

FUTURE

SCIENCE FICTION

Robert W.
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Editor

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THE REMEMBERERS

Someone had cut off all communication with Earth, and the ship was alone. But why did everyone want to protect the saboteur?

by H. Charles Blair



Sing Ship!

Sing, as you voyage into darkness toward the stars. The universe awaits; you must fulfill your destiny; you must spread the race of man.

And you are a joke.

For your women have given themselves up to madness. One by one have they died. Of the twelve human beings who embarked, four remain. Four helpless men, clinging to your guts, living on memories of a world they once knew, mockeries of what was to be.

...and the body of the last woman was jettisoned into space a trillion miles back.

CRAIG froze. On the table! His radio, his dream, his golden link with home, a glittering ruin of broken tubes and severed wire.

He clutched the door-handle for a moment. Nausea swept over him; he wanted to vomit, to scream, to cry.

He didn't; he just stumbled through the open door to his labor of years. He felt a momentary urge to pick it

up, fondle it, smooth away the dents, wash over the look of tortured destruction.

"Three years...three years..." He sat down on his cot and looked at the wall for a long time; contemplated his dream of listening to the warp broadcasts from Earth—of hearing the old Earth music again, the rich classics and the bittersweet folksongs from the heart of mankind.

He would never hear them now... Who would do a thing like this?

Then he felt it—a vague, whispering touch of something cold and potent. An alien mind was touching his, probing it, squeezing it, rolling it over like a piece of dough in a child's hands.

"Get out of my head!" Craig was on his feet, icy tremors racking his body. He pounded his forehead in animal terror. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop!"

He went blind with agony, felt his body knot convulsively and drop to the floor. Savage mental hands were tearing his brain-tissue out in fistfuls; he felt a murderous snap of release.

Craig sat up. The mind-contact was gone; his breathing was a rasping thunder in the cabin. He could smell his own sweat; his muscles were water. He wasn't thinking of the pain, now; he was thinking of a sardonic face and two hypnotic eyes of whitish green—lik moss in a sea of milk.

Pindar, the ship telepath; he had powers which no-one understood. Scott and Billy didn't know. He brought them letters from friends and lovers on Earth whose minds were attuned to his. But this showed he could reach other minds—and hurt them!

Pindar had not been abanqualed by the fanatics who thought Armageddon was at hand on the Solar and were sending colonists to the stars. He had been there when they had awakened, inscrutable—never speaking of his past.

Craig looked at his hand. It was shaking. He commanded it to be still;

it still shook. He thought back to the years of rocket-testing. His nerves had been steady, then; but no madman had ever attacked his brain before.

He stumbled into the passage. He had to find Billy—tell him about his radio...and Pindar.

HE FOUND Billy lying on his cot, hands clasped over his eyes. He sat up as Craig entered the room. "What's the matter!"

Two men don't live on the same ship for three years without knowing each other's mood on sight.

"My radio—its been smashed!"

Craig paused, and, getting no reaction, went on passionately. "It's Pindar! He wants to control all our contact with Earth. Don't you see that we're in his grip, now? He has powers in that freak mind we don't know anything about; I think he's insane!"

Billy looked at him for a long moment. His sensitive lips seemed to move, caressing some unintelligible phrase. His long supple fingers twitched, and he started for the door.

Craig caught him by the shoulder and spun him around. "What the devil is this? You're not on his side?"

Billy looked away.

Craig's voice was very soft. "Remember the years we've stuck together—remember at the space-station, before we were drugged and put aboard this coffin; remember how we worked together, taking hot ships with the bugs still in them and putting them through their paces?"

"We've been pals too long. You aren't running out now?"

Billy spoke with his face still averted. "I saved your life while the others were raving with space-fever...all the women and most of the men. The madness had them and it had you, too. I pulled you out—they're all dead and you're alive; I don't owe you anything!"

Craig smiled. "I never said you did. But I'm your friend. The others don't understand..."

Craig knew Billy was thinking back

—not only to their rocket-testing days but to the long hours in the gulls of the ship, singing space ditties while Craig played. Billy loved the music of deep space; it represented an ideal buried deep in his insides.

No, the others didn't understand, but Craig did...

"No." He choked on the word. Breaking away, he strode down the passage, his thin body moving very fast.

Craig watched him go.

He turned away. There was a sheet of paper on the bed. He picked it up. At the top of the page was the single word "Billy."

CRAIG began to read.

Today was warm. We celebrated the second anniversary of the signing of the Great Peace Pact. There was a parade.

The band played *Boar, Rockets, Boar!* and *My Sweetheart Is in Deep Space* and they finished with *The Song of the Outer Void* while everyone stood at attention. We went to sing that on our long walks.

I went over to the old space-fields today. Remember how we used to stand in the weeds by the fence and watch the ships blast off at night? Well, they've rebuilt the whole thing. It got smashed up when Mars began her bombing before the first trucks. It looks just like it did when we were kids. On clear nights I can see the rocket trails against the stars from the back porch.

The other day I went back to that little grove of trees where we used to eat cookies and gingerale. It still smells like cut grass. I sat down on the big log and watched the sky. Saw a few birds down by the horizon. Wonder where they were going.

That's it.

Paul

Craig felt trapped. Pindar was Billy's link with Earth; he would never try to break that link. Scott would have the same attitude.

Craig snapped erect in sudden decision. "I'm going down there alone. I've got to fight this out with Pindar."

He walked quickly out the door and down the passageway.

Once he felt the mind-touch. It only flickered across his brain this time, touching it like a cold wind. Yet

even that touch revealed a terrible power; Craig had the impression of staring down endless corridors of geometric impossibility.

Suddenly, he doubted his ability to deal with this thing, this god who could strike him down at will. Perhaps he was just being given enough rope to hang his hopes... his soul.

He came on... doggedly.

Scott stepped from his cabin as Craig walked past. He caught him by the shoulder. "Where you going?"

"To see Pindar." Craig had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach as he looked into Scott's dark eyes. They had a queer hardness about them... as if Pindar himself looked out.

"You're not going to hurt Pindar." Scott spoke as if under the stress of great emotion.

"Scott—you must listen to me!"

The hardness melted and he stepped back. "I'm listening."

The words rushed out. "Pindar's a madman. He has us all under his power; he smashed my radio and—"

"I know it."

"Billy?"

"Yes, he told me. I think you're crazy."

"But I didn't tell Billy everything. I felt Pindar touch my mind, tear it up, rip it to pieces."

Scott looked sick. "Space-Fever! You smashed that radio yourself!"

"No, you're wrong; it's Pindar I tell you! I'm all right." Craig realized suddenly that he was screaming. He saw Scott's hands clench.

Space-fever victims were locked in their cabins to rave. Usually they died. "Let's go to my cabin to talk this over." It was the most transparent trick.

Or was it Space fever after all?

Scott's slim body blocked the passage. Craig charged him desperately, relying on surprise to throw his opponent off-balance. It didn't work. Scott moved with the grace of a ballet-dancer, sliding his body neatly under

Craig's and throwing him full length over his back.

Craig was stunned. He rolled over and got to his feet. Scott made no effort to stop him: his handsome face was smiling. "Now come to the cabin."

Craig struck out blindly, desperately. His fist smashed into Scott's face, battering his lips against the wall of his teeth.

Scott reeled back, stunned. He looked at Craig a moment, reason fighting animal rage. The rage won; he spit out a little blood. Craig never knew a man could move so fast. Scott was on him in an instant, driving both hands into his body.

Craig met the attack savagely almost tearing his enemy's head off with a right and following it with a brutal series of chopping blows. The two reeled about the passage, battling with the maniacal fury of brothers in space. Blood ran from Scott's eye; he blinked and fought on.

AFTER a time, Craig smelled something like burning insulation. Hot lights came up and filled his eyes; he went down. Even as he fell he could see Scott diving at him. From somewhere came strength; he pulled his leg up close and kicked out savagely.

The blow took Scott squarely at the belt-line and sent him sprawling. He hit the floor and his head struck the door-jamb.

Craig started to get up. It wasn't easy; he finally got to his hands and knees. He realized vaguely that Scott was getting up, too. Then he was on his feet, facing his opponent once more. He could see the red blood in Scott's hair at the place that had hit the door-jamb.

Craig stumbled down the passage.

"Stop—stop!" Deadly voice of pain. Scott was following. There was the dull thud of a body falling to the carpeted floor. After awhile Craig looked back. Scott was still follow-

ing... on his hands and knees. The pain must have been very bad, but he made no sound.

"Must get to Pindar!" Craig wanted to vomit, but there was nothing inside. The passage began to spin; he clutched at thin air for support.

"Got to go on... Got to!" He was aware of a terrible agony in his head. He staggered forward, almost falling many times, but always saving himself. And behind him, on hands and knees, crawled a man with blood in his eyes, blood on his shirt, and a twisting stream still flowing from the gash in his scalp.

Craig felt a hand close about his ankle. As if in a dream, he lost his balance and fell to the deck. There was padding on this section of passageway. He tried to bury his face in it. It was too hard for that. He tried to get up, but Scott was on top of him, now, crawling over him to hold him there, to protect Pindar.

...Somebody was breathing very hard in his ear. The breath was warm. It was his space-brother...

Craig started to whimper low in his throat. Everything drew together into a single point of light. The point vanished, taking reality with it.

Darkness.

THE UNIVERSE came back in rippling flashes of light and pain. The inside of his mouth tasted like shoe leather. After a long period Craig managed to stand up.

It was Scott's cabin. The place smelled like him, blunt and leathery. He guessed that he had been dragged here. There was a little dried blood on the deck just inside the door.

Craig took a few deep breaths. They brought things into sharp focus. He pounded on the door; there was silence outside. "Guess I'll take the place apart."

He began to ransack the cabin, searching for something to use against the door.

It was under the pillow. Another letter in Pindar's handwriting—another letter from Earth.

Darling,

The papers have just named me, "Miss Solidocast". They say that when I sing a romantic song I seem to be making love to every man watching.

It's not true. I see your face in the cameras and I just sing to you, 'way out in space. Do you hear it? I hear your voice in my dreams, saying the things you used to say.

I keep your picture on the table by my bed. I kiss it every night and every morning.

"I'll always love you, my darling...there can't ever be anyone else."

Maurice

Craig began to laugh. He choked off; the paper in his hand was the nucleus of a life. It meant something solid and genuine to a human being.

He was alone. Alone against the others.

There were tools under the bed. He was glad Scott had been too far gone to remove them; Scott had just barely removed himself, apparently.

It took an hour to open the door. It

was constructed to hold the ship's air against the terrible vacuum of space, should the compartment be punctured. He crept down the passageway, alert to sound. There was none. He headed for Pindar's cabin.

Passing the hold, he saw Billy sitting at the piano. He held a thick sheaf of papers.

Craig guessed they were old letters—letters from Earth—written in Pindar's handwriting.

He walked past the open doorway. Billy did not look up.

PINDAR'S cabin was open. The man was lying on his bed. He seemed asleep. His flesh looked cold.

"Pindar!" Craig snarled the word. He felt like an animal before this man.

The being on the bed came erect in his queer clumsy way; his great bald head seemed too large for his thin body. "What do you want?"

"I want to know why you're prob-

ing my brains, and turning my friends into beasts raging against me!

"And my radio—you smashed it to cut us off from Earth! What's the reason for all of this?"

Pindar made a gesture of dismissal. "No! I'm not leaving without some answers." His voice dropped in volume and raised in intensity. "I'll take it out of you with my naked hands."

He watched the other man intently for some reaction. He saw nothing in those hypnotic eyes but a great well of sleep.

Pindar let out his breath. "Come in—close the door. You are a man of honor."

Craig felt the hair along the back of his neck rise. He was acutely conscious of an electric power hanging in the air, like the stench of a short-circuit.

"Why can't I listen to the voice of home?"

Pindar's fingers flexed. The motion spread up his arm and radiated throughout his body. He sat down on the bed. "Earth!" It was a prayer and a blasphemy. He laughed—a little hacking cough in his throat.

"The Solar War ended five years ago. Earth was torn apart and the pieces blasted to atoms! Earth is gone—forever!"

The scream ended. He rolled over and looked at the bulkhead.

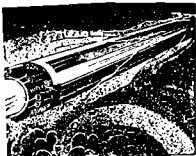
Craig held up his wrists and inspected them. They were hairy. The veins from the back of the hand plunged under the fat right there and continued up the arm, submerged.

Earth was gone; it would never be again.

He remembered everything he thought of as Earth. Lights and bells, stinks and dreams, emotions and sensation. Sun baked ground against the cheek, big trees ruling the world.

Shut the eyes—hard! The memories went away.

"Pindar—you rotten liar!" His voice was very harsh and strained in the air.



He saw only compassion in those greenish eyes. The hatred and fear drained out of his.

He knew.

Earth!

A girl's voice was singing in the back of his brain. Singing an idiot's song.

"Never again... never again... never again, my darling... my darling, never again."

Pindar said, "I loved her, too."

He crossed the cabin and opened a chest in the corner. Craig knelt before it. Pindar moved away.

The chest was filled with maps, postcards and a strange dreamlike paintings—all of Earth.

There was a click. Pindar had turned out the light. Craig could see Pindar's body outlined in the fuzzy red light from the stars at hyper-light velocity.

It was like being in a great church.

THE VOICE was soft. "There's a map of the home town of every man I've ever shipped out with. And those paintings—right out of their minds.

"I never saw Earth; I was born in deep space."

He held out his hands in a little yearning gesture. "It must be very beautiful."

"Never saw Earth?"

"In deep space, the only Earth I knew was the Earth the homesick men cried about, the drunks raved about, the crew sang about. They

thought I was just another telepath—that I read only attuned minds instantly across space. And I lay on my cot reading their minds—hates and loves and hopes and dreams. . . .”

The two men stared at the dim fire-flies that were universes beyond the port. Their hearts beat.

Craig broke the spell. “You’re going to tell them. You’re going to stop writing letters out of their memories and dreams of home. You smashed my radio so I wouldn’t tread on the sacred past; you were afraid I’d pick up Venus city.

“Well, Earth is dead! Stop living a lie and give them the truth!”

The shadowy body seemed to sway in some intangible wind. “Tell them—tell them to stop loving because the thing they love is dead? Wipe out the reason for living? No.

“What kept them from space madness? Love of their home world. They had something to cling to; they still need it.”

Pindar turned and moved toward Craig. He flung out his arms and embraced him like a brother. “I was going home. Home to Earth after a lifetime on the trans-Jovian run.

“And I got drunk, raving drunk!
“When I woke up I was in this

ship. They took my home away from me—are you going to do that to the others?”

Craig pushed the gaunt, trembling body away from him. “I don’t know. . . I don’t know.” His voice was tortured.

“Craig—we’re just little men in a little ship going God knows where. It makes me afraid to think of it.

“For us Earth is still there. The cities and the towns, the seas and the rivers, the hills and the mountains. What difference if it exists in actual space or in our minds. We are exiles.

“Reality is within this ship—nothing else can touch us. I have created Earth here—painted it in two minds. Will you rub it out?”

Craig turned away savagely. He doubled up his fist and hit the wall with terrible violence. Then he looked at the blood running through the skin. His voice was flat. “I’m sorry—sorry—you’re right.”



Ten minutes later, a man was playing the piano in the hold. He was laughing very loud but there were tears in his eyes.

There were cuts in his knuckles. He was getting blood on the keys.

