

PLANET STORIES



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The VANDERLARK

by M. ST. CLAIR

THE PECULIAR quality of deep space is hard to put into words. On earth, however isolated we are, whatever happens to us, we are yet on our home planet. The man afloat on the life raft in the Pacific, delirious with exposure and loneliness, floats nonetheless on an element

whose very saltiness relates it to the red sea water in his veins. The flyer forced down in the desert curses the rising sun; but the same sun that sucks water out of his drying tissues is the glorious temporal lord on whose radiation all terrestrial life processes depend. On earth our extremest terrors, our



ultimate catastrophes, are yet like the blows of a familiar band. It is very different in deep space.

"Are there any more of them?" Alice asked McFeen when he came back from two hold.

"Yes."

Alice's mouth opened in a soundless O. Her hand went to her breast. After a moment she picked up the comb and began pulling it again through her brittle hair. "How many more?" she asked.

"I didn't count them. Hyra are hard to count. Quite a lot."

The comb caught on a tangle. Alice put it down unsteadily. "I wish we'd never brought them," she said abruptly. "I wish we'd never started on this trip. I hate those things. They're uncanny. They give me the creeps. What do you suppose is making them increase like that?"

"I don't know." McFeen's lean, ill-humored face was more than usually morose. "Listen, Alice. . . ."

"Well?"

"That isn't the worst of it. I found a hole in the mesh of their cage."

"You're trying to frighten me," Alice said pitifully after a second. "There couldn't be a hole in beryllium mesh."

"There was, though. I had to patch it up the best way I could. And . . . and . . . Alice, there was an eroded spot in the side of the hull."

"You mean there was a spot eaten into on the side of our ship?"

"Yes. I plated it over with the auto-weld. It was near their cage."

The comb snapped in Alice's hand. She stared at McFeen. "I told you!" she said finally. Her voice had risen several notes. "I told you it was dangerous! You wouldn't listen to me. You knew everything.

"When I said maybe there was a reason why the Biologic Survey wouldn't release any Hyra to fight the blight on Varro, you said the Survey was nothing but a bunch of fat-cat office-holders who had to make a lot of fool regulations to look like they were earning their salaries. You talked big about how it was your duty to help the poor bosula ranchers on Varro fight the blight. You tried to pretend money wasn't the

reason why you were smuggling the Hyra out to them. You knew all the answers, everything would be all right! Oh, you were Mr. Know-it-all!

"Now we're in deep space with an eroded hull. In deep space! I told you something would happen! I to—"

McFeen slapped her hard across the mouth. "Keep that gabby trap of yours shut," he said threateningly. He hung over her menacingly for a moment. And then, relenting (after all, he and Alice had been through a lot together), "Stow it," he said. "No matter whose fault it is, complaining isn't going to help us now. We've got to figure a way out of this."

Alice put up one hand and fingered her swelling lips. She nodded. "Yes," she whispered, "I guess we have."

McFeen began to walk up and down the little cabin. "The way I figure it," he said, frowning, "is, this is the first time anybody's had any Hyra in deep space. They were all right as long as we were in the system; it wasn't until we hit deep that they began to increase. The deeper in we go, the faster their rate of increase is."

"Hyra come from Pluto, and when the Biologic Survey tried them out on germs of the blight from Varro and found they controlled it, the tests were made on Terra. Still inside the system, I mean. And under system conditions Hyra increase so slowly that for one to bud off was a real rarity.

"The way I figure it, conditions are different out here in deep. Maybe it's because inside the system there's always some gravity. Even off the planets, I mean. We don't notice it, but it stands to reason it must be there. When there's no gravity at all, the Hyra start to breed. And when they breed they give off a . . . a kind of gas, or something, that attacks beryllium."

"But we've got gravity on the ship," Alice said through her swollen lips. "We don't go floating around."

"It isn't really gravity, Alice, it's just from the centrifuge."

"Oh. Well, if it isn't, what is real gravity?"

"I don't know exactly," McFeen confessed. "I never was good at theoretical stuff. Some kind of electro-magnetic force, I guess."

Alice nodded uncomprehendingly. "Couldn't we—couldn't we get rid of the Hyra, Mac?" she asked timidly. On impulse she put out her hand and touched his sleeve. "We could think up some way of killing them if we tried, I guess. You're awfully smart. And then we could start back home. I'm so scared, honey. Those Hyra scare me so."

McFeen turned on her fiercely. "You blasted fool," he said, "don't you know how it is with us? Is something the matter with your head? I've been blacklisted. There isn't a place in the system I could get a job. There isn't a man in the system I could borrow money from. If this trip fails I'm sunk, done for, finished. Get rid of the Hyra! You brainless, blathering idiot! Do you want to starve?"

Alice shrank into herself. "But, Mac—"

"If we can get through to Varro with the Hyra we've got, the big bosula groups will make us rich. We can have everything we've ever wanted. Now shut up."

He went to a locker and began getting equipment out of it. Alice watched him, running her tongue over her swollen lips. "What are you going to do, Mac?" she asked at last.

"Rig up an electro-magnet around the Hyra," he said without turning. "It might help. It's got to help."

It didn't work. Whether or not McFeen's theory was at fault, the apparatus he rigged up around the cage of Hyra did no good. He tried chemical solutions, sprays, hard and soft radiations—nothing helped. He took to spending most of his time in two hold, trying desperately, with the help of the auto-weld, to keep the eroded patches on the hull under control. Without telling Alice, he made experiments designed to "get rid" of at least some of the Hyra. These too failed. The silicious, gelatinous bodies of the Hyra were extremely hard to destroy. Short of methods which would have endangered the whole ship, there was nothing he could do.

McFeen's natural moroseness was changing rapidly into an inflammable desperation when, quite abruptly, the increase of the Hyra stopped. At first he was incredulous. He tried over and over to count those in the cage, and gave up in disgust. More

convincing was the evidence of the hull; no more eroded patches were appearing. For some twenty-four hours he held on to his incredulity; then he allowed himself to be conquered by relief.

He went to Alice with the news and found her as incredulous as he had been. He had to take her into two hold and show her the hull's gleaming, intact sides piece by piece before she would be convinced. Then she began to giggle in hysterical relief.

"Poor old Hyra," she said, "poor old things. I guess I was pretty mean about them, Mac. I'm sorry. Poor old things!" She looked toward the crowded Hyra cage and then, rather hastily, away again. "But everything's going to be all right now, isn't it, Mac? Now they've stopped increasing, everything's going to be all right."

"You bet it is," McFeen said expansively. "Nothing more to worry about. Say, listen, Alice. . . ."

"Yes?" She was still looking obliquely toward the Hyra cage.

"What do you say we go back to the cabin and have a little drink? To celebrate."

"That's a swell idea," Alice answered warmly. "I always said you were smart, Mac. Let's go celebrate." She glanced once more toward the Hyra and then followed him out of the hold.

BACK in the cabin, McFeen broke out a bottle of soma concentrate. He and Alice drank it slowly, with much inconclusive speculation as to the reason why the Hyra had ceased to breed. When the soma was gone, McFeen brought out a bottle of phlomis. Usually he and Alice began to quarrel bitterly when they reached the second bottle in their drinking bouts, but this time they were both feeling too good for it to happen. They went on from bottle to bottle, drink after drink, in a thickening haze of moist, maudlin goodfellowship. Finally they both passed out. Meantime the ship slid on and on into the deep.

McFeen awoke some ten hours later with his sinuses thundering. Liquor always did that to him. He had a dim, uncomfortable feeling that at some point in their drinking he had insisted on telling Alice what he had really done with the 1,500 I.U.'s she

thought had been stolen. Even more faintly he seemed to remember her responding with a full and equally indiscreet account of how she had spent the three months he had been on Uranus. Oh, well, it didn't really matter. Neither he nor Alice was the kind of drinker who remembers details.

He sat on the edge of his bunk for a moment, gathering strength, and then groped his way over to the aid chest. He got out two sobrior pills and swallowed them. As his head began to clear, he looked around for Alice. She was lying on her back in her bunk, snoring heavily, with a long strand of her bleached blonde hair lying across her face. She'd be out for a while yet, he guessed.

Meanwhile, he'd better go see how the cage of Hyra was. It was always possible that they'd begun to breed again. Or was he feeling too queasy to look at them now? Any tendency to queasiness was bound to be increased by looking at Hyra. No, he'd better not put it off. Still walking rather unsteadily, he left the cabin and went into two hold.

His first impression was that the Hyra cage had grown. Surely it was much larger than it had been. Then he realized that the size of the cage was unchanged; it seemed larger because it was emptier. There were fewer Hyra in it than there had been before.

There were no visible holes in the mesh. It was impossible. McFeen, cold sober now, knelt down beside the cage and inspected the mesh centimeter by centimeter. Everywhere it was whole and unbroken; he didn't think a flea could have got out through it.

He turned on the floodlights and gave the hold an equally thorough scrutiny. No, no Hyra. Not a Hyra anywhere.

Leaving aside the question of how they had got out through the mesh, where had they gone to? Number two hold, like the others, was hermetically sealed. And he knew no Hyra had gone past him when he had broken the seal on entering. The whole thing was impossible. He must be imagining it. After all, he hadn't counted them.

McFeen leaned against a bulkhead and pressed his fingers to his head. The pain in his frontal sinus was jumping again. Maybe he was still a little bit buzzed. He

didn't think he was, but it was possible. That would account for a lot.

He looked at the cage once more. Wait, now, he had it. The reason it looked so much emptier was that the Hyra (ugh, how he loathed them—he'd never let Alice see how much) were all jammed together at one end, heaped up on one another, like a pile of oozing, pupilless eyes. Naturally the cage looked bigger when the Hyra were piled up like that. McFeen almost laughed in his relief.

He sealed the hole up carefully and went back to the cabin, his footfalls ringing unevenly. Alice was sitting up in her bunk. She had washed her face and pushed her hair out of her eyes. She nodded shortly at him when he came in. After a while she got up and began opening some soup.

THEY both felt better when they had eaten. Alice revived sufficiently to comb her hair and spray some make-up on. The pain began to die away in McFeen's head. He'd been a fool to get so excited over nothing. All the same, he was going into the hold and have another look at the Hyra. He pushed back his chair.

"Where you going, Mac?" Alice asked. She was gathering up the remains of their meal and putting them in the disposer.

"Two hold."

"They aren't increasing again, are they?" she asked in quick alarm.

"No, nothing like that."

This time there was no possible doubt. The heap of Hyra was less than half the size it had been. In the time since he had left the hold—certainly not more than three-quarters of an hour—it had gone way, way down. He could count the Hyra without any difficulty now. There were either sixteen or seventeen.

McFeen's heart began pounding wildly. His chest felt so constricted he could hardly breathe. For a moment he tried to fight his panic, to reason with himself. Then he turned and ran for Alice.

She came rather unwillingly, understanding from his hoarse incoherence only that the Hyra were not increasing any more. Even when she saw the almost empty cage she was not alarmed. "Why, honey, there must be a hole there you haven't found,"

she said reasonably. "A hole or some—" she fell silent suddenly.

"Mac," she said in a quite different voice.

"Hunh?" McFeen had been trying to count the Hyra; it seemed to him that there was one less in the cage than there had been when he went to the cabin just now for Alice.

"Mac, where's that shadow coming from?"

The fear in her voice infected McFeen with instant irritability. "What shadow?" he demanded. "What are you talking about? Haven't we got trouble enough? Be quiet! What are you starting in on shadows for?"

"Mac . . ." Alice had to swallow and lick her lips before she could go on. "Look at it. There. In the corner of the cage." She pointed with one hand.

McFeen's eyes followed the gesture. For an unbearable moment he looked squarely at the thing in the corner of the cage. His heart gave a horrible hunch, like a horse trying to unseat the rider on its back. "It's nothing," he said desperately. "Nothing, nothing! Just a shadow. The bulkhead's casting it."

"Was the shadow here when you were in the hold before?"

"I don't know. Yes, of course it was. It must have been."

Alice stood quite motionless for an instant. Her elbows were pressed to her sides, her hands against her chest, in the feminine posture of resistance and defense. "Turn the floodlights on, Mac," she said.

The lights snapped on. The hold was illuminated from all sides. It was an illumination as shadowless as that of an operating theater, as bright as the noon of a terrestrial day. The shadow in the corner of the Hyra cage was quite unaffected by it.

ALICE drew a long, quavering sigh. She put both her hands on McFeen's forearm; he could feel her trembling. "Mac, honey," she said very softly, "you know such a lot, you're so smart. Won't you tell me where the shadow's coming from? Won't you please tell me what's making it?"

McFeen looked at her. His eyes were wild. "I don't know!" he said in a high, breaking voice. "I tell you, I don't know!"

Stop asking me questions! Stop badgering me! I'm getting out of here!" He pulled against her for a moment. Then he tore loose and ran.

"Mac, honey," Alice said when they were back in the cabin once more with the hold sealed behind them, "I think I know what that thing in the cage is." She spoke with surprising calmness. Though she was trembling a good deal she had, all things considered, come out of the hold in better condition than McFeen had.

"There's nothing in the cage," McFeen answered, shuddering. He uncapped a phlomis bottle and drank from it. Drops of the liquor were running down his chin. "There's nothing in the cage."

"Oh, yes . . . Mac, I think it's a Vanderlark."

He put the bottle down. The drink had helped him. "A Vanderlark? What's that supposed to be?"

"I guess there's only one of it," Alice corrected herself. She rubbed her lips for a moment with a handkerchief. "I wish my mouth wouldn't shake," she said petulantly. "It makes it hard to talk."

"The Vanderlark's a—a thing—that lives in deep space. It's made out of black. One of my boy friends who was a pilot in deep told me about it once when he'd been drinking. He was awfully afraid of it."

"I guess it's everywhere, really. Bill said it was everywhere, always, in all spaces and all times. I don't understand that very well, do you, Mac?"

"Go on," McFeen said. He turned the phlomis bottle around, studying it with haggard concentration.

"Anyway, deep is where the Vanderlark is more. Most of the time it doesn't bother anybody. But if you call it—it—it comes."

"Call it? What do you mean? We never called that thing."

"We didn't mean to call it," Alice said, "but maybe. . . . Or maybe it was the Hyra called it. I mean, when we hit deep space and they began to increase. Maybe when they increased they made a—a quiver in space that attracted it. They're not alive in the way other things are. They're different. Or maybe a part of them has always been where the Vanderlark is."

McFeen rubbed his hands over his face.

He got another bottle of phlomis from the locker, uncapped it, and then put it aside without tasting it. "What are we going to do, Alice?" he asked humbly.

Alice stood up, smoothing the folds of her wrinkled dress. In this moment she had an odd dignity. "I'm awfully scared, Mac," she said as if in explanation. "The best thing I can think of is to put the Hyra cage in the life raft. And then jet the raft off away from the ship. Maybe the Vanderlark will follow it. When the Hyra are gone, maybe the shadow will leave us alone."

There were only three Hyra left in the cage. The shadow had filled all except the cage's extreme end. McFeen looked at it and then averted his gaze. His face was so white that the brownness of his skin looked like greasepaint laid on a mask. Alice was standing behind him. He muttered something. He laid hold of the cage and tried to lift it up.

There was an instant's resistance. Then the shadow welled up enormously, in a horrible puffing-out of black. McFeen was left

holding the top edge of the cage. All the rest was gone.

He stood looking stupidly at the metal for a moment and then dropped it on the deck. He began to back away. He was screaming on a single high note. He hadn't stopped screaming when, without any perceptible motion, the blackness, the limitless blackness, closed over him.

Alice turned and ran. The life raft was aft of two hold; she couldn't have got through to the raft even if she had thought of it.

She ran from the hold to the cabin, from the cabin into the control room. The Vanderlark found her there, pressed flat against the metal of the prow, mumbling "No no no," over and over and trying to push her way out through the ship with her hands. Quietly and easily it extended itself and made her a part of it.

Then there was silence. After a while the Vanderlark flowed over the whole ship. And then there was nothing there at all but the Vanderlark.
