

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Once upon a time, while we were waiting for a bus, an old man came along down the queue peddling Eskimo-pops. "Eskimo! Eskimo!" he cried. At the same time, from the opposite direction, another old man appeared, hawking beygels. "Beygels!" he called. "Beygels!" It was inevitable that their paths should intersect, and we awaited the outcome with interest. Came the confrontation. The two venerable merchants examined one another for a moment in silence. Then the Eskimo-man purchased a beygel, and the beygel-man purchased an Eskimo-pop. They ate their goodies, wiped their mouths, then continued on their ways: "Eskimo! Eskimo!" "Beygels! Beygels!" The pertinence of this fascinating anecdote to the story below awaits only your reading to be made clear.

THERE WAS AN OLD WOMAN WHO LIVED IN A SHOE

by Robert F. Young

ALPHA CENTAURI HAD YET TO resolve into two suns when the blip that later came to be known as "The Mark of Malthus" appeared on the matter-detector screen of *The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want*. Wells, the first mate, happened to be present in the radar room at the time, and took the report up to the bridge himself. His duties aboard a spaceship with a payload of three thousand and four

passengers (at the last count) and one hundred and two crewmembers were legion, but he did not consider any matter to be beneath his personal attention provided it justified his disdain for positive thinking or could be used in any way to bug the captain. The blip fell into both categories, and represented a handsome find indeed.

Captain Ramm was standing in front of the bridge viewplate, looking out across the immensities to-

ward the bright bonfire of Alpha Centauri. With his strong masculine face and sturdy well-proportioned body, he cut a fine figure, and he knew it. The girls in the passenger village knew it too, and from the way they acted in his presence you would have thought that he was one of his eleven handsome sons instead of a married man of fifty. Wells was only thirty, and unmarried to boot, but with his flabby-checked face and frail frame, he cut as sorry a figure as the captain did a fine one. The girls in the passenger village knew that too, and from the way they acted in his presence you would have thought that he was something the Gardener had found on the bottom of one of the hydroponic tanks.

At the navigator's desk, Niles, the navigator, was rechecking *The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want's* course. Stepping around the desk, Wells handed the captain the report. "Unusual, wouldn't you say, sir?" he asked.

Captain Ramm's pale blue eyes made short work of the terse little paragraph. "What's so unusual—or so important—about a meteor that won't come within ten thousand miles of us?"

"It's not a meteor," Wells said. "Its mass-velocity ratio indicates it to be a spaceship."

The captain about-faced. "Nonsense, Mr. Wells! You know as well as I do that *The Lord Is My*

Shepherd, I Shall Not Want was the first EPD ship to leave Earth. Even assuming that one of the successive ships to leave could have overtaken and passed us without our knowledge, it could hardly have reversed its course and be approaching us from the opposite direction!"

"All of which," said Wells, enjoying himself keenly, "suggests that the ship in question isn't from Earth."

"That's blasphemy, Mr. Wells!"

"No it isn't—it's logic. It's all very well to insist that Earth is the chosen planet and that it and it alone is inhabited by intelligent beings and to admit of no other possibility; but a ship is a ship is a ship is a ship, and *has* to come from somewhere. So if this one didn't come from Earth, it must have come from some place else."

"That's enough of your wild surmising, Mr. Wells!" An ardent propagationist, the captain had no use whatsoever for neo-Malthusians, and whenever he pulled rank on one, he did so with a vengeance. "As soon as this precious object of yours comes within depth-scanning range, see to it that the necessary steps are taken to ascertain its true nature. Until then, keep your whimsical speculations to yourself!"

"Aye, aye, sir."

Wells saluted, and left the bridge. Before returning to the radar room, he took the lift up to

Little Heaven, climbed into the patrol 'copter and made his daily aerial inspection of the ship's village. The ship's village pre-empted eighty percent of the huge sphere's interior and was everything a ship's village should be. There were houses and lawns and trees. There was an elementary school, a high school, a university, and a space academy. There was a library, a park, a hospital, a sun, a sky, and a supermarket. True, the supermarket was a front for a ration-distribution center, and the sky was as phony as the sun was, but the village was still a pleasant place for the successive generations of passengers—the sixth was just coming into being—to raise their children and worship the god of their choice.

The church where they worshipped the god of their choice stood in the center of the village square and was called, appropriately enough, The God-Of-Our-Choice Church. The God-Of-Our-Choice had come into his own long before the departure of *The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want*, and had superseded all other gods before him. Actually, people had been worshipping him ever since the middle of the twentieth century, but they had called him by different names, such as "Security", "Medical Aid for the Aged", "Pension Plan", "Federal Aid", "Parity", "Two Cars in every Garage", "Fast Buck", "Time-and-a-

Half", "Seniority", and "Dr. Spock". Now they came right out and called him by his right name, and weren't in the least ashamed to put the words of the Good Book in his mouth.

Wells was, though. However, he was one of those unfortunate persons who have just enough intelligence to disapprove of the *status quo*, but not quite enough to be able to do anything about it. Such a dilemma invariably makes cynics out of those impaled upon its horns, and it was Wells' cynicism, combined with his unpopularity with women, that had led him into the besieged camp of the Last of the neo-Malthusians, and it was his cynicism, combined with the burdensome and all-but-extinguished torch he had elected to carry, that had inspired the little game he had come to call "Bugging The Captain".

Upon his return to the radar room, he was informed by the operator-on-duty that the approaching UFO was not yet within depth-scanning range, but that it would be shortly. Wells spent the intervening time breaking down the information he wanted into a series of pertinent questions, then he punched out the questions on a scanner card and fed the card into the slot. Finally, at the operator's signal, he turned on the machine.

It was an elated first mate who, some fifteen minutes later, pounded up the companionway to the

bridge. Captain Ramm was in conversation with the navigator, or, more accurately, the navigator was on the receiving end of a propagationist pep-talk. "The neo-Malthusians to the contrary, Mr. Niles," Captain Ramm was saying, "we are not sheep stampeding senselessly toward a cliff, all the while pretending that the cliff isn't there. Babies are man's birthright, and it is his bounden duty to create as many of them as he possibly can. That is why God-Of-Our-Choice put him upon the face of the earth and made the face of the earth green and filled the earth with good things for him to dig up and make shiny things out of. And just in case the good things should ever happen to run out and the greenness go away, God-Of-Our-Choice made Alpha Centauri Three so that man would have another place to go on propagating himself on . . . Yes, Mr. Wells?"

"I have ascertained the true nature of the approaching object," Wells said humbly. "Would the captain be interested in my findings?"

Captain Ramm regarded him blankly for a moment. Then, "Oh, you mean the meteor. Very well—proceed, Mr. Wells."

"It happens to be a spaceship, as I said before—not a meteor. It also happens to be a spaceship very much like our own. In a moment it will reach its point of nearest approach to *The Lord Is*

My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want, and I've taken advantage of this brief period of proximity and arranged a telegam between you and the other captain. In a few seconds his face will appear on your personal viewscreen, and yours will appear on his. The language correlator will see to it that the historic remarks which both of you will undoubtedly utter are conveyed correctly to one another's ears." Wells handed a note to the navigator. "Adjust the screen to these co-ordinates, Niles."

Niles did so. Meanwhile, the thundercloud that had gathered on the captain's forehead took on a darker hue. "How dare you overstep your authority, Mr. Wells!" he demanded. "You—you advocate of the devil, you!"

"The exigencies of the situation leave me no choice, sir . . . There's the other captain now."

Despite its unusual features, the face that had popped into being on the screen was subtly human. The forehead was extremely high, and slanted outward into a blunt and bridgeless nose. Just beneath the nose was a small chinless mouth, and on either side of the forehead—or perhaps the nose; it was difficult to tell where one left off and the other began—was a round, BB-like eye. The ears were pointed, and set very high on the head, and between them sat a round object that disconcertingly resembled an officer's kepi.

"Captain Squeel speaking," the alien said in a high-pitched voice. "I demand to know your destination!"

Captain Ramm was in the midst of a very bad moment. Nevertheless, he rose to the occasion admirably. "Captain Ramm speaking," was what he came back with. "I demand to know your destination!"

"Sol Three," said Captain Squeel.

"Alpha Centauri Three," said Captain Ramm.

For a moment the two officers gawked at each other. Then, "But you can't go to Sol Three—there's no room for you there!" said Captain Ramm.

"But you can't go to Alpha Centauri Three—there's no room for you there!" said Captain Squeel.

"I demand to know the purpose of your voyage!" shouted Captain Ramm.

"I demand to know the purpose of yours!" squeaked Captain Squeel.

"The purpose of both," Wells interposed, "is the alleviation of population pressures through the founding of new colonies. Don't you see, Captain Ramm? They're in the same boat we are."

"Impossible! Two different races on two different planets couldn't possibly suffer simultaneous population crises!"

"Nor did they," said Wells. "Our excess-population dispersal ship is

well past the halfway point in its journey, while theirs has yet to reach the halfway point. Since our two velocities are almost identical, that means that we left Earth almost half a century before they left Alpha Centauri Three."

Captain Squeel's image began to fade as the two ships drew rapidly apart. "Then all we're doing is exchanging places," he said in a sort of despairing squeek.

Captain Ramm's face looked like the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. "I'm afraid that's what it amounts to," he said. Then, remembering his noble calling, "Bon voyage, Captain Squeel."

"Bon voyage, Captain Ramm."

The screen went blank.

A silence settled on the bridge. Wells broke it. "There's an ancient nursery rhyme about an old woman who lived in a shoe and who had so many children she didn't know what to do," he said. "To my knowledge, she never tried to solve her problem, but if she had, she probably would have proceeded on the assumption that somewhere there was another shoe, and have sent her excess children out to look for it. It's fortunate that she didn't try, for if her excess children had found another shoe, they would have found it inhabited by another old woman who had so many children she didn't know what to do. Irresponsibility in the matter of offspring isn't a shortcoming one old woman can

expect another, equally irresponsible, old woman to pay for—and vice versa."

"But we can't turn back," Niles said.

"Of course we can't—and there's no reason why we should. The Alpha Centauri Three civilization will welcome us. They'll welcome us for the simple reason that they'll know that if they don't, the Sol Three civilization won't wel-

come their excess children. But both civilizations are going to have to grow up and act their age."

There was a thoughtful as well as a rueful expression on the captain's face. "That alien made me think of a rat," he said.

Wells smiled. It was his moment in the sun, and he was enjoying it to the full. "He looked more like a Guinea pig to me," he said.

