

Tillot tangled with time once ... twice ... once too often ... and then he found he couldn't break

## THE HABIT

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

OUTWARDLY she was just another ship, just another of the standard freighters that handled most of the traffic from Earth to her planetary colonies. She had been, in fact, such a freighter—the name Venus Girl still shone, in letters of gold, on her sleek side. Only the experienced eye of the professional spaceman would have noted the oddly shaped slits, black against gleaming metal, in her shell plating. Only the professional spaceman, together with a handful of physicists, would have been able to hazard an intelligent guess as to their purport. Two men appeared, framed in the circle of the airlock door. The first of them ignored the ramp, jumped the ten feet between airlock and apron, landing lightly, his knees flexing to take the shock of his fall. The second followed more sedately, walking slowly down the inclined way to the scarred concrete. He said, his voice reproving, "You should be more careful, Tillot. After all, we blast off tonight."

"If I were being careful," replied the spaceman, the stance of his short, slight figure somehow belligerent, "I shouldn't be here."

The tall man—his name was Abbotsford and he was head of the Interplanetary Transport Commission's Department of Research—bit back an angry reproof. He said, "I'm glad to have you with me, Tillot. I'm glad that out of all the rocket pilots employed by the Commission there was one volunteer. Even so, I wish you'd be careful. There's too much hinging upon the success of this test flight ..."

"All right, Doctor," replied Tillot in tones of mock humility. "I'll be careful. I'll take this crate of yours up out of the atmosphere as though she were a basket of eggs, and I'll bring her back the same way. What happens in between times is up to you." There was mockery in his voice. "In between times—I suppose that you'll be careful."

"Of course," said Abbotsford stiffly.

"Of course," mimicked Tillot. Then—"Don't make me laugh, Doctor. This will be the first ship to approach the speed of light, the first interstellar ship ... How the hell can you be careful? "

Their conversation was interrupted then; there were officials of the Commission desiring speech with them, Abbotsford's colleagues and members of the executive staff of the spaceport. The group of men and woman walked slowly across the broad stretch of concrete to the complex of offices, storerooms and repair shops, to the oasis of artifact and ingenuity set in the featureless desert.

Later that night Abbotsford got Tillot to himself, pleading that he and his pilot had much to discuss concerning the experimental flight. They sat in Abbotsford's room—bare it was, sparsely yet comfortably furnished, more office or laboratory than living apartment—sipping the whiskey that the

scientist had produced from a filing cabinet.

Abbotsford said, "I'm curious ..."

"Isn't that the proper occupational state of mind for a research scientist?" asked Tillot.

"Why, yes. But what I'm curious about is a question of psychology rather than physics."

"Then why don't you go to Dr. Wendell? After all, he is the Commission's number one trick cyclist."

"Dr. Wendell," said Abbotsford, who was not quite sober, "would have talked a lot of crap about the Oedipus Complex, the Death Wish and all the rest of it. He would have told me nothing."

"I'm just a rocketeer," said Tillot.

"But it's you that I'm curious about."

"Isn't this inquisition rather . . . presumptuous, Doctor?"

"No. I don't think so. After all, we shall be cooped up together in that tin coffin out there for quite a long time. We should know something about each other."

"Then what do you want to know?" demanded Tillot.

"Just this. Spacemen are supposed to be an adventurous breed. There are two hundred odd pilots in the employ of the Interplanetary Transport Commission. And yet, for what could well be the first interstellar flight, there's only one volunteer. One."

Tillot laughed, with a touch of bitterness. "It had to be me. If I hadn't volunteered, I'd have been told to. It's as simple as that."

"But why?"

The spaceman laughed again.

"I'll tell you. It had always been the Commission's policy to employ only married men in Space. The married man is not lacking in courage, or the adventurous spirit. But he takes no unjustifiable risks, either with ships or lives."

"I think I begin to see . . . and you?"

"You'd not have gotten me as volunteer—or a conscript— this time last year," said Tillot flatly.

"Even so, the risk is neither great nor unjustifiable. Neutralized gravity and the repulsive force of light are a motive power far less hazardous than your rocket motors. The most dangerous parts of the flight will still be blasting off and landing, under rocket power . . ."

"Agreed. But . . ."

"But what?"

"Now I'm going to ask you a personal question, Dr. Abbotsford," said Tillot. "Have you ever been in love? Come to that —have you ever had a woman?"

"Women have never bothered me much. I've had my work, and . . ."

"All right. I'll explain. The rocket pilot blasts off on a voyage—to the Moon, Mars, Venus, the Belt, or wherever. If things go badly wrong he won't come back. If things don't go wrong—and it's up to him to make sure of that—he does come back, after a lapse of, at the outside, months. Now, I'm no physicist. As far as I'm concerned, astronautics is just a matter of ballistics; a spaceship is no more than a manned missile over the trajectory of which the crew are able to exert a limited degree of control. But interstellar flight, with speed approaching that of light itself, is different. As I understand it, Time, for the crew of such a ship, will be different from the Time kept by the world that they have left. A voyage may last for a matter of mere months—but on return it will be found that Earth has circled the Sun fifty times, or more . . .

"Crudely put," said Abbotsford, "but near enough to the truth."

"Then ask yourself," Tillot told him, "what married man would ship out with such a homecoming to look forward to?"

She stood proudly on the scarred concrete, gleaming in the reflected light of the bright floods. High in the sky rode Cross and Centaur—and it seemed wrong that her sharp prow was not pointed directly towards Alpha Centauri, the obvious first objective for the first interstellar ship. Even Tillot, walking out to the vessel, felt this, although he was aware of the absurdity of his feelings. As well expect the prow of the Lunar Ferry, on blast-off, to be pointed directly at the Moon, the sharp stem of a liner of the Martian Mail to be lined up exactly on the glowing spark in the sky that was the red planet. Time enough to get the ship on to her trajectory—but was "trajectory" the right word to use regarding the course of a sailing ship of Space ?—after she was up and clear, in orbit around the Earth.

Abruptly he turned, shaking hands with those who had walked out to the ship with him. They wished him luck. Some of them, a little wistfully, wondered what sort of world he would find on his return. He allowed himself to speculate, briefly, on the same subject, thinking, Perhaps even now there is somebody, some schoolgirl, who will grow up to be almost the twin of Valerie. Perhaps I will find her. Perhaps she will be waiting for me .

. .

He climbed the ramp to the airlock, went inside the little compartment, pressing the button that retracted the tongue of metal that was the ramp, the other button that shut and sealed the circular outer door. Abbotsford, he knew, was waiting for him in the control room. Abbotsford might guess the meaning of the lights flashing on the console, although it didn't much matter if he did not. Abbotsford, for all his knowledge, for all his high standing with the Commission, was so very much a planetlubber.

Tillot could have used the elevator in the axial shaft to take him up to Control but he preferred not to. He didn't know for how long he would be

living under conditions of Free Fall; this might well be the last chance for him properly to exercise his muscles for months. He clambered from compartment to compartment, up a succession of ladders—past the heavily shielded, almost featureless monster that was the Pile, past the propellant tanks, through the "farm" in which were the hydroponics tanks, the algae and yeast and tissue culture vats, through the compartments that had once been cargo and passenger spaces and that now housed Abbotsford's machines. Tillot wished that he knew more about them. The motors that extruded and retracted the big, plastic sails were obvious enough but the generators, Abbotsford's own invention, that somehow nullified gravitational fields were a mystery to him, a complexity of spinning wheels set at odd angles to each other, gyroscopes mounted within gyroscopes, a huge, gleaming pendulum that looked ornamental but that must be functional.

At last, he climbed up through the little hatch into the control room. As he had surmised, Abbotsford was already there, strapped into his own seat, the seat before which was mounted his own control console.

"Are you ready, Tillot?" he asked testily.

"Ready," replied the spaceman shortly. He strapped himself into his chair, spoke briefly into the microphone. "Venus Girl to Spaceport Contra Request permission to proceed."

"Experimental Station Spaceport Control to Venus Girl. Proceed at will—and good luck."

"Thank you, Spaceport Control. Proceeding."

The great flower of flame blossomed beneath Venus Girl's vaned stern and she lifted, balancing delicately upon the lengthening column of incandescent gases, borne skyward on the screaming thunder of her rockets. Tillot, trusting the servo-mechanisms, looked out of the big viewports to the dwindling Earth below—the seas and continents, the drifting cloud masses, the sparkling lights of the great cities—and wondered when, if ever, he would ever see the mother planet again.

He told himself that he didn't much care, and knew that he was lying.

Abbotsford said, after the initial confusion was over, that he looked upon the accident as a blessing rather than a catastrophe, that it would take its place among the other accidents that have led to great scientific discoveries.

"Think of it!" he enthused.

"I am thinking of it," grumbled Tillot. "Your comic Drive has gone wrong. We don't know where we are, where we're heading. What's so wonderful about that?"

"My Drive hasn't gone wrong," said the scientist patiently. "It's gone right."

"Are you sure that bang on the head didn't upset you, Doctor?"

"Quite sure. Look at it this way, Tillot. For years I was working on the

problem of antigravity. I succeeded in nullifying gravity, but no more. That was why I had to cook up that absurd makeshift of spars and sails—a makeshift that now will never be used. But the sheer, blind chance of it! A loose connection, shaken adrift by your rockets. A spindle forced out of its bearing by the acceleration . . . It's fantastic!"

"I'll say," agreed the spaceman dourly.

"You aren't very enthusiastic."

"Frankly, I'm not. Perhaps I'm old fashioned, but as far as I'm concerned the prime function of a ship is to carry a payload from Point A to Point B, and return to Point A ..."

"I thought that you weren't fussy about that part of it."

"I thought so, too. But there comes a time when you begin to think of all the liquor you haven't drunk, all the girls you haven't made love to ..."

"The liquor part of it begins to worry me a little," admitted the scientist. "I suppose I'm a fair enough organic chemist to concoct something from the vegetables in the tanks and the yeast from the vats, should the need arise. Even so ..."

"Well?" demanded Tillot. "What do we do?"

"I'll stop the gravity nullifiers," said Abbotsford. "Then it's up to you to get some kind of fix. You're the navigator."

"Strictly interplanetary," the spaceman told him. "Not interstellar. But I'll do my best . . ."

Tillot strapped himself into his chair, watched Abbotsford pull himself through the hatch, vanish into the body of the ship.

When he was alone he switched his attention to the weird grayness outside the viewports, the flickering nothingness. There was no sensation of speed. The ship was falling free—and yet, with her repulsive field in operation, she must be accelerating. Tillot decided that there must, somehow, be no longer inertia. If there had been inertia he would have been spread over the control room deck like strawberry jam.

The intercom phone buzzed and Abbotsford's voice remarked, conversationally, "Stand by, Tillot. I'm shutting down."

"All right. Shut down."

The subdued whirring of machinery faltered, abruptly ceased. With startling, shocking suddenness Space, as seen through the viewports, became its familiar, velvety black, the bright beacons of the stars springing into view. But it was not the sight of the stars that caused the scream that burst from Tillot's throat. It was the sight of the planet, the huge, gleaming globe, that was directly ahead of Venus Girl, that was expanding with terrifying rapidity with every passing second.

"Abbotsford!" he shouted. "Start up your motors! Planet dead ahead!"

He heard the scientist curse, heard him mutter, "Damn the fool thing!"

"What's wrong?" "Everything! The whole lot's just fallen to pieces!"

"Then hang on!" shouted Tillot. "I'll have to use the rockets. I'll try to throw us into some kind of orbit!"

He actuated the big gyroscope, was relieved when he heard the familiar humming of the thing, when he saw the stars swinging across the viewports, the stars and that swollen, still swelling globe. He saw the strange planet disappear, saw its image appear again in the periscope screen. He stopped the gyroscope, used his rockets, watched the quivering needle of the accelerometer. One gravity . . . Two . . . Three ... Four. His body was pressed deep into the padding of his chair. He wondered how Abbotsford was making out, sprawled on the hard deck of his engine-room. But this way there was a chance of survival for both of them; with too gentle a deceleration there would be no chance for either of them.

He hit the fringes of the atmosphere, his rocket drive still bellowing. He swept around the night side of the planet like a meteor, hull heated to incandescence, then put into Space again. Again he made the grazing ellipse, and again—and looked with growing horror at the gauges of the propellant tanks. There must be a leak, he thought, a fractured line. It was obvious that there would not be enough reaction mass to establish the ship in any sort of orbit. There might be enough for a landing, although that was doubtful.

But it had to be tried.

"Abbotsford!" he cried. "We are going down!"

He thought he heard an answering moan, but he could not be sure.

Once again the ship swept around the sunlit side of the planet, this time inside the atmosphere. And this time Tillot snatched hasty glances from his controls, caught brief glimpses of the world that he was circling. "No," he muttered. "No . . ." But it had to be. Nowhere in the Universe could the outlines of seas and continents be duplicated so exactly. Nowhere in the Universe could there be another world whose satellite was so large as to be almost a sister planet.

And then there was no time for observations. Then there was a seeming eternity of fighting a pitching, yawing ship that was writing crazy words in fire across the night sky. Then there was the last, hopeless gasp of the rockets, their propellant tanks run dry. Then there was the flash of inspiration that came to Tillot, and the running out of the great sails that should have caught and held the almost immaterial photons, that were far too flimsy to withstand the assault of the uprushing molecules of atmosphere. But hold they did, although not for long. Hold they did, and in the seconds before they were ripped to streaming shreds they slowed Venus Girl appreciably, slowed her so that she hit the sea almost gently.

Almost.

The force of the impact buckled her plating, broke everything with one

exception, that was breakable—that one exception being the bones of her pilot. Tillot survived the crash, even retained consciousness. Shakily, he unstrapped himself and, staggering as the wreck lurched in the swell, made his way to the hatch, clambered down ladder after ladder to Abbotsford's engineroom. He found the scientist sprawled brokenly among the wreckage of his machine. He was dead; there could be no doubt about that. No man could have lost the amount of blood that was swilling over the plating and remained alive.

Tillot looked at the dead man and listened to the water gurgling in the compartment below, saw the first of it splash up through the open hatch to dilute Abbotsford's blood. He knew that there was nothing more that he could do. Shakily, he made his way up to Control once more, pulled from its locker a survival suit, zippered himself into it. He started knocking up the dogs that would release one of the big viewports. Suddenly he looked outside, saw a surface craft, long, low and somehow sinister, lifting and falling on the surface of the sea just outside, saw the men, their faces pale in the dim light from his control room, who waved and gestured to him.

He hammered up the last dog, scrambled out through the port just as the tough glass fell clear, let hard, willing hands pull him aboard the rescue ship. He heard a sound like a great sigh as the last of the air was expelled from Venus Girl's broken hull.

He did not see her go.

Sea Adder lay off the coast, rolling in the swell. Inshore the lights of the towns that were one long string of suburbs from Sydney to Gabo Island sparkled invitingly.

"This," said Sea Adder's skipper, "is as far as we can bring you. You'll make it to the beach in your survival suit, all right. We've smeared it well with shark repellent. Ditch the suit as soon as you get to the beach; it should be deserted at this time of night. And remember, don't mention us. Not to anybody. We can do without the publicity resulting from the picking up of a shipwrecked spaceman."

"I understand," said Tillot.

He had known, of course, of the smugglers operating between Australia and the Theocratic Republic of New Zealand, of the traffic in liquor and tobacco and the other luxuries unobtainable in Theocracy. He had known, too, that the Australian Government was going through the motions of stamping out the trade. He had never dreamed that he would one day owe his life to such smugglers.

But the moral implications of smuggling were the least of his worries. At first, aboard the smugglers' ship, he had asked questions, then had realized that his questions were of such a character that his rescuers assumed that he was delirious. Then he had maintained a discreet silence, had tried to work out some sort of answer for himself.

First of all, he was back on Earth.

Venus Girl, of course, could have traveled in a circle, great or small.

But . . .

But there had been the newspaper in the cabin into which he had been taken after his rescue, a not too old copy of the Sydney Morning Herald. At first glance it had seemed to be a year old, and he had remarked upon this to the Mate of the smuggler. The Mate had looked at him as though he were slightly mad.

First of all, he was back on Earth.

Secondly, the clock had been put back.

But how?

How?

Had Venus Girl, when plunging through Space uncontrolled, exceeded the speed of light? Had she, in consequence, traveled back in Time? Or was there some other explanation? Could it be that by sheer, blind chance she had driven towards the exact spot where Earth had been a year in the past? Could it be that Time is somehow a function of the expanding Universe, or that the expansion of the Universe is linked in some odd way with Time? Tillot wished that he knew, and knew that it didn't much matter whether he knew or not. One thing mattered, one thing was of supreme importance. He was about to be given his second chance.

He shook hands with the crew of Sea Adder, slipped quietly over the side. He struck out for shore, the suit aiding rather than hindering his movements. There was an inshore set and he realized, quite suddenly, that the long line of lights along the promenade was very close. He let his legs sink, felt sand under his flippered feet. He waded up the beach.

As the smugglers had told him it would be, it was deserted. He stripped off his suit, stood there in the civilian shirt, shorts and sandals that they had given him. There was money in his pocket, and the key ring that he always carried with him. He supposed that the key would still fit the door of his apartment. But it had to. This was no alternative world—or was it? He wished that he could be sure.

There was an all-night cafe on the sea front. Tillot walked into it, saw that the time was shortly after three a.m. by the big wall clock, that the first editions of the morning papers were exposed for sale in the rack. He picked one up, walked with it to the counter, paid for it and ordered a hamburger and a cup of coffee from the sleepy proprietor. His coffee was available at once. He sat down with it at the nearest table, sipped it while he read the paper.

He remembered the headlines —the mysterious meteorite, the suggestion that it could have been an alien ship from outside the System, the rioting in Venusburg, the opening of the Atlantic Tunnel. He remembered the headlines—and remembered what else had happened that day. He had been back on Earth, was on leave after a routine Martian voyage. He and Valerie had gone to a party that night. He had taken too much to drink. He had insisted on driving home, although the controls of the family ground car were far less familiar to him than the controls of his spaceship. He had



insisted on driving, had met, at speed, another driver probably no more sober than he was himself, and . . .

And Valerie had been killed, and he had survived, and the well-meaning coroner, knowing that the publication of the true facts of the case would ruin Tillot's astronomical career, had stressed the fact that the accident had been due to the unforeseeable failure of the steering gear of Tillot's car.

But it hadn't happened yet. It would never happen.

But what should he do? Should he go home, should he confront himself and say, "Look, Tillot, you're not going to the Weldons' party tonight. You can't hold your liquor." Or should he say, "Look, Tillot. I'm senior to you, by one year. Move out, will you, and let me move in . . ."

But was this the same world, in every detail?

There was one way to find out. He ignored the hamburger that had been set down before him, went into the phone booth. He inserted coins into the slot, punched his number. At the last moment he remembered to switch off the scanner. He heard the bell ringing. He saw the screen light up, saw his own face, sleepy and puzzled, heard a strange voice (but one's own voice is always strange without the facial cavities to give it resonance) say, "Tillot here. What do you want?"

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Wrong number." He hung up slowly and left the booth.

He remembered then that he had been awakened that morning by just such a call.

So ...

He returned to his coffee and hamburger. He tried to remember the events of the day. He and Valerie had lived in each other's pockets throughout—and for him to confront his earlier self in the presence of Valerie would lead to unforeseeable complications. But I must see her, he thought. I must.

He went on trying to relive the past. He and Valerie had driven out to the Weldons fairly early in the evening. The Weldons were well-to-do, were one of the few families that owned a real house, standing in its own grounds, not far from Avalon. After dinner, nobody else being inclined to move, Tillot had wandered out into the garden to admire the scenery, to gaze out over the serene expanse of the Pacific.

And that, he thought, will be the best time.

Meanwhile, there was the day to fill in. He filled it in somehow. He traveled from cinema to cinema, using public transport, moving closer and closer to his goal. It was evening when he came out of the last one; a short subway ride followed by a short walk would bring him to his destination on time.

It did. He opened the Weldons' gate, remembering to feel thankful that Weldon had never bothered to have an alarm system and scanner installed.

He saw the lighted ground floor windows, saw—and he wished that he could have stopped to gaze—Valerie, tall and slim and beautiful, standing, a glass in her hand, talking to her host and hostess. He walked round to the back of the house, to the edge of the cliff, saw a shadowy form and the glowing end of a cigarette.

"Tillot," he said.

His earlier self started, swung round to face him.

"Who are you?"

"You. Or me."

"What is this? Are you mad?" "No. Tillot, I've come to tell you not to drive the car tonight."

Tillot had been drinking a lot, and after a few drinks was liable to be short tempered. Tillot flared, "I don't know who you are, but get out of here!"

"I've as much right here as you have," replied Tillot. "More, perhaps."

"Get out," snarled Tillot. "You get out!" rasped Tillot, grasping the other's arm.

It was a short fight, although the antagonists were evenly matched. It would have been longer if one of them had not tripped over a root, had not fallen heavily, striking his head against a stone, the weight of the other on top of him adding force to the blow.

He thought, He is dead. He thought, But he—I?—seriously considered suicide after Valerie was killed. So what does it matter? I've saved him—me?—the trouble, and I've saved Valerie . . .

Almost without volition he stripped the corpse—luckily there were no bloodstains on the clothing—then removed his own garments. He dressed in the clothes that the other had been wearing, clad the other in his own shirt and shorts. He thought, How very considerate of Jim Weldon to build his house on the edge of a cliff. I hope the sharks are hungry tonight ...

"Darling," said Valerie, "do you think you should drive ?"

"He'll be all right." said Jim Weldon. "Just remember that that jalopy of yours isn't a rocket!"

"How," slurred Tillot, "could I ever forget?"

He opened the door of the car for Valerie, went round to the other side of the vehicle and let himself in. He pressed the starting button, heard the whine of the gas turbine. He let in the clutch, shot away from the curb. It was at the first corner of the winding road that the accident happened, the accident that might, perhaps, not have happened had the wheel not gone dead in Tillot's hands at the crucial moment.

Semi-conscious, in hospital, he was haunted by vague memories of a ship called Venus Girl and a scientist called Abbotsford. Semi-conscious, he told

himself that it was only a matter of waiting and that next time he would play his cards more skillfully. He talked about it to his nurses and to anybody else who would listen, and the Staff Psychiatrist listened to his ravings and by careful suggestion, by sessions of hypnosis, cured him of his delusions, so that when he was discharged he remembered nothing except the accident and his almost unbearable loss.

When the call was made for volunteers for the first interstellar flight, he volunteered.

It was a habit.

THE END