

Space Travel

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FEATURE ARTICLE

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**Hallam wanted to get out of Space — but
even more he wanted to make a fortune first.
Now he had found a way to do it — by selling—**

The Ultimate Vice

by

A. Bertram Chandler

YOU KNOW how it is. When you're just a kid you read books, and you watch the trivideo, and you follow the adventures of Captain Starman and feel that the Universe is coming to an end if you miss a single installment. You want to become a spaceman—and if you've sufficient will power to resist the arguments of those older and wiser than yourself, if you're fit enough, physically and mentally, to survive the years of training and to pass the stiff examinations at the end of them, you become a spaceman.

And then, sooner or later—unless you're one of the rare exceptions to whom life in Deep Space is the only possible life—you'd sell your soul to become a planet-lubber once more.

The trouble is that it's not so easy. Oh, you know a lot. You're highly qualified, and you have years

of experience to back your qualifications—but the only people ready and willing to pay big money for your know-how are the shipping lines. You can get a planet job of sorts without too much trouble—but it will mean a drastic reduction in your standard of living. Furthermore, on the only world worth living on—Earth—planet jobs aren't at all plentiful, and there's a long, long waiting list for berths in the little rockets of the Lunar Ferry. It'd be easier to get into the Phobos-Leimos Ferry—but who wants to live on Mars?

We talked it over, Hallam and I, in many a watch below while we were shipmates in the old *Delta Sextans*. Hallam was Second of her, and I was Third. It always rather surprised me that Hallam had ever become a spaceman. It wasn't that he hadn't the brains and the physique, it was just that he had alto-



gether the wrong outlook on life. He was too much of a nonconformist to fit into any disciplined service. Neither rank nor regulations could he ever take seriously—and that was why he was still Second.

"It's a fine life, Peter," he said to me one evening after dinner over drinks in his cabin. "It's a great life if you don't weaken. I've been working it out—I must be the senior Second Mate in this concern—and the way things are going I'll still be Senior Second Mate of the whole damned fleet when you're Master of one of the Alpha Class liners . . ."

"You could," I told him, "try calling the Old Man and the Mate 'Sir' a little more often. You could try not making a play for female passengers. You could even make sure that your shoulder straps are buttoned on properly. . ."

He ripped the offending badge of rank off his shirt, tossed it on to the deck. "All this sort of thing is all right for *you*," he said. "Discipline, saluting, correct uniforms, due and proper attention to the Commission's Regulations. You've got that sort of mind. . ."

"And you haven't? Then why did you ever come into Space?"

"Misguided, youthful roman-

ticism!" he snorted. "Join ITC and see the Cosmos! A sweetheart on every planet and the odd one or two between planets. . ."

"You don't do badly," I reminded him.

He ignored this. "The glamour of strange worlds," he went on. "The glamour of mud balls and hunks of sterile rock and globes of dusty sand! The glamour of hick towns calling themselves cultures and civilizations! The glamour of *things* that you'd step on back on Earth, or put in tanks or cages, making themselves out to be our equals!

"No. Earth is the only world in the whole damned Galaxy for a civilized man!"

"Did you hear from the Lunar Ferry people last time home?" I asked him.

"Yes. There *may* be a vacancy in ten years' time."

He refilled our glasses. He offered me a cigarette, took one for himself.

He said suddenly, "We're fools to think of life on Earth in terms of *jobs*."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Just this. Boiling it all down, it's the people who buy cheap and sell dear who get the best of any deal. And of them—it's the people who sell vices who do best of all."

"Vices?" I asked. "Why not planes and chisels and saws and

hammers?"

"Not that sort of vice, you fool!" he snapped. "*This* sort of vice." He dragged at his cigarette. "*This* sort of vice!" He tossed down the whisky in his glass.

"It'd take a lot of capital to buy a pub," I said.

"I wasn't thinking of buying a pub. Oh, I might some day—in some ways it'd be rather fun. But I want to make the capital first."

"How?"

"By not wasting my time in our ports of call. By doing some real investigation on the subject of vice on alien worlds. Somewhere in this benighted Galaxy there must be a *new* vice—new so far as Earth is concerned. Tobacco was new once, remember, to the Europeans—but once Sir Walter Raleigh introduced it into England it caught on, and since then billions of dollars must have gone up in smoke. Alcohol must have been new once—but it caught on too, and has made fortunes for brewers and distillers. Then there're the various drugs. . ."

"So far," I said, "nothing new has been found. Intelligent beings throughout the Galaxy all run very much to pattern insofar as vice is concerned. Vegan dreamweed and Altairian angels' milk had a certain novelty value on Earth when they were first imported, but they're too like tobacco and our own al-

coholic tipples ever to have caught on properly. . .”

“There must be something new,” he insisted. “And if—*when*—I find it it’s a long goodbye to a vastly over-rated profession.”

HE FOUND IT that voyage. He found it on a quiet little world called Djellah, in the Polaris sector. Djellah isn’t one of the regular ports of call for the Commission’s ships, being part of the Shaara Empire. We put into Djellah only because our Mannschen Drive unit was playing up, having first of all obtained permission from the local Shaara Hive to land.

Djellah’s an Earth-type planet, with Earth-type flora and fauna. The dominant species is humanoid. It came as rather a shock to me to find human beings living contently under the rule of what the Old Man described as a bunch of communistic bumble bees. Communistic bumble bees the Shaara may be, but, save for a few unpleasanties when our expanding cultures first made contact, our relations with them have always been friendly. Shore leave was granted while the repairs were being made.

Hallam and I went ashore together. We left the ship, and found the road from the spaceport to the nearest town. It was a good day

for walking—sunny, but not too warm, yet not chilly enough to require heavier clothing than our uniform shirts and shorts.

The road was good enough for pedestrians but seemed hardly suitable for heavy wheeled traffic. We came to the conclusion that there was no heavy wheeled traffic—we saw two natives riding on the backs of animals not unlike horses, and three more proceeding at a leisurely pace in a wheeled contraption, just a light and flimsy affair, drawn by two of the animals. They looked at us without curiosity as they passed. We stared at them. There was nothing in their physical appearance to arouse our interest—they could have been dumped down in, say, India and lost at once in the crowd.

What intrigued us was, I suppose, the lack of interest that they showed in us. We were, after all, visitors from another world and, furthermore, living proof that their kind of intelligent life existed elsewhere in the Galaxy.

There was traffic enough overhead—but, once again, nothing mechanical. To and from the huge dome-shaped Hive at the spaceport flew a steady stream of the Shaara workers, bringing in nectar and pollen from the flowering forests to the westward, returning empty for further loads.

We were rather surprised when one of them circled over us, then came in to a rather clumsy landing just ahead of us. Then we saw that it wasn't a worker, but a drone. I don't know if you've ever seen a Shaara - they visit Earth occasionally—but they're handsome creatures, the drones especially. This one was about the size of an Aire-dale dog. His slim body was banded with scarlet and lemon yellow. His translucent wings gleamed iridescently in the sunlight. His huge, faceted eyes shone like diamonds. It took us some seconds to realise that the buzzing noise that came from a diaphragm on his thorax was speech.

"You are from the Earth ship?" he was asking.

"Yes," said Hallam.

"I will go with you into the Hive. . . The town, I mean. You would like a guide."

"Thanks a lot."

"You will give me whisky?"

"Yes." Then Hallam turned to me. "See what I mean about vices? But there's nothing new. Damn it."

The drone lifted from the rough road, flew slowly alongside us. As he flew, he talked. He told us how backward, how primitive the Djellahns were, how the Shaara had long since given up the attempt to raise them to the level of an industrial civilization. "They don't

work," he complained.

"Neither do you," said Hallam rather cruelly.

"I have my function," replied the drone, contriving somehow to put expression into the buzzing "voice".

We reached the town. We entered a street of low houses, built of stone and timber, roofed with what looked like bundles of reeds. Smoke came from cylindrical stacks on the roofs—and we realized that these people must actually use fire, the combustion of wood or fossil vegetation, for their cooking.

"Look at the street lamps!" said Hallam. "They aren't electric. What are they?"

"They burn a natural gas," explained our guide. "These are a very primitive, a very lazy people. They are content with what they have, and wish nothing more."

"I'd rather like to look inside one of the houses," I said.

"Come with me," said the drone.

He hovered before a door, manipulated the crude catch with his fore limbs. He flew into the building. Feeling absurdly embarrassed, we followed. We followed the drone through a short passage; there was not enough width for him to use his wings so he had to alight and walk. We followed him into a room in which a family had just finished their midday meal. The mother—a

quite attractive looking female, was removing dishes from the table. The father, until our entrance, was sitting back in his chair, at ease. Two children were playing on the floor. The man got to his feet. The others turned to look at us. Yet there was no surprise, no real interest.

OUR GUIDE BUZZED a few words in an unknown language. The man replied.

"I told him," said the drone, "that you were visitors from the stars, friends of the Shaara. He said that his cell—his house—was yours."

"Tell him that we say thank you," said Hallam.

There was a further exchange of conversation, then, "He wishes to know if you will take refreshment," said the drone.

"We will," said Hallam.

"Careful," I said. "These people may look human—but what's just a mild intoxicant to them may be a deadly poison to us."

"We'll see what it is, anyway," said Hallam.

The woman went on clearing the table—then, when it had been cleared, stayed in the kitchen. We heard the sound of running water, of clattering crockery and cutlery. The man said something to the children, who ran out of the room to join their mother. He motioned

us then to two chairs. We sat down. The chairs, for all their crude appearance, were surprisingly comfortable.

He went to a cupboard, brought out a polished wooden box. He opened it, proffered it first to Hallam. *Cigars?* I thought—then saw that the box held, each in its own black velvet nest, four little, gleaming, transparent balls. Hallam took one, looking puzzled. I took one. It was surprisingly heavy. It must contain, I thought, some sort of liquor. I wondered how it was opened. Our host put the box on the table, returned to his chair, then lifted out the third ball. He held it cupped in his hands. He stared down into it

"What is this?" Hallam asked the drone.

"Like whisky to your people and my people," he replied.

"But how does he drink it?"

"You don't drink it. You look. I have tried, we have all tried, but it does nothing to us."

"Try anything once," grunted Hallam.

I looked down into the ball. It seemed that there was a faint, shifting cloudiness. It seemed that there were depths beyond depths. It seemed, for a second or two, that the face of a girl with whom I'd been in love years ago, back on Procyon IV, was taking shape—

then it was gone. The ball was just a ball, crystal or glass or plastic.

The native, I thought, was seeing more. And so was Hallam - much more. I began to get worried, especially when the native sighed, put his ball back into the box and then held the box before me so that I could return mine.

"Hallam!" I said. "Wake up!"

He paid no heed. He might have been asleep, save for the fact that his eyes were wide open. I was frightened by the expression on his face. It was ecstatic—but the ecstasy was of Earth or Hell rather than of Heaven.

I got out of my chair and I tried shaking him. It was no use. There was only one thing to do. I did it. I snatched the ball from his cupped hands, almost threw it back into the box. I snapped shut the lid.

Hallam sighed gustily. He started to tremble. His eyes shut and his face went pale. He whispered, "Damn you, Peter!"

"Come on," I said roughly. "We must get back to the ship."

"Damn the ship!" he said.

I pulled him to his feet. For a moment I thought that he was going to strike me, then he let his hands drop to his sides. He grinned.

"I think I've found it," he said.

"Found *what?*"

"The vice. The new vice. But let's get out of here."

"Tell our host thank you," I said to the drone.

"And then come with us," said Hallam. "I want to talk to you."

We left the house. We walked slowly back towards the spaceport.

"What did you see?" I asked.

"What did *you* see?" he countered.

"Nothing much," I said. "Shifting clouds. A girl's face."

"I saw the same," he lied.

"You will give me whisky?" asked the drone.

"Yes. And the chance to earn more - lots more. These balls that the natives use—could you get some for me?"

"Yes. I can buy them for honey."

"How many for one bottle of whisky?"

"Ten?"

"Twenty."

"All right,—twenty."

"You'll have to work fast," said Hallam. "Repairs will take only a couple of days."

"Even a drone," said the Shaara, "will work for whisky."

BACK ABOARD the ship I asked Hallam, "What *did* you see?"

"Everything," he said abruptly. "Everything I've ever wanted, ever dreamed of—and a few things that

I didn't know, until now, that I do want. Women, power. . . I wish I'd kept that ball."

"And what are your intentions?"

"To get together as many bottles of whisky as I can—it's a pity that my wine bill is too high already, but I think I can turn the charm on to the Catering Officer and get her to cook her books a little before the Old Man checks 'em. And you'll be able to help out. You're in on this, of course."

"In on what?"

"The deal. Can't you see—this is our big chance to make real money. We should be able to get at least a hundred and twenty of the globes—and I see no reason why we shouldn't charge five thousand dollars each for them. Anybody for whom they'd work would be willing to pay that much."

"They don't work for me. Perhaps they won't work for anybody but you."

"Rubbish. Some people have more of the psi factor than others, that's all."

"Anyhow," I said abruptly, "count me out."

"Why?"

"It's like drug running, that's all."

"There's no resemblance."

"Isn't there? You should have seen your face when you were under the influence. It's like . . .

It's like the Chinese. They take opium, in moderation, just as we take tobacco or alcohol. It's white men who become addicts, wrecks. These people here take this. . . this . . . How shall I put it? They take this psychic drug in moderation - even so, it's made them incredibly backward. No machines and, worst of all, letting themselves be bossed around by *insects!* Could that have ever happened if they hadn't dreamed away their guts?"

"That's their worry," he said. "Making money and getting out of this rustbucket is mine."

I SHOULD, I suppose, have reported the whole business to the Old Man—but that would have gone rather against the grain. I should have sung my song to the Customs when we got back to Earth—but that would have gone even more against the grain. Hallam paid off as soon as we berthed—and it was a case of his putting in his resignation five seconds before he got fired. The Old Man and the Mate thought that it was drink or drugs that had caused his downfall, but they were wrong. They searched his room enough times—but they weren't looking for the right thing. *That* he always carried in his pocket, and its seventy nine mates were in his trunk in the baggage room.

I never did hear the full story of what happened after that. There were rumors, of course, and snatches of news that made sense to me if to nobody else in the ship. There was a raid by the Customs our next time on Earth—they went through the ship with a fine tooth comb and found all sorts of interesting and embarrassing things, but not the things that they were after. There was a new rule promulgated to the effect that no artifacts whatsoever were to be brought in from any world outside the Federation.

I did see Hallam again, just once. It was a year or so later, when I was Second Mate of *Beta Puppis*. We made a short call at Carnis, one of the more dismal worlds. Oh, Carnis has its points. You can live there very cheaply if you don't mind the climate and the people, whose ancestors must have been something on the same lines as the Terran dog and who, in wet weather (and it is almost always wet on Carnis) are somewhat odorous.

The Trader on Carnis told me that there was an Earthman, who'd gone native, living in the village a mile or so from the spaceport. He was an ex-spaceman, said the Trader, and his name was Hallam.

I walked out through the rain to the native village. I found the

hut in which my old shipmate was living. It was filthy and, in spite of the smoking fire, cold and damp. Hallam was on the bed, staring into that infernal ball. He paid no attention to his servant, an unprepossessing local woman, when she told him that I was there. She shrugged her shaggy shoulders, went back to the preparation of some revolting looking mess that was simmering in a dirt encrusted pot on the hearth.

I did the same as I had done once before—snatched the ball from his hands. As he had done before, he sighed and shuddered. It took him a long time to come back to the world of reality.

"So it's you, Peter," he said at last.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I sold two," he said, "and then the Narcotics men were on to me."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I asked.

"You can give me back the ball."

That was all that I could do. I thought, as I handed the thing to him, of the dreams of wealth, of independence that he had once had. He must have read my thoughts.

"My idea was sound, Peter. I only made one mistake."

I looked from him to the ball. He knew I knew but he said if

anyway.

“The money’s still there to be made. But I don’t have time for selling. I’m my own best customer.”

He grinned weakly and then his eyes became fixed on the ball. He

was gone, and I had no more reason to pull him back.

I left, thinking that at least one part of his dream was now reality. He was a land-lubber again.

It’s the big reason I’m happy to be back in space.
