

PLANET STORIES



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The master-chronometer was a mess of fused cogs and wires.

FLIGHT FROM TIME

By ALFRED COPPEL

The meteor-smashed clock at first meant nothing. Malenson had all the time in the cosmos. Too late, he discovered there can be such a thing as too much time.

A LONG CAREER OF CUTTING corners had taught Malenson the importance of timing. Time, he had long ago concluded, was the fabric from which were cut the garments of poverty or greatness. And since Malenson had no love for the simple life, it naturally followed that he should turn his talents toward the amassing of wealth with the

least possible waste of the precious commodity . . . time.

He didn't bother to conceal his crime. He only timed it well. And following his carefully thought out plans further, he boarded his ship at the proper instant and vanished into the interstellar fastnesses with five million irridium dollars in coin and government certificates.

A galaxy, he reflected, would make a perfect hiding place. One would have only to look at the girdle of the Milky Way on a clear night to see the logic of his choice. Among a billion billion stars separated by light years of brooding emptiness, one man in a small ship would be a fantastically difficult thing to find. Easier by far it would be to find one particular grain of sand on the seashore, than to locate Malenson within the vast limbo of the galaxy.

Only if he made a planetfall on one of the colonized worlds could he be found, and Malenson was no fool. His ship was fueled and provisioned for twelve years in space. With care and a strict system of rationing, he could stretch it out to fifteen years. And at the end of that time he could return safely with his millions, for an enlightened penal system had long ago assigned statutes of limitation to all felonies.

Nor would exile be an unbearable thing. The three hundred foot ship was packed with reading tapes, classical and popular recordings, all manner of occupational therapy devices, and old fashioned books.

Only human companionship was missing, and to Malenson that meant nothing. He had lived a lonely life, isolated from his fellows by a profound sense of his own superiority. He had no love for humanity.

So Malenson and his treasure ship fled from the world of men. Up from the spaceport and into the void he went. As soon as he had cleared the atmosphere, he cut in the second order drive and lifted clear of the ecliptic plane at better than light speed.

Malenson was no navigator, but his spacecraft was fool-proof, and relying on that fact he drove upward and outward from Earth toward the celestial pole. Leisurely, he settled himself for the first short leg of his long voyage. He was completely at ease, for pursuit in second order flight was impossible.

Exactly seventy hours elapsed before he cut the drive for a look around him. The ship was in a moderately starred region of the galaxy. He could still make out most of the familiar constellations. Ursa Major lay ahead and to the right;

Cygnus, a trifle distorted lay overhead. And the beacon stars Rigel, Altair and Sirius were easily recognizable. Sol had dwindled to a yellow star of the third magnitude.

Malenson smiled with satisfaction and pointed the ship's nose at the bright ve of Taurus. The red eye of Aldebaran would make an excellent check point, and his trajectory would be well above Sol and the regular shipping lanes. Then he cut in the drive again and went to bed.

SIX hours later he awoke. Food, automatically prepared in the galley awaited him. He ate and made his way to the control room. He checked the operation of the automatic controls and settled down before the forward ports to watch the sky. Travelling above light speed played strange tricks on his vision. Looking out into the galactic night, it seemed that all the stars were grouped in a distorted mass directly in front of the plunging ship. It was illusion, Malenson knew, but the weird spectacle vaguely disturbed him. He quite illogically felt constrained to cut the drive and check his position. He knew, of course that he was nowhere near Aldebaran yet, but he could not control the sudden urge to see the stars in their proper places.

He cut the drive.

Malenson realized his mistake immediately, for the ship was in the middle of a small meteor swarm. In second order flight it was inviolate, but primary flight slowed it to a point where meteor danger was a real consideration.

Alarm bells jangled and the screen went to work. The bells would have meant an immediate shift back into second order flight to any really experienced spaceman, but Malenson was new to interstellar navigating. He sat and stared stupidly at the danger signals on the panel.

Still, the ship was an almost perfect machine. Certainly it saved Malenson's life. Only one small meteor penetrated the deflectors and crashed through the hull. Malenson flung himself to the deck instinctively as the tiny missile streaked hotly through the oxygen rich air of the control room. Immediately the self sealing

insulation stopped all loss of pressure in the ship, and a repair unit set to work mending the break in the hull plates. But the meteor itself careened through the control room and ripped into the center panel with a smashing of glass and tearing of metal.

Malenson picked himself up and ran to the panel, panic-stricken. He inspected the damage carefully and heaved a sigh of relief. Nothing vital was destroyed. Only the master chronometer and some lesser indicators were hit.

Then Malenson frowned. Without the master timepiece no clock on board would run, since they were all only terminals of the master system. He hurried to his stateroom and checked the wall clock. It smelled of burnt insulation. He pried the face loose and peered at its vitals. They were a mess of fused cogs and wires. A quick check throughout the ship showed that every clock was in the same useless condition. Even if he had been mechanic enough to repair them . . . which he was not . . . they were each and every one a hopeless tangle of burnt out innards. The meteor had short circuited the entire time-keeping system of the ship.

He returned to the control room with some misgivings. The loss of the clocks was no death blow to his kind of trial and error navigation. But it did promise to be a serious inconvenience in the regulation of his life in the timelessness of deep space. He still had his wristwatch, of course, but it was a very delicate ornamental sort of thing, not intended for hard usage.

Still, he reflected brightening somewhat, since his exile was to be measured in years and not minutes and hours, the wristwatch would serve. The star-charts and stellar analyzers that could identify any star would do for navigation. He might become misplaced, but to lose himself completely was impossible. He relied mightily on the fact that his ship was, in fact, fool-proof.

He kept the nose pointed at Taurus and cut in the second order drive again. The rest of the day, he spent in the library, laying out the reading he planned to do for the next few months.

A WEEK later, the ship had passed through Taurus, skirted the Hyades, and was heading outward toward the galactic periphery. It was there that Malenson entertained a slight hope of finding a habitable uncolonized world. And there he could wander for years without the remotest chance of running into any representatives of the Galactic Confederation.

Two weeks later, his wristwatch stopped.

Cursing disgustedly, Malenson shook the recalcitrant bit of jewelry. It ticked fitfully once or twice and stopped. He decided that it must be in need of cleaning. He realized full well that he was not qualified to attempt such a delicate operation, but he also recognized the fact that there was little he could do about it. He needed the watch, and clean it he must; even though he hadn't the vaguest notion of how the thing was done.

Arming himself with alcohol, lens tissue, pliers and a tiny screwdriver, he set to work. Soon all the intestines of the tiny machine lay on the table before him. With great care he cleaned each part and re-assembled them. But when he had finished, the watch would not run. The close work and the lack of success began to wear on him. Malenson did not take kindly to failure. A second time he dismantled the watch and a second time assembled it. The watch stubbornly refused to tick. With a disgusted curse Malenson repeated the process. Still no success. By now his hands were trembling hopelessly, and he knew he should let the job go for a few hours before attempting it again. But Malenson was a stubborn man. A fourth time the watch was dismembered and re-assembled. And a fifth time. By now he could not hold the tiny wheels steady enough to mount them on the almost microscopic shafts. His fingers felt like thumbs. When finally the watch was closed up for the sixth time and still would not run, a sudden surge of illogical rage shook him and he slammed the watch furiously against the wall. It dissolved into a miniature shambles of thread-fine springs and tiny wheels. Still raging, he ground the remains to bits under his heel and strode angrily into the galley for a long pull at the brandy bottle . . .

An indeterminate time later, Malenson

staggered up the long companionway and into his stateroom. Drugged with liquor, he sank down on his bunk and dropped into fitful, uneasy, slumber.

THERE was no way of telling how long he had slept. When he awoke, he hurried foggily to the control room and cut the second order drive. The configuration of the stars seemed much the same as he had last seen it . . . how long ago?

Depressed, and somehow still tired, he cut the drive in again and made his way to the galley. Hot coffee made him feel better, shaking some of the haziness out of his mind.

He strove with care to evaluate his situation. There was nothing to worry about, he told himself. The ship was operating perfectly. The only thing that was lacking was a way to compute the passage of time. He half-smiled at that, thinking of his pride in a "sense" of timing. Still, he reflected, perhaps the natural functions of his body would serve. He prided himself on being a methodical, systematic man; one of regular habits.

A gnawing doubt began to eat at his mind. Was that enough? Perhaps it would be wise to construct a timepiece. How? He racked his memory trying to recall the various clocks of the ancients. A mechanical clock was out of the question. He simply hadn't the skill or the materials necessary for its construction. The episode with the watch proved that all too well. An hour glass then? A careful search of the ship was unrewarding. There was nothing that could be made into an hour glass, nor any way to calibrate such a device even if he could make one. A water clock, perhaps? The same objections. And his own lack of know-how. Malenson was no scientist or hobbyist. He was first and last a man of business. Still he did not want to give up easily. A candle clock. Immediately he recognized that idea as impractical.

He didn't have the technical understanding of his ship necessary to use its speed for the computation of time. In fact the only thing he knew about the ship was that it traveled faster than light. How much faster, he had never found out. It

had been enough for his purposes to know that it travelled faster or as fast as any type of vessel in the Confederation. And even if he had known how to make the necessary calculations, what was needed was something that would divide twelve or fifteen years into days, hours, minutes.

Radio reception was out. Each of the colonized worlds had an Earth-type atmosphere . . . complete with Heavyside Layer. And the radar beams that could pierce the layer would be swarming with freighters, liners and . . . Patrol ships. Malenson was certain that by now every patrolman in the known cosmos was alerted for the appearance of a ship of Malenson's type. And detention meant an end to a dream of wealth. Prison.

What was the answer, then?

The answer was . . . *no answer.*

Malenson, possessed of the finest machine ever devised by the mind of man, and the greatest hoard of wealth in recent times . . . was reduced to keeping track of time by the movements of his digestive tract and a series of scratches on the wall of the control room.

At the time he could see the irony of it. He even laughed . . . then.

Time dragged on sluggishly. What might have been weeks passed by in a seemingly endless cycle of sleeps and meals. Every time he awoke Malenson would cut the drive and check his position. And always, the bright beacon stars stared back at him, little changed.

Slowly, the line of scratches on the control room wall grew. Malenson lived in a timeless limbo amidst the vast, unchanging emptiness of the galactic periphery. For weeks and months at a time, he would lose himself in the sparsely starred outer marches. Then he would find his position again, an agonizingly short distance from the last fix given him by star-chart and analyzer. Lethargically, the ship crawled across parsecs of space, a hollow shell of life amid the cosmic desolation of the great edge.

A year passed. Two. Malenson knew he was safe now. No patrol ship could follow his aimless wanderings. But the ten year statute of limitations remained uppermost in his mind. He realized that he was

assigning an arbitrary value to his days and months, thus he decided that he must stay in space for the full time allowed by his supplies. He could not risk a miscalculation.

THE solitude did not affect him. Malenson had no desire for companionship. And the library of the ship absorbed much of his time. He read great tomes and thin monographs, passionate novels and cold texts. And he could *feel* time slipping by.

At the end of his fourth calculated year, Malenson noticed his feverishness. It was a slight thing. He felt perfectly well. But his temperature stood at 100.6. His curiosity aroused, he confined himself to the ship's infirmary for a month. Except for a periodical trip to the control room for a star sight, he remained under the UV lamps. He took large doses of streptomycin XXV. But he did not feel in the least alarmed when the fever refused to leave him. He merely adapted himself . . .

In his eighth year in space Malenson abandoned any hope of finding a habitable planet. He had located five planetary systems among some nine hundred stars. But none of the globes were even remotely suitable for the support of humanoid life. Mostly they were great gassy worlds of frozen methane and ammonia. The few low gravity planets were generally so close to their primaries as to be parched wastelands with surface temperatures near the melting point of lead.

It was at this point in his odyssey that Malenson's thoughts began to drift homeward. Many sleeps were spent in calculations and trial and error navigation before the ship's nose was turned inward toward the center of the galactic lens. Finally, Malenson was ready to begin the long voyage home.

The loneliness had changed him, he knew. Not that he had once missed the nearness of mere people. Malenson felt himself above such a need. And there was the money in the hold to keep him company. More and more of his time was spent down there, fondling his wealth. The feel of the coins and the crisp irridium certificates more than made up for the solitude.

Uncounted hours would slip by while he sat contentedly in the midst of his loot . . . or was it days? Malenson had stopped trying to discover.

The library had lost its appeal for him now. He had finished the majority of the books now, and strangely the reading tapes and recordings seemed to drag unbearably. It was getting so that he could hardly understand the mouthings that emanated from the speakers, and the vision screens were turgid masses of dark, muddy colors. Something, he decided, had gone wrong with the projection apparatus.

The dawning of his tenth year in limbo was the occasion for a celebration. The statute of limitation was explicit in his particular form of larceny. It stated that should the case be unprosecuted for ten solar years, the crime was stricken from the records and an unequivocal pardon granted. Before Malenson's case, the law had never been evoked. But now at last the time was up. Malenson was free.

He was only three years from Sol now, according to his estimate. He had been careful to allow for the seemingly reduced speed of the ship. But he was still unwilling to take any unnecessary chances. He realized that he could have made a considerable error in his timing. It was even possible, he reflected, that he was as much as a year off. Perhaps even two. So Malenson decided that having waited this long, he could wait yet a bit longer. He had become quite adapted to his artificial environment now, and another two or three years in space would be no great hardship. He set his course for the Centaurian System before heading for home. This slight detour would bring him into Sol's family at just the right time. Fifteen years, he calculated, from the time of his departure.

That night . . . or what passed for night in the timeless void . . . Malenson celebrated his freedom.

TIME slipped by in an endless, formless night. He began to notice that he was aging. The mirror in his stateroom showed lines and wrinkles in his face that had not been there when he fled Earth. He had been just forty when the flight began. He looked fifty three or four now,

at least. It confirmed his computations. His timing was still right . . .

It was a long time later that the Centaurian System slipped astern. He was in the infirmary at the time and did not even notice. Long solitude had dulled his perceptions. He was totally engrossed in the evidence of his thermometer. It registered a body temperature of 117.8. That wasn't possible, he knew. A man couldn't stand such a temperature. Yet he was perfectly well. The instrument, he decided, was faulty. He had not felt feverish since that first time long, long ago. He abandoned the sterile whiteness of the infirmary for the hold and the silent companionship of his money. He was happy there.

The food was gone now, and though there was plenty of fuel in the tanks, the ship was nearing Sol. It had been many, many sleeps since Malenson had bothered to cut the drive for a position check. He sat contentedly with his money, oblivious to all else.

But his ship was still a perfect machine. It arced down into the ecliptic plane, cutting the stellar drive automatically. The ship shifted smoothly into primary flight and spiralled in toward Earth. It set itself a stable orbit around the home planet and waited, alarm bells ringing.

The Earth spread out into a green carpet under the slowly descending spaceship. Malenson sat stiffly in the control chair, eyes drinking in the forgotten beauty of his home world. The ship sank through a layer of fleecy clouds toward the spaceport. Buildings took shape out of the formless mass of the ground. Malenson frowned. Things looked just the same. One would have thought that changes would take place in fifteen years.

He caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the glass of the port. It angered him suddenly that the years should have been so sparing with Earth and so cruel to him. He had aged more than he thought . . . He felt very tired . . .

Very gently, the ship sank to a landing on the busy ramp. The generators sighed, and fell silent. Malenson smiled thinly. His timing was still good. He locked the

hold carefully and made his way to the valve. The long unused mechanism worked smoothly and quickly. Malenson stepped out . . .

A circle of resolute patrolmen surrounded him, hands on their weapons. He stared at them in stunned disbelief.

A young inspector shouldered his way through the file. He spoke words that Malenson heard only dimly through the sudden roaring in his ears.

"You are under arrest, Malenson," the inspector said shortly.

SUBJECT: *Report on Prisoner Malenson, File No. 8,697,032*

To: Wilton, Chief Penologist, Luna Criminal Detention Center

From: Berry, Director North American Geriatrics Institute

1. Transfer of subject prisoner to this institution is confirmed.

2. cursory examination reveals that the prisoner is a victim of acutely accelerated general metabolism.

3. An interview with the prisoner reveals that he is firmly convinced that he recently spent a period of fifteen years in space, whereas port records conclusively prove that he was absent from Earth for a period of only twenty two months (Ref. N'york Sp. Log 2/890 Pages 867,1098). His condition is perfectly suited to the experimental work now being conducted here, as I suspected. There is an excellent possibility that we may be able to correlate the clinical data of his case with our own hypotheses and so ascertain exactly to what extent senility is the product of psychological conditioning rather than chronological age as heretofore believed.

4. Prognosis negative. In the case of Prisoner Malenson himself, we are unable to prescribe treatment. All efforts to retard his fantastically high metabolism rate have failed. His body temperature is now normal at 120.6° Fahrenheit, and his pulse steady at 140/minute. Definite indications of senescence are appearing. Symptoms of incipient ataxic aphasia have been detected.

5. Death from advanced senility predicted within thirty days.

Signed: Berry, NAGI Director.