

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# VISCOUS circle

by . . . A. Bertram Chandler

It's bad to be trapped in a time warp with anyone. And when anyone is Malaprop Jenkins it can adder a man's wits peppermintly.

## FOREWORD

"This is up your alley," he said. "You might be able to do something with it. If I still had the bottle, the original paper, I'd chance sending it in to the Air Ministry or the Royal Society or somebody. But it's out of the question now. You know what happens to people who see sea-serpents!

"We were having boat drill off Fremantle, in Gage Roads. We were pulling back for the ship when I spotted this bottle. It was very bright in the sunlight, unlike any glass I've ever seen anywhere. It was a good shape too—lovely lines to it, graceful. So I leaned out of the boat and picked it up.

"It was on my desk all that day. People came in and admired it. It never occurred to any of us that there might be anything inside it—it was an opaque sort of glass but glittery, like an opal.

"The Second Mate came in just before dinner—he wanted to know if I had an empty gin bottle he could use for gasoline to clean his gyro compass. I had a gin bottle—but it wasn't empty and I wasn't going to give him *the* bottle. So we had a gin each and I started to pour what was left of it into the bottle I'd picked up.

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*Although Mr. Chandler, over the years, has been a valued contributor to scores of STP magazines, his proudest distinction lies in being the only member of his profession who is also a First Mate in the Australian Merchant Marine. Which makes him unique.*

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"It had a funny cork by the way—sort of plastic. It was then we found there was a roll of paper inside. It was rum sort of stuff and covered with queer type-script, more like the markings you get on the toilet roll of a depth recorder. It was readable.

"The Second Mate was very excited—we both were. We thought it'd be as well to make a copy, which we did that night.

"And now comes the really funny part. We'd sweated and slaved over that beastly manuscript, taking turns at the typewriter. Then we'd rolled it up again and put it back in the bottle and then we'd settled down to finish the gin. Suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, the bottle just took off like a shooting star in reverse. It went right through the deckhead of my cabin—if you care to come aboard you can see the patch in the bridge planking.

"But this is the funny thing. It may have been the gin, yet I'll swear that the hole through which the bottle went was there a fraction of a second before the bottle got to it. The moon was shining through it quite brightly.

"And we had a helluva job explaining that hole to the Old Man."

I took the papers he gave me. As he said—it would have been absurd to have passed them in to the Meteorological Office of the Air Ministry or any of the other scientific bodies with which the sailor has occasional dealings.

But it's only right that *somebody* should see them.

—A. BERTRAM CHANDLER.

IT WAS A MISTAKE teaming up with Malaprop Jenkins. The fact the man's a killer is bad enough—especially now I know that sooner or later it'll be either him or me for the high jump. And I'd sooner it was him . . . But it's his murder of words that's worst of all.

The first time that he uses the right word in the wrong place it's funny. The fourteenth time it's just a little boring. By the fortieth time—and situated as we are there *must* be repetition—it's grounds for justifiable homicide.

But Jenkins knows where the weapons are in the cargo and he's helped himself to a point-five service blaster, complete with belt, holster and charges, and I can't find the pillaged case anywhere. I've found paper and a typewriter and they're helping to pass the incredible amount of time we have on our hands.

Jenkins, as befits a common thief, just rummages through the cargo. One day—do we still have days?—he got drunk and tried on the most flamboyant creations from out of a case of ladies' dresses. When I told him how childish it was he muttered that satin soon finds mischief for idle hands to do!

He's not the type I'd associate with ordinarily. I had no idea, when I first started faking my books,

what I was letting myself in for. But it was just hard luck. *Silver Streak* was a dead cert for the Round-the-Moon Stakes—and how was I to know she'd blow a tube before she was clear of the stratosphere?

If it hadn't been for that the Bank would have got all its money back and nobody would have been any the wiser when the annual book-checking came round. As it was I had to get out fast. I helped myself to another ten thousand credits while I was about it. I knew that the Feds would run me down anywhere on Earth and my only hope was to get out and make a fresh start somewhere with no extradition.

Yes, the Federal Agents are smart—but there're people who are smarter. There's that old man in Sydney, for example. I'll not tell you his name—I had to swear a most blood-curdling oath that I'd never in any circumstances divulge it. And there's always the slim chance this story will be picked up somewhere, sometime, and an even slimmer chance that I come out of this mess in one piece.

And if I do and have let too many cats out of the bag there's any amount of people both on Earth and on Centaurus V who'd take a keen delight in having me liquidated, even though my brain might be wiped clean as a baby's by the penal psychologists and nicely fitted out with a set of ersatz memories. Mind you—I'd as

soon be liquidated as have *that* happen to me but I certainly don't want to get in the bad books of both the Law and the Underground.

There was a man used to come into the bank now and again. I knew him to talk to and, of course, his address. He was respectable enough—on the surface—but it was common knowledge that he was some kind of punk, just too smart to be caught out in anything illegal. When I heard that the examiners were paying a visit the next day I thought of him at once.

As soon as I'd helped myself to the extra folding money I left the Bank, telling old Carmichael, the head cashier, that I wasn't well. He didn't try to stop me going—I suppose I looked pale enough for anything.

When I got to the roof there was a down-town 'copter just dropping in to the Stop. I got aboard and sat and fidgeted in the minute or so before it lifted and droned its leisurely way over the city, following the course of the Thames to the sea.

At every stop—Tower Bridge, Woolwich, Barking Creek—I was afraid a policeman would board and drag me from my seat. But it was far too early for anything of the kind to happen. The short journey was without incident. The 'copter went as far as Southend, the very edge of the city limits.

The man I was going to see lived at Southend. I found him in his apartment a little more than mid-

way along the Pier. Whatever it was he did it must have paid—you don't get that kind of place for ten credits a week.

I saw his face in the hall tele-panel as he answered my ring. I could see that he recognised me and that he was puzzled at my calling. I told him it was urgent. He looked thoughtful, then told me to come right up. The elevator that took me to the fifth floor let me out into the passageway not far from his door.

I couldn't help peering out cautiously, first one way, then the other, before I left the cage. While I was doing this a door opened and the man I had come to see looked out. He told me irritably to come in and wanted to know what I was playing at.

When I did tell him, inside his apartment, he was amused. I didn't see anything funny in it myself. But I suppose that the shady ways in which he made his living gave him a queer sense of humor. When he had finished laughing he said, "Well, what am I supposed to do about it?"

I didn't know quite what to say. I stammered something about thinking that he might be able to tell me—I forget what now. But I had a dreadful feeling that my one faint hope was going to prove a false one.

He laughed again and looked out of his window to the sunlit Thames Estuary, to a passing cruise liner bedecked with bright flags, appeared

to be listening to the faint strains of music drifting from her crowded decks. Then, without turning to face me, he told me to make out an I.O.U. for two thousand credits.

"But I don't . . ." I began. He said he knew I didn't, but that I would by the time he was through with me. He didn't think he'd be caught with any of the notes I was going to give him, but just in case . . . He asked too if I had any preference.

"There's Mars," he told me, "and Venus. But they have been known to extradite criminals in exchange for their own bad baskets. There's the Jovian System and Pluto—but all I'd be fit for there would be unskilled manual labor. He turned round and looked at me and said rather insultingly that he didn't think I was cut out for that kind of thing, that in any case I wouldn't like the climate.

I was thinking, I told him, of Centaurus V.

He went to his desk and scribbled something on a sheet of paper. Then, "Give me that I.O.U.!" he said. "And the two thousand."

"But what guarantee . . . ?" I began.

"My word—my spoken word. More than that I can't give you. And remember—if *they* catch you, you've a lot to lose. All the memories, all the habits, all the personal idiosyncracies that make you *you*. And you wouldn't want that, would you? Exile to Centaurus Fifth is better than Earth as a synthetic

personality manufactured by the pen-psychs."

He was right. I gave him the two thousand—I gave him the I.O.U. He scrawled *Paid* across it, initialed it. He said, "Take it back. Get your fingerprints over it. Twist it up—that's right. Now drop it carelessly. You owed me that money over the Round-the-Moon Stakes—remember?

"Now—go first of all to Hornchurch—the top address on this piece of paper. There's a man there, keeps an antique shop. Ask him if he has any early twentieth-century poker-work pipe-racks with matching pipes.

"He won't have but he'll ask you into the back room. It'll probably cost you another five hundred at least. Go to Heston, next. Take the next stratoliner to Sydney—and that's the second address . . ."

It didn't seem much for two thousand. I told him so and he said if I wasn't satisfied he'd put through a call to the police. So there wasn't much that I could do about it.

I found the shop at Hornchurch. It occupied, fittingly, the lower floor of an old-fashioned concrete building that looked startlingly out of place among its plastic and aluminum neighbors. The owner of the shop was a little rat of a man, dirty and untidy and generally unprepossessing, but he asked no questions. When I put my query to him he just said I might find what I wanted in the back room, called an assistant to take charge of the

shop and accompanied me to the rear of the premises.

He didn't do much for his five hundred. All he gave me was a change of clothing, two contact lenses that turned my eyes from blue to a sort of brown, a pair of shoes that added another two inches to my height.

Oh—and there was the matter of the hair-dye and the wallet stuffed with all kinds of papers that made me out to be a wool merchant making a business trip to Westralia. Luckily I have a brother in that trade and from him, thanks to a retentive memory, enough knowledge of textiles to deceive anybody not an expert.

When I got to Heston there were police around the ticket offices, police watching the embarkation of passengers aboard each outward-bound stratoliner. In spite of my disguise I felt utterly naked and helpless.

And then, while I was still hanging indecisively around the waiting room, pretending an interest in the books and magazines on display on the newsstand, there was a scuffle at the window of the Far East booking-office. It was a woman they caught—a big brassy blonde.

I never found out what they wanted her for. But on top of my relief my commonsense told me that *they* wouldn't be after me until the examiners went through my books. I still had a few hours of grace.

I was lucky. There was one berth unreserved in the Sydney stratoliner. The next ship would not leave until the following morning—and that would have been cutting things a little too fine. One berth and the liner was lifting in ten minutes. I had my foot on the bottom step of the gangway when I realised that I had no baggage. The man in the antique shop should have thought of that.

Anyhow I had time to nip back to the waiting room, to dive into the shop that catered to the needs of absent-minded or badly-rushed travelers. I bought myself a cheap compressed pulp suitcase, pajamas, toothbrush, toothpaste, a tube of Smoothex and a change of shirts. The Smoothex was really the most important. A blond beard with dark hair would have looked odd—not unnatural but odd enough to arouse the interest of the steward.

When I jumped aboard the ship little whisps of blue smoke were already trickling from the venturis. As I settled into my seat I heard the wheeled gangway being pulled away from the entrance port, heard the door slammed and dogged tight shut.

As I lit a cigarette the ship started to move and the tilt of the deck, forcing me back into the padded seat, told me that she was lifting into the London sky.

I looked through the port at my side. The city was sliding past below, the buildings gleaming pallidly among the dark green of the parks,

the first lights already twinkling along the broad avenues and on the Thames Embankment. Like a great wave the dusk was washing in from the east. Then, as we gained altitude, I saw the last tip of the sun's upper limb climb briefly above the long low line of the hills to the westward—climb, then vanish as our brief respite from the onrushing darkness was ended.

It all looked too good to leave. What if the penal psychologists did give me a fresh personality? What did it matter? Some part of the essential *I* would surely remain, would survive to appreciate and enjoy the familiar scenes among which I had been reared. Centaurus V could offer nothing like this.

Its cities, set among the wild rugged mountains of Van Huyten's Land, along the steamy beaches of the MacLean Coast, were too new, without history, lacking the smooth warm comfort that comes with maturity. There and then I decided to take the next ship back from Australia. I would give myself up and take whatever was coming to me.

But London was gone, England was gone, below us was one vast sheet of uniform cloud, above us the stars, bright, unwinking, set in the black sky. I reminded myself there was the little matter of two-and-a-half thousand credits already expended, to say nothing of the outlay on suitcase and traveling gear. I like to get value for my money.

If I didn't like Centaurus V—well, the ships ran both ways.

The dinner gong was sounded then and we all got up from our seats and filed down to the dining saloon. They put me at a table with a middle-aged man and two rather charming girls. At any other time I should have liked to have got to know those girls better. As it was I couldn't risk it. They must have thought me an unsociable type, hurrying through my meal with my nose buried in one of the magazines I had picked up at the airport.

After coffee I went up to the next deck again. The stewards had not yet finished the minor magic by which they transformed rows of cushioned seats into curtained bunks. So I went to the bar and treated myself to a double whisky. The barman was inclined to be talkative but I feigned a slight air-sickness. When I left at last I had told him nothing but he had told me at least seven different ways of dealing with that malady.

And then, behind the curtains of my bunk, snug and secure under the electrically warmed blanket, I felt really safe at last. It would be evening again when we arrived at Sydney—evening in New South Wales but only early morning in England. I would still have a few hours grace before the examiners started to find the discrepancies in my books, before the hunt was up.

And in that time . . .

And in that time I found the

second address the man in Southend had given me. It was another antique shop. Its windows were filled with a display of boomerangs, woomerahs and other aboriginal weapons. There were one or two ship's bells—ORION was the name on one of them and it struck me as being rather apt—that had presumably belonged to long-since broken-up surface liners on the Australian trade.

There were opals, alive with shifting polychromatic light, in ancient gold and silver settings. There were weapons I thought at first were heavy blasters but which I identified after a few moments' inspection as twentieth century revolvers and automatic pistols.

But what was I to do? Who was I to ask for? My friend in London hadn't told me. But—it was an antique shop of sorts. So I went inside, walked to the tall stooped old man behind the counter and asked him if he had any early twentieth-century poker-work pipe-racks.

He made a pretence of rummaging in a showcase on the counter and asked in a low voice if I was the young man from the bank. I hesitated—then told him that I was. While I was speaking the door opened again and somebody else, another man, came in. The shop-keeper, still fumbling in his showcase, said that if I cared to wait a few minutes he had some fifth-century work that might interest me.

I looked at the new customer. I was afraid he might be an agent. But he didn't look like one. His jacket was stained and threadbare, his linen was filthy. He had a shifty hangdog air even the finest actor would find it next to impossible to reproduce faithfully.

And his eyes, glaring beneath the shaggy brows, were the eyes of a wild animal. He looked at me and appeared to ignore me—although his right hand strayed down to his pocket in a suggestive manner. And he asked the shopkeeper if he had any twentieth-century poker-work pipe-racks.

"And who sent you?" asked the man behind the counter.

"Roscommon. He told me you was ingenuous enough to . . ." Then, "Who's this?"

"Another customer after the same as yourself. Mr. . . ."

"Calthorpe," I told him.

". . . meet Mr. Jenkins. I've been expecting Mr. Jenkins along for many a month."

"That'll do," growled Jenkins. "There's no need to go all hysterical on us."

All this had me more than a little puzzled. The shopkeeper, so far as I could judge, seemed prone to neither ingenuousness nor hysteria. But I didn't know Jenkins then.

Outside it was now quite dark and the light of a street lamp shone through the shop windows, gleaming on the ancient weapons, striking glimmering uncanny fire from the

opals. And the three of us stood there in the darkness, distrusting one another like three strange dogs undecided whether or not to fight.

The shopkeeper's hand strayed along his counter and from somewhere in the rear of the shop we heard the ringing of a bell. Jenkins swore and his right hand came out of his pocket. It held a knife. From the shadows behind the counter two forms silently materialised. Each held a shining object in his right hand that could have been an illegal blaster.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," said the shopkeeper. "I hadn't bargained on two of you at once, one of you Mr. Jenkins. I have to take my precautions."

Jenkins muttered something about eternal viridescence being the price of safety.

"Quite so. And now if you will both step round to my office we will discuss the matter of fifth-century work that I have already referred to . . ."

"Lead on, Macduff," said Jenkins.

It seems to me now that the cleverest part of the organisation in which we had become entangled was that its customers took most of the risks. There was, I suppose, a certain amount of bribery involved, a certain familiarity with the workings of airports and spaceports.

We, Jenkins and I, paid the antique dealer not so much for what he did as for what he knew. We also paid him—or a friend of his—for a Spurling Three that

should have been on display in his window, a refugee from the junk pile if ever there was one.

The money we had to fork out would have purchased one of the very latest Spurling Sevens with h. and c. and every modern convenience. Luckily I can pilot a Spurling—and it was a good job that the antique man in Hornchurch had included a private pilot's license among the papers in the wallet he sold me.

Then we had to pay—but heavily—for the timetable and the map he sold us. It gave us the route to follow to Port Kingsford in Westralia, the location of the unmarked patch of desert where we were to land and destroy the Spurling, the trail to take to the spaceport.

There was the exact time that we were to stroll on to the landing field, the compartment aboard the ship, STARMAIDEN, in which we were to hide ourselves. There was, I suppose, some first-class staff-work there—but five thousand credits was a lot to pay for it, to say nothing of another thousand for the flying garbage can.

Oh, well—give the devil his due. He threw in some advice and information free, gratis and for damn-all. "You're going to see a lot of Malaprop Jenkins," he told me. "Yes—and hear a lot. It's a long way to Centaurus Fifth, Manschen Drive notwithstanding.

"There'll be the two of you in the ship and after you give yourselves up to the Captain—who'll

be expecting you—he'll almost certainly berth you together. The cargo liners don't have much in the way of spare accommodation. You'll find friend Jenkins' misuse of words a bit boring after a while. Or you might even find it funny.

"Whichever way it is—don't let him see it. He's very sensitive. The Feds are after him for two crimes—robbery with violence and carving his girlfriend because she laughed when he told her—she was all dressed up to kill—that fine feathers make fine brides."

"She should have cut *him* dead after that effort," I told him.

"Now don't *you* start. I've no responsibility for you whatsoever—all that I've done is sell you a secondhand Spurling through my cousin. But I don't like to see people remade by the pen-psychs—to my way of thinking it's worse than the death penalty. It happened to a friend of mine—if you *must* know, a girl I was rather fond of. They reckoned she was anti-social. And I don't want to see you murdered by Jenkins.

"It's a pity that you'll be in the same ship but it couldn't be avoided. Frankly I'd have let *him* take what was coming to him—but once you're mixed up in this racket there's no backing out. Well, you have your charts and your timetable. Don't drop me a line from Centaurus Five—the fewer clues the better—but if you like you can call in and see"—he gave me a scrap of paper—"this friend

of mine in Port Phillips. Memorize the address and destroy the paper."

That was that. Jenkins was waiting in the Spurling when I got to the municipal airfield. I climbed carefully into the cockpit, more than half afraid that the crazy crate would collapse around my ears. But except for some ominous creakings all seemed to be well.

I waited until the traffic controller gave me the green light, then lifted her on her turret-drive. The jets fired sweetly and cleanly and in next to no time we had reached the thousand-foot level. I set the course as per instructions for Auckland.

Fifty miles out over the Tasman Sea I brought her round, swung her in a great arc so as to pass well to the north of Sydney. Something big passed overhead, well above the clouds, and we heard the noise of its jets. We didn't see it and it probably didn't see us—except as an insignificant not-to-be-bothered-with luminous speck on its radar screen.

The night came sweeping down almost before we made the land and the greater part of our flight was made over featureless darkness. The antique dealer had routed us well, clear of every town and village. The actual steering of the Spurling I left to the automatic pilot, busying myself with radio cross-bearings.

Jenkins, except for the time that he said that he was interested in astrology and asked me to identify

the constellation of O'Brien, was silent. At last, according to my latest fix, we had a scant thirty miles to go to the place where we were to land. According to my watch, we were running on time.

I felt very pleased with myself and thought of sending my log in to Headquarters—then remembered with a shock that whatever happened I had forfeited my commission in the Federal Air Force Reserve.

Rather glumly I cut the drive to a mere trickle of power, eased the old Spurling down on her turret-drive. I couldn't use landing lights or flares—all that I had to work on was the dial of the radio altimeter. At five hundred feet I was apprehensive. At three hundred I was in a cold sweat.

At one hundred there was a splintering crash as the ancient undercarriage met the hard sand that, according to the lying altimeter, was all of thirty-three-and-a-third yards below. The poor old Spurling sat down hard, fell over on her side, collapsed. She would never fly again.

That didn't worry me. What did worry me—after the misbehavior of one important instrument—was the possibility of considerable error in my last radio bearings. But I needn't have worried. I needn't have troubled to get out the little magnetic compass with which we had been supplied.

The lights of Port Kingsford glowed like a pale impossible dawn

over the desert rim, a glow that seemed to be creeping up to engulf the stars of the Cross and Alpha and Beta Centauri, riding low in the black sky over the pallid radiance from the spaceport.

"Well," I said, "we're here."

Jenkins clambered out of the wreckage. He reminded me that it was many a step 'twixt the cup and the lip. And it did look like a long walk. But before we started out there was one thing left to do. There was an innocent-looking little switch on the dashboard. I pressed it down. After a certain interval—long or short I didn't know—the time fuse would do its work and the poor old Spurling would be no more than a puddle of fused metal on the sand. My companion said that he'd often wondered how Caesar's army managed to march after they'd burned their boots.

It was cold and we could have done with a light to help us over the rough terrain but we made good time. We circled the port so as to approach from the south. When the thermite bomb went we could see the point of this. It made quite a racket and a ruddy flare that must have been visible for miles.

We saw a certain flashing of lights around the administration buildings and heard a steady diminishing drone as a helicopter took off to investigate. It was then that I started to have misgivings. If Port Kingsford carried any abnormal trackers on its payroll the game would be up. But Port Cap-

tains aren't policemen and presumably the organization knew what it was doing.

Nobody stopped us when we walked onto the landing field. There was some activity on its northern edge—the conveyor belts were steadily pouring freight into a big cargo liner. That would be STAR-MAIDEN. Loading was scheduled to be completed at 0600. At 0630 there would be nobody aboard but the officer of the watch.

At 0645 he would come ashore and walk across to the administration buildings to get the figures from the stevedore. At 0730, approximately, he and the other officers and crew would return on board and prepare for blasting off. And by this time Jenkins and I would be snugly hidden in the control-room spares-locker.

We had half an hour or so to waste. We kept as much as possible to the shadows thrown by the buildings by the tall monolithic ships. We watched the passengers filing up the gangway of a huge Venus-bound transport. Government-assisted emigrants they must have been and they were burdened with all kinds of incongruous junk in addition to their cheap and battered baggage.

One woman, I remember, was clutching to her bosom what looked like a potted aspidistra. I was tempted to join them—then saw that there were far too many uniformed officials at both ends of the long gangway.

Jenkins went all philosophical and whispered in a hoarse voice, "There they go with all their goods and shackles . . ." In a way he was right. People do chain themselves to useless inanimate objects.

All the time we were working ourselves closer to STARMAIDEN. She had finished loading now and we saw the big cargo ports being shut and sealed, the spidery conveyor belts being dismantled. We saw the stevedores pouring ashore from her main airlock.

Then a single uniformed figure came out after them, turned to look briefly up at his ship, strode briskly across the fused sand to the administration buildings. We started forward—then held back. There was one man still by the gangway—evidently some kind of a watchman.

He stamped about as if to drive the cold from his feet. He looked guiltily around, then pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. But there was too much wind where he was standing for him to get a light. He slid swiftly round to the lee of the ship to light up in comfort.

We didn't wait for the flare of his match. We ran across the stretch of illuminated ground, feeling terribly naked and conspicuous in the glare of STARMAIDEN's floodlights. We clambered up the gangway into the airlock, into the ship. Now Jenkins was on strange territory—but I found my Air

Force Reserve training stood me in good stead.

It's only Air Force training—but officers are expected to have some slight smattering of spacemanship. During one annual drill I rode the Earth-Moon ferry in the control-room of a Lunar Metals freighter—as a very supernumerary officer. But it was all coming in useful now.

With Jenkins following I made straight for the control-room. The locker was there, as we had been told, hard by the hatch through which we had come from the body of the ship. It didn't look too big. It didn't look any bigger than a coffin—and it was much the same shape. But it was almost empty.

It held the two of us easily and not too uncomfortably. I could see that once acceleration started our hip-bones were going to dig holes for themselves in the hard plastic of the locker bottom—but we shouldn't have to put up with that for long. Once the Martellis were cut and the ship switched over to the Mannschen Drive there would be no turning back. We could come out then.

We got into the box.

"Snug as bugs in a jug," commented Jenkins. He put another syllable on the end of "bugs." But that kind of thing didn't matter—not then. We lay there for eternities, wanting to smoke, wanting to sneeze, straining our ears for the sound of feet on the ladder which would mean that Captain, Chief Pilot and Navigator were coming

to their stations. At last, by means of a fine piece of contortionism, I managed to look at my watch. It was 0715, Westralian Time.

"They won't be long," I whispered.

Then at last there was a sound. It wasn't the friendly clatter of feet on ladders. It was eerie, spine-chilling, washing through the control room in waves of pure terror. It was the Port Kingsford alarm siren. Jenkins cursed, threw back the lid of the locker, jumped out. His knife glimmered in his hand.

I followed him. It was almost day now and the pallid grey light of dawn streamed in through the control room viewports. From our vantage point we could see figures running towards the ship from all sides. We looked up—and there was a big police ship just coming in for a landing.

There was only one thing to do. I did it. I ran to the control-panel, threw the switch that would close our airlock doors. I started our own siren—and if people didn't keep clear of backblast that'd be their funeral. I looked at the other controls, trying hard to remember. I did remember.

The roar of the Martellis as they opened up was frightening, deafening. I almost cut the drive—then realised that this wasn't one of the toy rockets of the Lunar Ferry. We lifted. Jenkins screamed and pointed. I looked up—and it seemed that we were flying into a stream of flame. There was a vast black

shape, looming closer and closer. It was right on top of us.

Then . . .

Then there was only the sky ahead, black, sprinkled with blazing stars.

"My God," said Jenkins. "The police-ship!"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "But there was no shock . . ."

"We was going too fast."

He walked to the nearest viewport, looked out. He walked back again hastily to the center of the control room. I piled on another two G's acceleration. He sat down—hard. Then, "Can you take us to Centaurus?"

"I don't know. I'm not a Master Astronaut."

"But the Spurling. And this . . ."

"I was qualified to fly the Spurling. This is just luck. If my memory holds out I can manage planetary takeoffs and landings. But navigation is beyond me. And I know nothing of the Interstellar Drive."

"There're books." He grabbed three in one huge paw from the Navigator's book rack. "You don't have to be a Master Astrologer to read, do you?"

"What do you want me to do? Cast a horoscope?"

"What was that?" He played with his knife, looked as though he might turn nasty.

"Oh, nothing. I'll give it a go."

So I gave it a go. I let her run until we had reached escape velocity, then cut the Martellis. I went down

to look at the Mannschen Drive. There didn't seem to be much to it—just a mess of wheels at all kinds of odd angles. But it wasn't working then . . .

I ploughed through all the textbooks and such that I could lay my hands on. I may have been wrong but it seemed to me that the best policy was to swing her on her gyroscopes until her nose was pointing straight for Alpha Centauri. A ticklish job—but accomplished at last. I didn't know if there was anything in front of us but the way we were going took us well clear of the Plane of the Ecliptic.

Well, I got her lined up and then switched over to the Mannschen. I don't know what I expected—but the only immediate result was a deep drone, sliding rapidly up the octaves to a shrill whine as all those blasted wheels started spinning.

We didn't feel anything or see anything. Jenkins, I know, had the idea that Alpha Centauri was going to expand at once from a pinpoint of light to a visible disc. He was very disappointed. He asked me how it worked.

I told him I didn't know. I told him I *thought* we were going astern in Time as we went ahead in Space, that the actual math of it all was way beyond me.

"Oh," he grunted. "Sort of a step in Time saves nine in Space?"

"Sort of . . ." I admitted

"Can't we—go faster?"

"I suppose we might. But it

would mean switching off the Mannschen, working up more speed with the Mantellis, falling free again, then cutting in the Mannschen with the rockets off. As far as I can gather any change of mass with the Mannschen Drive running leads to disastrous results."

"I see," He didn't. "But we're eating, drinking, breathing and so on . . ."

"All changes on the molecular level. And the ship is a closed economy. Nothing is being lost. If I switch on the Martellis mass would be changed into energy and *some* balance, *somewhere*, would be upset."

"I see," he said.

Well, for about ten days we fell silently through Space. It seemed to us that there was some slight shift in the configuration of the constellations and certainly our own Sun was no more than another star among the countless stars astern of us.

Alpha Centauri may have been expanding ever so slightly—but I could never find out how to use the instruments in the control-room. I had, as I said before, a rough grounding in interplanetary navigation but this interstellar stuff was black magic.

And the Mannschen Drive was black magic too. I went down quite often to look at it, although I knew that it wasn't—healthy. All those spinning wheels, with the biggest one of all that was all the time precessing, tilting, tilting,

dragging the eye with it, dragging the mind with it, back, back . . .

It was all wrong, somehow. It wasn't natural. For two pins I'd have stopped it there and then, even though it meant dying of senile decay a bare decimal of the distance from Earth to Centaurus V.

On the eleventh day it happened. I was sleeping, and Jenkins came and called me. He was in a panic. There was a ship, he said, astern, overhauling us fast. So I got out of the Captain's bunk and, still feeling vague and dim, followed him up to Control. He was right. The screens showed a ship. She was, according to our radar, only fifty miles distant. Even as we watched, that distance was decreased by a mile, two miles, three . . .

Of course, extradition or no extradition, they were bound to be after us. Piracy is recognized as a crime by all worlds, by all nations. And the hunk of property to which we had helped ourselves was big enough to leave an appreciable gap in the economies of both the Solar and Centaurian Unions.

Still—I didn't share Jenkins' apprehension. A little knowledge may have been a dangerous thing—but I couldn't see how our pursuers, short of opening fire with everything they had and blasting us into eternity, could do anything about catching us. True, they could grapple and board—if the rates of temperal precession of the two ships matched to a split micro-

second. And that was a million-to-one chance.

I strapped myself into the Pilot's chair, looked at the instruments in front of me, drove my sleep-befogged brain to formulate some plan of action. Something had to be done about it. The pursuing ship, even though she might be reluctant to destroy several million credits worthy of property, would be an uncomfortable sort of traveling companion.

*If I stop the Mannschen, I remember thinking, and then cut loose with the Martellis, John Willy will have his work cut out to locate us again.*

"Forty miles!" screamed Jenkins. He reached across me, threw the switch of the rocket motors. The sudden acceleration slammed him down on the deck. The radar screen came alive with rippling spirals of livid flame. The stars, the cold fixed stars shining through our viewports, wheeled and coruscated crazily.

"You fool!" I shouted.

It was hard to raise my hand against the weight of our acceleration. But I managed it. My fingers closed over the switch. There was a brief sputtering arc as I opened it. Then silence, ominous and deathly after the short-lived thunder of the Martellis, fell like a thick, muffling blanket. Silence? Not quite.

As our ears recovered from their shock we heard the shrill almost supersonic whine of the Mannschen Drive. I thought I'd better cut it, try to get some kind of bearings

and start again from scratch. I cut it. It would take time, I told myself, for all those spinning wheels to come to rest. I was still telling myself that half an hour later.

I went down to the Mannschen Drive room then. I pulled fuses, I cut cables. I even, at the finish, tried to poke a steel bar into that whirling complexity but there seems to be some kind of field around it and nothing can be done to it. It goes on, whining away to itself with a complete disregard for anything I may do.

But for awhile we still thought we were heading for Centaurus V. The queer behavior of the Drive would make landing rather a problem—when we came to it. But we hadn't yet come to it. There should be time—there *must* be time—between Position X and the Centaurian System to get things under control. I spent most of my time working on the Drive, leaving Jenkins to keep a lookout of sorts in Control.

I must have ripped out every inch of wiring between the control room and the Drive unit. I soon had the interior of the ship looking as though some demented spider with a lead-and-copper metabolism had been running wild. There had to be some power lead that I hadn't found . . . But there wasn't.

And then Jenkins came scrambling down. We were there, he cried. We'd made it. I didn't see how this could be—the last time that I'd been up to the greenhouse

the stars ahead had still been mere points of light and Alpha Centauri no closer to showing as a disc than ever it had.

But we were coming in stern first, said Jenkins. Stern first? Had he managed to swing her? Surely I'd have known—and in any case I didn't think that the gyroscopes could possibly work after the mess into which I'd reduced the wiring.

But there was a planet, bawled Jenkins. A whacking great planet, showing up on the screens as large as life and twice as mutual.

So I put down my tools and followed him back to Control. There, right ahead—fixed, steady—were the stars of Cross and Centaur, just as you can see them on any clear night from Earth's Southern Hemisphere. And there—a black-and-white picture on the screen—right astern was a great globe. It was expanding fast. Its pattern of cloud and sea and land swelled as though painted on the surface of a child's toy balloon.

I didn't forget that the Drive was still running. I just didn't care. I got the Martellis going—thanking my lucky stars I hadn't succeeded in severing their control cables. But although acceleration pressed us down, although the whole ship vibrated to their thunder, they seemed utterly powerless to check our headlong plunge. What mass could this strange, impossible world have—what gravity?

And what was it like? What did it remind me of? What *was* it?

The roughly rectangular island continent to which we were falling expanded until it filled the screen. Details were becoming visible now—a stretch of arid desolation, a huddle of buildings, the tall shapes of ships . . .

And there was a ship blasting off, rising, rising, right into the torrent of atomic flame from our jets. Closer it came, and closer. Its dark onrushing mass filled the screen. We braced ourselves for the shock . . .

Then the screen was blank—no world, no landing-field, no ship.

Nothing.

"I tell you what," Jenkins says to me every so often, "It's one of them paradises."

If one insists on semantic accuracy it's not—it's getting too close to the very reverse for comfort. But it could be worse. On the homeward semicircle we don't experience any horrors such as regurgitation, talking backwards, falling up and getting down and all the rest of it. Life to us is—normal.

And I'm not sure that living backwards is such a drawback—it means our food supply is inexhaustible. Air and water—thanks to the closed economy of a space-ship—are practically inexhaustible. And I suppose that we shall be able to use our hydroponics tanks for something else besides air conditioning.

Still—we have our freedom, such as it is. Nothing we do on the molecular level can possibly have any effect—we can eat, drink, kill

each other—and the total mass of the ship remains unchanged. And on the atomic level all we are able to do is accelerate the cycle. There we have both loss of mass and increase of energy.

I'm more than half afraid to fire the Martellis any more—I can't help remembering the absurd story about the bird that flew in ever decreasing circles until it vanished. It all links up with what Jenkins insists on calling the Lorenz-Fitzgerald Contradiction. But I'll give it a go some time—if there is such a thing as Time any longer . . .

There's something else to try first. A little thing, easily done, that could perhaps just throw the infernal cycle out of gear—a change of mass with no increase of energy, a killing of two birds with one stone as it were. I'm going to put this message into a bottle—we have any amount of empties now.

When next we approach Port Kingsford I'm going out into the airlock and I'm going to throw the bottle out as hard as I can. It may stay in the same field as the ship. It may not. It may tell the Feds and the Centurian Corporation what's happened to STARMADEN—or it may intrigue some archaeologist of the remote future. It may even startle our ancestors!

But all that's of minor importance.

What is important is anything, *anything*, that could conceivably get us out of this sticky web of paradoxes, this viscous circle.