sort of honeymoon with life," he told Joe, "when you and the cosmos seem especially made for each other and you're sure you'll never quarrel. All right. Go ahead."

He did better than consent. He pulled some highly necessary wires so Joe could join the Mavourneen as a spaceman, second class, in spite of competition. And eventually he and Joe's mother went down to see the Mavourneen lift off. The ship was not new or impressive. She carried cargo only, so Joe was visible to them only as a figure in a white duck crew-suit, working a cargo-crane as the last bales went on board. He saw

them and waved, and presently the cargo port closed and sealed, and then the lift-warning horn blared. There was nothing overhead, so it didn't make a bit of difference, but it was custom. Then came that curious rumbling sound which is a drive warming up, and Joe's father and mother tried to get rid of the cotton-woolly feeling it made in their ears, and after a little the outside speaker said hollowly: "Seconds to lift:—ten, —nine—eight—seven—"

Joe's father and mother felt the way parents would feel at that moment, but Joe felt fine. He was sealed up in the *Mavourneen* for his first cruise—which would probably be his only one, things being as they were. It wasn't likely that he'd ever again be able to spare eight months out of his life to go traveling on a freighter, with a living to make which he had to try to nurse into a career.

Then the ungainly bulk of the *Mavourneen* lifted heavily and seemed to go grunting skyward.

Joe's mother waved her handkerchief until the ship was a bare speck. Then she wept, as mothers do when their sons take one step nearer to not needing their mothers any more. His father rumbled unhappily. He remembered, poignantly, how magnificently confident and competent a young man can feel. Then they drove homeward with their thoughts on the *Mavourneen*—out of atmosphere before they were a mile from the field—and they thought of the clumsy, bulbous-shaped ship as speeding splendidly toward the stars, with sunlight shining on her outer plates. They knew that was how Joe had been thinking of it.

But Joe was busy. He was rated as spaceman, second class, which is as low as a rating can go. The first hour up he worked in the cargo hold putting braces in place so the cargo wouldn't shift. That's always done, and at some time or another between take-off and landing the skipper puts his ship through her paces to see just how she handles with the trim for this particular voyage. The second hour up, Joe followed a spaceman, first class, along a seemingly interminable corridor with white-painted walls and ceilings and a gray-painted floor. This was to learn where motors were—there were motors in most unexpected places—and exactly how they should be oiled.

He knew that outside the ship the sky had long since turned

from blue to dark purple and then to black, and that it was no longer night or day but both at once. Which was because the sun was always shining outside the ship, and the stars shone too—in uncountable multiples of the number to be seen when looking up from one's bedroom window at home.

But Joe didn't see the stars. When he'd followed the space-man, first class, along the corridor, he went to the crew's quarters and found his bunk and his possessions exactly where he'd dumped them. His name was on a duty list, so he went and got a swab and wiped down a floor that didn't need wiping. Then he went to mess—the food was not at all bad—and he found out his watch, and learned that now he could turn in while other people walked around white-painted corridors and swabbed floors.

He lay in his bunk and thought gloriously that now he was in space. He saw, of course, nothing but the underside of the bunk above his and the strictly aseptic crew's quarters. He had exactly the physical sensations of anybody in an air-conditioned, metal-walled space anywhere at all. But he knew that outside there was illimitable emptiness, and the sun glared fiercely and silently in the middle of all of it, spurting out pseudopods of flame, and Earth would only be a ball that was momentarily growing smaller. By now it would be about the size of an orange—but a little greenish for an orange, with patches of fungus-looking white stuff at its poles. And all around would be the stars. Millions and billions and quintillions of them, tinier specks than anybody could imagine and more than anyone could think of counting. But he did not see them. Naturally!

He didn't sleep well that first night. —It wasn't really night, but only a certain number of hours of ship-time. His mother didn't sleep well either. Back on Earth, she and Joe's father went to bed and lay quite still, each pretending to the other to be asleep. But it was unbearable. Quite suddenly his mother gave up the pretense and said worriedly in the darkness of the bedroom: "Do you suppose they're nice boys in the ship?—They all looked so young!"

And Joe's father said with a dryness that Joe's mother didn't catch: "Oh, yes! They're nice boys. They're star-crazy and ships can pick and choose their crews, you know."

This was perfectly true, because the most romantic thing in the world— No. The most romantic things in all the solar system were the ships that floated magnificently from one planet to another. There weren't but so many. There was a stodgy fleet that hauled metal from Mercury—ready-smelted metal. There were brisk liners that went to the domes on Venus—it was proof that one was a millionaire to spend a few weeks every year on Venus—and there were a couple of ships hauling back the things the scientists were finding in the ruined cities on Mars. Then there were the ships that went to the Jovian moons—two of them—and to the mines on Uranus and Pluto. That was all. There was work for perhaps a hundred space-ships. There wasn't work for more. So every year there were several thousand space-crazy young men trying frantically for each one of the very few vacancies in their crews. The ships could pick their crews on any basis their skippers pleased. Joe was lucky to be signed on.

But he didn't see the stars. A week from Earth, he was trusted to remember all the motors and places that had to be oiled. Thereafter he made his round alone. Each watch, he made a trudging progress along what seemed miles of white-painted corridor, dutifully stopping at each place where a motor lurked behind a door or panel, and conscientiously made sure that each one was adequately lubricated. And he had divers other official duties, of which swabbing floors seemed to be most prominent.

When he was two weeks out he realized that he was pretty well ignored by the rest of the crew. He was acutely and gloriously aware that he was in space. They prided themselves upon being space-hardened. Which meant having no illusions about the romance of space travel. The older men may even have meant it, but the ones around Joe's age were self-consciously disillusioned. They were raucously amused at any suggestion that being a spaceman was anything but a tedious and not-too-well-paid job. They conceded only that their profession entitled them to—and secured them—their choice of female companionship in the dives they spent their pay in back on Earth. They talked as nearly as possible in four-letter words only. Which proved their sophistication but made their

talk unduly monotonous. Lost in his rapt contemplation of the fact that he was in space, Joe bored them.

Once the man whose bunk was above Joe's took action. He sneaked a spare gravity coil out of the electrician's storeroom and set it up above Joe's bunk. When Joe was asleep he turned it on. It neatly neutralized the normal gravitation of the ship. Joe woke, weightless, gasping in terror. It was that nightmare sensation of unending fall—the sensation the very first rocketeers had when they essayed to "coast" to the moon on their own momentum. They could not sleep, because when they dozed off they woke instantly in the primeval horror of falling. Even on the moon they could not sleep. The gravity was not enough. Some of them died of sleeplessness and— But everybody knows all about that.

The gravity coil was intended as a joke. But it was used nightly, and many times a night, until Joe began to feel an hysterical terror of sleeping. Then an old hand exposed the trick and showed Joe the other trick of strapping himself down so that there was always pressure on his body. It was a substitute for the feel of something—or someone—holding him comfortably fast. But it was a long time before Joe got back real confidence in sleep.

Back on Earth, Joe's mother and father very carefully made a boast of Joe's journeying. They said proudly to their friends that Joe was away out beyond Mars now, which was true. They said that he was an old hand in space now. Which was probably true, too. But he hadn't seen the stars. He only traveled among them.

On the trip out he actually saw the stars just once, and then it was a bare glimpse. It was a little beyond the orbit of Jupiter, when the *Mavourneen* was something over two months out from Earth and still accelerating—still going a little bit faster every instant than she'd been going the instant before. Joe was trudging the weary, endless, unchanging corridor in which he oiled motors. He saw the *Mavourneen's* first mate coming in the opposite direction.

The mate stopped by a round plate set in the outer wall of the corridor. He took a key from his pocket, unlocked something, and swung the plate inward on a hinge. He looked at what was uncovered.

Joe passed, going on his round. He glanced where the mate looked. Then he froze. The mate was making a routine check of the few, emergency, rarely-or-never-used viewports in the ship's hull. In the unthinkable event of disaster to the control room—from which the stars were normally viewed—the ship could be navigated by hand with men at such ports as this, reporting to a jury-rigged control room. The mate was simply verifying that they were ready for use. But he uncovered the stars. And Joe looked.

He looked with his own eyes into infinity—past the mate's head and shoulders, of course. He saw the stars. Their number was like the number of grains of sand. Their color varied beyond belief. For the first time Joe realized that they differed only in brightness and color, because they were all so far away that they were the same size. None was larger than a mathematical point. It was a sight which no man has ever seen save through some such window as the mate had uncovered.

Joe gazed with absolute rapture. The mate matter-of-factly made his verification of the condition of the port and the shutters that closed over it outside—the shutters which infinitesimal meteorites might pit with their tiny, violent explosions if they struck. The mate closed the inner plate, making sure that the outer shutters closed with it. He locked it and turned to go on. He saw Joe, dazed and agitated, staring at the metal plate which had just locked out the universe.

Joe said, swallowing:

"I—never saw the stars before, sir."

The mate said, "Oh," and went on.

Joe continued about his duties, but his actions were purely automatic. For two watches he did not see anything much but the tiny, remembered segment of the cosmos, glimpsed beyond the head and shoulders of the Mavourneen's first mate. He did not notice what he ate. He had seen the stars!

He expanded the vision in his mind. He pictured the cosmos as that small scene multiplied until he could imagine looking in every direction and seeing nothing else, as if he were disembodied in emptiness. By the mere fact of thinking he discovered that odd quirk in man's constitution by which human beings stay sane in emptiness. The quirk is that the stars do not look far away. There is no feeling of distance.

They are so remote that—like the toy-sized houses and roads and forests seen from a transport plane on earth—they lose all scale. They do not move. One knows that there is vastness about, but the sensation is comfortably that of occupying a stable, solid building out of whose windows one sees a backdrop punctured with multitudes of holes. One simply does not feel empty distance all around, through which one might fall screaming for a thousand million years. And therefore men stay sane in space.

Nearing a planet, it is different. Refraction in an atmosphere makes a planet seem round. It is visibly a solid ball and nearer than its background of stars. One has a sensation of height and a conviction that it is far away, and a panicky, desperate need to reach it and feel its huge and reassuring mass . . .

It is a fortunate thing that one has to use power to get down to a planet's surface from space.

Joe's meditations told him all this. Perhaps his companions had seen the stars with the same eagerness as himself, in time past. After the first thrill they felt disappointment. And therefore they voiced their disillusionment in raucous scorn. But still they stayed spacemen . . .

Back on Earth, Joe's father and mother noticed that the later vision-casts were quite fascinating. They mentioned the matter to each other, pretending astonishment. They admitted ruefully that they were staying up too late and not getting enough sleep. But they didn't refer to their separate discoveries that it was much wiser to be thoroughly tired out before thinking of going to bed—if one wanted to sleep. To their friends they said brightly that Joe's ship was out beyond Saturn.

It was. Joe oiled motors and swabbed decks. Presently his parents back on Earth were able to tell their friends confidently that Joe was out beyond Uranus' orbit. He was. He still swabbed decks and oiled motors and trudged through a white-painted corridor and listened to his companions' talk—almost exclusively four-letter words—and sometimes he made use of the ship's crew's library. Sometimes he watched taped vision-casts.

After a while the ship was beyond Neptune.

Joe's mother and father knew the *Mavourneen* was decelerating, now. It made a non-stop voyage because that was the most practical way to make the run. The early rocket explorers hopped from one planet to another, carefully building up fuel stores for their ships before daring to go further. This was because fuel was their great problem. Atomic-powered ships like the *Mavourneen* handled the matter otherwise. They wanted to use the smallest possible atom-piles, so they used the least power that would lift them. But fuel was no problem, so they kept the power on for half their journeys, building up speed second by second. On the second half of their voyages they used the same power to check the speed they had so painstakingly built up. Doubling the distance traveled in this way did not nearly double the time required to travel it. So, short journeys or broken ones were vastly wasteful of time. Therefore the *Mavourneen* made no stops on the way to Pluto.

But it was not an exciting journey. Each day Joe oiled and inspected more small motors than he had known could exist, before joining the *Mavourneen's* crew. Each day he swabbed decks, broke out stores, painted, polished, and performed other duties incident to the career of a spaceman, second class. On the way out to Pluto he spent a total of more than seven hundred hours at menial tasks, requiring neither skill nor the education his father had paid for. But he was very happy. He had seen a very small portion of the firmament for something like thirty seconds past the head and shoulders of a preoccupied first mate.

Back on Earth, his mother told her friends confidentially that she hadn't the least idea how she'd managed it, but she'd lost several pounds and wasn't it wonderful to lose weight without dieting? Joe's father apologetically admitted to his friends that he was getting a little bit absent-minded these days. Joe? His son Joe? Oh, Joe was fine! Out on a cargo ship to Pluto to get space-hunger and the wanderlust out of his system at the same time. Come to think of it, his ship ought to be landing on Pluto any day now . . .

It was time for landing. There days from landing the first mate inspected the cargo holds and had some extra braces put in place. Later, the ship performed elephantine maneuvers in

space. The sensation on board was precisely what would be produced by a slow and deliberate earthquake, when all of solidity changed its position, and changed back, and changed again, and again, and again. It was productive of pure, instinctive panic.

Naturally, Joe gave no sign of his sensations. He knew that a pale disk had appeared in the stars before the Mavourneen. It was not bright like the face of a planet near the sun. Here the sun was only a bright star, yielding about as much light as the moon does to Earth. There were no days on Pluto. There was night; yes. Night without a moon, and with infinitesimal stars, much brighter than on Earth, shining in incredible multitudes from every crack and cranny of the heavens. And there was twilight. That was when the star-sized sun was overhead. But there was no day.

Joe knew, too, that the ghost disk to be seen from the Mavourneen's control room ports showed no markings at all. There were no seas. If there was water, it was frozen. There was no air. It was frozen, too. The planet was a featureless gray phantom of solidity as the Mavourneen approached its twilight side.

The ship's space radio was sending a beam of radio waves on ahead to notify its coming. Other signals were coming back from the tiny human settlement deep under the planet's frigid surface. Joe tried to imagine how explorers had found the heart to search such a planet for the mineral deposits which made a settlement worth while. The settlement itself, of course, was no problem. A ship like the Mavourneen would need only to settle to solidity anywhere, and it could run a shaft down to something which would neither evaporate or run away as a liquid at a temperature at which human beings could live. One ship could establish a village, which other ships could supply and increase down under the cold. For more than fifty years, now, there had been humans living on Pluto and working its mines. There were even families . . .

But Joe could not quite imagine family life on Pluto.

He knew that the landing was due, but he did not know when the ship went down to the planet-wide plain which a radio beam assured the Mavourneen's skipper was his destination. Joe did not see the tiny, flickering, pinpoint of brightness

which was the landing-beacon and the first actual contact with human beings outside the ship for some thousands of millions of miles. He was swabbing a floor when his ears abruptly felt strange. There was something very odd about all his surroundings. It was seconds before he realized what had happened.

The drive was off. It had been in his ears every second of the time since leaving Earth. Now it had stopped.

The *Mavourneen* had landed on Pluto.

Joe continued to swab. But his feelings were remarkable.

During his next watch, the unloading of cargo on Pluto began. The ship was sealed to the ground by a wall attached to the rounded hull at the top, and to the landing-platform at the bottom. It was made of stuff squirted out of hoses, which hardened where it landed and almost as it splashed. It was water, mined at the end of one of the galleries leading in all directions from the underground settlement. It made an airtight connection of the ship to the ground. In thick work jackets, the crew of the *Mavourneen* unloaded cargo in this temporary ice-walled cavern. Their breaths were frosty in the glare of the unloading-lights. The cargo vanished into shafts going down into the village.

In his watch off, Joe was given shore-leave. He was permitted to go down to the village on Pluto. There were nearly two thousand people here, and ships came fairly often. There was no loneliness. The folk who lived here felt no such hunger for talk as Joe felt. They had a reasonably spacious community, with metal walls and ceilings—mostly painted white—and they had shops and homes, and life went on very comfortably. The air had a peculiar, invigorating smell to it, because of the hydroponic gardens which grew fresh vegetables. It was warmer, too, than on the ship. The community had an atom pile for power, and mined uranium as part of its way of life. Part of the cargo for Earth was pigs of uranium.

The only thing Joe could really note down as distinctive was that the settlement was warmer than he was at all used to. Otherwise the feel of things was like that in a medium-sized village, assuming only that it lived in a single apartment house and that all the time was night. —That was because all the light was artificial. But this did not seem strange to

Joe. He had seen no other sort of light all the way out on the ship.

He bought souvenirs for his parents—minerals, and some of those inexplicable fossil-bearing lumps of transparent rock that are familiar enough in museums. There was no other distinctive local product to buy. The settlement on Pluto was small, but it was prosperous and up-to-date. The only thing in the least backward about it was the visi-screen shows. They were brought out recorded on tape, and Joe had seen all of them.

Just before the last of the ship's cargo was unloaded, Joe broke his arm. It was one of those unforeseeable accidents. A cargo sling let go the fraction of a second before it should have. A bale came tumbling, and Joe tried to stop it with a cargo hook, and the bale was heavier than it should have been. His arm was flicked aside with a deceptive gentleness, and he felt the bones snap.

It was nothing very serious. There was a hospital, of course, where highly professional X-rays determined the exact damage, and a perfectly competent surgeon pinned the bones, put the arm in a light plastic cast, and told Joe he was quite fit for light duty. Even the first mate took it casually.

"I'll give you second steward rating on the way back," he said matter-of-factly. "That'll mean a little better pay, even. You wait on table and help the cook for the officers' mess."

"But the work I was doing—"

"A second steward's signing off," said the mate. "He'll stay out here between ships. Good pay in the mines. And there's a man wants to get back to Earth. He's made a stake. His papers say he's an engineer, third, but he'll go back as spaceman, second class."

And that was that. There was no passenger traffic to Pluto. There was nothing to see. While the ship was aground Joe never saw the surface, and aside from the souvenir minerals the only oddity he remembered was the warm, man-made climate.

He was helping the cook with the officers' mess when the *Mavourneen* took off again. He felt the cotton-woolly sensation in his ears when the drive warmed up, and he knew the moment of take-off because the sound changed. And of course he knew it would no longer be possible to go down into the

underground settlement on his watch off. But that was all. He regretted that he hadn't been able to see the ice seal melted down by space-suited figures using torches to melt the ship free. The water would have frozen again instantly, of course. Then the walls would be broken up and taken down into the village to be used again later.

But when the Mavourneen was only two hours out from Pluto, bound back to Earth, Joe had the first inkling of the event that was to make his whole journey remarkable. The first mate brought a girl into the kitchen and said briefly:

"This is Miss Alice Cawdor. She rates as supernumerary steward. The skipper had orders to bring her to Earth if she wanted to make the trip. See that she has meals. She isn't required to do any work, but if she wants to, she may."

He went away. The girl said politely:

"How do you do?"

She looked at Joe with a friendly reserve which was exactly the way a small-town girl looks at people she has not met before. Not suspicious, and not stand-offish, but like somebody who's known the same people all her life, and knows that some new people will become her friends and some won't. Joe had been pretty lonely on Pluto, and he'd expected to be lonely on the way back. He found himself hoping that this girl would decide he was worth making friends with.

Back on Earth his father and mother were beginning to talk about taking a vacation somewhere. They needed it. Joe's father was drawn pretty fine, now, and his mother had had to take in all her clothes. There could be no communication by radio beyond a distance to be measured in thousands of miles. The distance to where Joe was was thousands of millions of miles. So there would be no word from or about Joe until his ship got back. The next three and a half months were going to be hard to last through.

Joe's new duties as a second steward were easier than those of a spaceman, second class. He set the table for the officers and put the food on it. He took out the dishes and put them in the washer. Later he stacked them. He did some polishing of cutlery and pans. Not much. The girl stayed in an empty cabin most of the time. She came and got her meals from

the kitchen and took them to her cabin to eat, alone. She was pleasant, but reserved.

During the first week, though, she did ask Joe if there were any books or vision-tapes to read or look at. He found some for her and set up a small tape-viewer for her to watch the vision-tapes in. He mentioned one record he thought she'd like.

The sun, at that time, was a flaring bright star four light-hours away. It would take the *Mavourneen* a little over three and a half months to reach a spot eight light-minutes away from it, where there should be a certain small planet called Earth.

Joe worked in the kitchen and served the officers' meals. He thought often and deeply about the stars. He set a table and cleared it and put dishes in a washer and later stacked them. Once he thought about the profession he had studied to practice. He also thought about the vision-reels in the ship's library, and the books, and picked out some others for the girl to see when she wanted them.

Two weeks out of Pluto they were talking about other subjects than books and vision-reels. With a little embarrassment she told him she'd been born on Pluto and had lived all her life in the underground settlement there.

"My mother got tired of it, finally," she said. "She used to get homesick for Earth. I don't remember, but she made my father promise that he'd send me back to Earth to see it, anyway, before I married somebody out there."

"Have you picked him out?" asked Joe.

She shook her head.

By the time they passed the orbit of Neptune they were friends. And Joe knew that she'd estimated him carefully before she gave him her friendship. He felt that the honor was great. His selection of vision-reels and books became even more painstaking. But they talked quite a lot. Sometimes about the stars outside the ship. She had never seen the stars, either.

"You'll see them on Earth," Joe promised. "You'll see them every night."

She said uncomfortably:

"Night . . . It must be strange. That's when there isn't any light. And the stars are in the sky . . ." She said uncertainly. "I can't imagine what a sky is like. My father says there isn't any ceiling over your head . . ."

Joe looked at her in astonishment. Then he realized. He, himself, had not seen a sky for nearly five months. She had never seen one. She had never been out-of-doors. Not that she had suffered physically from the fact. Lamps supplied needed ultraviolet in the ship, and certainly in the settlement on Pluto.

"And sunshine," she added uneasily. "It's yellow, isn't it? I wonder what I'll look like in—daylight?"

Joe tried to tell her. He was very earnest about it. But when he was by himself, sometimes he doubted the accuracy of the descriptions he gave her. It had been a long time since he'd seen a sky or the sun or trees, or grass, or even the stars as they look from the bottom of Earth's ocean of air.

The *Mavourneen* floated on through emptiness toward Earth. Around her the stars shone by myriads of myriads. Some were brighter than others, and some were yellow and some were blue and pink and even green. But none was larger than any other. All were pinpoints—unwinking and infinitely small.

All but the sun.

That had visibly a disk when the *Mavourneen* crossed the orbit of Uranus. Not that Joe saw the planet, nor did Alice Cawdor, the girl. As a matter of fact, Uranus was around on the other side of the sun and was not seen even by the officers and crew-members who had occasion to enter the control room and look out of its ports. Saturn was visible, but the ship would not pass within hundreds of millions of miles of it. There was not much excitement even in duty in the control room of the *Mavourneen*.

The firmament gave no impression of distance. It looked like an all-encompassing backdrop in which someone had prickled countless tiny holes through which lights shone. There was the sun ahead, but it was merely a distinct bright light of small but appreciable size. Navigating the *Mavourneen* was merely a matter of working controls so

that dials would read what mathematics said they should. One had no feeling of movement or adventure.

The ship passed the orbit of Saturn. Back on Earth, Joe's mother began to find it more difficult to sleep. Joe might be home in two months more. If nothing had happened . . . Joe's father smoked too much. But he would have grinned at the suggestion that he worried about Joe. Joe was all right. Of course!

Then Jupiter and the sun and the Mavourneen were at the three corners of an equilateral triangle, if anybody cared. The ship had been decelerating for a long time when she reached that point and kept on sunward toward the orbit of Mars. She continued to decelerate. The only noteworthy thing that turned up in Joe's life was that he discovered Alice did not know that on Earth everybody went to sleep at night. Without really thinking about it, she'd assumed that life on Earth was like life on Pluto, and that people were awake and slept in shifts—as on Pluto—and that there was always brightness outside one's room and somebody up and about and working or amusing themselves. She found it frightening to think of everybody asleep at once. It seemed to her that somebody ought to be on duty to make sure there was light and heat and air. On Pluto there was.

Joe felt a sort of compassionate protectiveness toward her now. He told her about his family, and assured her that his mother would instantly invite her to visit and grow used to Earth in his home. She had been bound for some institutional hotel where she would be properly guarded against her unsophistication in Earth customs.

They passed the orbit of Mars.

Now Joe was enormously impatient for the Mavourneen to land. He wanted to show Alice the sky. She had never seen it. He wanted to show her the stars—not from space, but from Earth. He was going to show her the sunset, and the rain, and a sunrise. There would be mountains to be regarded, and the ocean. She must see—and be protected from terror at the sight of—more people than lived on all of Pluto, dining at once in one great room, with many times more moving about outside. She must hear bird songs in the morning. She must—

She grew scared.

"I—want to see the sky," she said uneasily, "but—what will I look like, Joe, in the sunlight?"

Joe said:

"You'll look beautiful!"

And he kissed her tenderly.

They'd reached that point above the asteroid belt. The Mavourneen had made a parabolic curve above the plane of the ecliptic to dodge the asteroids, which may be the fragments of that planet which ought to lie between Earth and Mars, but doesn't. The ship was then curving down again to a rendezvous with Earth. The sun was an angry ball of seething flame, floating in emptiness and spouting streamers of fire. It was already too bright to be looked at directly from the control room ports. Mars could be plainly seen, and Venus was almost as bright as the sun itself appeared from Pluto.

But Joe and Alice did not even think what space looked like, outside the ship. Joe served the meals for the officers and cleared away the dishes and put them in the washer and later stacked them. He did some polishing of cutlery. But then he hastened to find excuses to talk to Alice.

She grew afraid. She had watched vision-tape plays about life on Earth. She had seen pictures. She had read. But by anticipation she felt a shaking agoraphobia. Yet she wanted desperately to see the sky.

Eight hours before landing, she wept bitterly. Joe's arms were tightly about her, for comfort, but she was terrified. Then she tried to smile at him with wet eyes and her breath still coming in little gasps from past sobbing.

"I—I don't know what I'd do without you, Joe. You—encourage me so! What would I do without you?"

"You'll never find out," he told her. "You'll never be without me!"

It was quite definitely settled that they were going to marry. After all, Joe had finished college and was trained to a profession, and so was able to support a wife as soon as he got started. Anyhow, his father would help out at the beginning. Obviously Joe couldn't let Alice try to make her way about Earth alone! So of course they would be married immediately.

His father would agree that it was the only sensible arrangement. Nothing else was thinkable!

And so the *Mavourneen*, huge and swollen of shape and ungraceful to look at and horribly clumsy to handle in atmosphere—so the *Mavourneen* reached Earth. Joe's mother and father were at the field when the ship landed. It came down out of nowhere, and Joe's mother saw it first, but it was instantly blotted out by tears. It grew larger and larger, and its few, unbeautiful exterior features became visible, and then it seemed to sway crushingly overhead. Then it settled down, very heavily and gruntingly, and was on Earth again.

It was not like a passenger-liner landing. Joe's father and mother were the only people to meet it except those whose livelihood it made. But presently they saw Joe. There was, then, no sign of his having broken an arm. It was long since healed. He came down the landing-ladder with Alice. He helped her to the ground, with the swelling hull of the *Mavourneen*, above them, blotting out the sky. He hurried her toward his father and mother—but he did not see them. He stopped no more than a dozen feet away from them. Joe's mother could not speak. His father simply looked.

Joe said exultantly:

"Look, darling! That's the sky! Look at it! Isn't it wonderful?"

Joe's mother and father saw a pretty girl. A young girl. A sweet-faced girl, in every way suitable to rouse their son's enthusiasm. Joe's father and mother looked at Joe, and at her. And Alice was frightened and desperately yearning. She did not look at the sky. Her eyes clung affrightedly to Joe's face, searching his expression. She said in a scared voice:

"H—how do I look—in daylight?"

"Beautiful!" said Joe. It had not occurred to him to have any doubt. There had been no reason for doubt. He kissed her jocosely.

His father and mother waited for him to see them. His mother's eyes overflowed. It was at least partly the result of seeing that Joe had taken another step toward not needing a mother any more. Joe's father's face was a little bit gaunt. The last eight months had been pretty bad for him.

They waited while Joe kissed Alice triumphantly, and then faced her about and commanded her to look at the sky and the grass and the trees beyond the field. He showed her a cloud. He showed her the sun.

Presently he noticed his father and mother.