

THE DERELICT OF SPACE

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Ronald Deely was master of time and space, but the human weaknesses of those around him proved to be his downfall.

I FIRST saw the ship from our forward turret window. Around me were the clang of bells, the tramp of feet. But I scarcely heard them as I stared at this derelict we had come upon so suddenly, lying so silent and alone in the trackless infinitude of interstellar space.

Here in this eternity of emptiness, where we had thought ourselves the first humans ever to penetrate, lay the derelict Ship of Doom. It hung no more than a mile away. It resembled, from this viewpoint, an old-time space-ship of the sort which once attempted the Moon journey and failed.

As we approached still closer it showed itself to be in form like a ball, flattened at its poles so that it had the aspect of a disc. I could not tell at first how large it might be. But Rance was steadily maneuvering us toward it.

I saw at last that it was a coppery metal disc perhaps a hundred feet in diameter, with an interior height of some thirty feet. A deck encircled its outer rim—a narrow deck of what might have been glassite panes and a row of bullseye windows. And in the center, upon the top of the disc a bulging little conning tower was set.

As we drew forward I saw that the tower was a woven mesh of wire strands. The disc seemed slowly rotating upon a polar axis so that all its deck windows passed out of line of vision in a silent review. Between two of the bullseyes was a small port.

Rance called "Allerton, see that door It's partly open ! There's no air in the thing! No one can be on it alive!"

I did not answer. Was anyone, dead or alive, within this strange little derelict? It seemed not. No face was at any of the bullseyes. And what was this little thing doing out here? It was not a space-ship. Then how came it here? What human had devised it? And how had he brought it here?

AS THOUGH to answer my unspoken questions, a hand gripped my shoulder. It was old man Dorrance, father of our present commander. At seventy, for all his white hair and the weight of his years, there was not a man among us more capable of coping with the unknown.

"I know what it is! I remember it, forty odd years ago, lad that was before your time! So this was its end."

As he told me I too recalled it by hearsay. Years ago, to an incredulous world, a scientist named Ronald Deely announced that he had found the secret of time-travel. He had procured funds and built his little vehicle—this same disc-like vehicle which now lay so strangely inert before us.

Old Dorrance poured out the tale. There were Deely and his wife Hilda—and the commander, one Gerald Vane. With three other men these dabblers in the unknown had entered their burnished disc for a time-flight fifty years into the future.

Ten thousand people—old Dorrance had been one of them—breathlessly stood and watched this disc depart. The current went into it. The thing hummed. The solid, burnished coppery shape grew tenuous. An instant and it was a wraith—the shimmering ghost of a disc.

Then it was gone, speeding forward into time.

Yet the time-traveling disc was not equipped to move in space. The concrete platform where it rested, to the eye of the beholder seemed empty when it departed. For that *time* it *was* empty. The disc presumably had gone fifty years ahead—yet it should have remained upon its platform. Then why was

the disc hanging out here now in space, billions of miles from the Earth?

A group of our men were around us. Young Dorrance said, "No air in it! We'll go aboard."

Somebody else exclaimed, "So it's the Deely time-ship? Out here—"

"And if any of you men want to go aboard with me, get into your pressure suits. We'll *see* what's there—" Young Dorrance's voice faded as he dashed from our turret.

"Wait!" said old Dorrance. "I know why it's here."

While he told me his theory Rance's brother was assembling our pressure suits.

The Deely time-ship had gone fifty years into the future. But Ronald Deely, coping thus with nature, had failed to make adjustments of time with space. His little ship, once in the stream of time, plunging forward, became wholly disconnected from the Earth. And the Earth is not at rest in space but swiftly moving. It follows our Sun, which in turn is drifting—and all the stars, all the Universe plunges—somewhere.

Deely had either overlooked this or had been unable to make the necessary adjustments. His ship was whirled away into the infinity of interstellar space, fifty years ahead of the motion of our solar system—to await the arrival of our little planet to make a space and time contact.

This then was where the Earth would be in some ten years more. I stared at the Ship of Doom with new amazement. It rotated very slowly on its vertical axis. Was that not perhaps a mere visual illusion. Perhaps all the firmament was endowed with that slow spin.

Was this derelict drifting back home—or was the Earth merely approaching their predestined meeting place? As I envisaged this commingling of time and space, it seemed to me that here might be the secret of gravity itself. And as I stared at the Ship of Doom I saw in it suddenly *absolute rest*. In all the great starry Universe was this little time-ship the only thing unmoving—a pivot around which flowed the ceaseless changes of the cosmos?

"Perhaps that is so," old Man Dorrance was saying. "So many things we think we know and find we know nothing. Yes, I want my pressure suit! Do you think the old man is likely to sit here doing nothing?"

Four of us went aboard the Ship of Doom. The silence and the motionlessness hung like a spell upon it. We could sense that death was here.

YOUNG DORRANCE was first to step the small yawning gap between the two ships. His bloated gloved hand seized the partly open door and drew it aside. We crowded forward with the dim starlit little deck of the Ship of Doom curving before us.

A few small metal chairs stood neatly in a row. The curving deck was four feet wide and twice as high. A nearby inner door to the circular interior was closed. Nothing here.

But as I turned from this instant glance I saw slumped on the deck a human form—a man, hunched forward with his arms wrapped around his updrawn knees.

"Dead!" said the voice of old Dorrance in my ear. "Dead, of course, these many years—body marvelously preserved. I remember him. Brown, the mechanic. I had a talk with him once."

He sat here by the opened outer door, as though he were on guard. Or perhaps watching the rush of air as it went out. His attitude seemed so calm, so resigned—philosophically watching death stalk him.

The body fell forward to the deck as my companions pulled at it like prowling ghouls. He was a man about thirty. A rough-hewn, good-natured face, now puffed up—bulging blue eyes.

But there were others on this Ship of Doom. The central portion of the circular disc was divided into two horizontal floors with several rooms on each. It was a dark and silent interior of woven metal grid-work and metal furnishings.

The rooms were segments of a circle like a pie cut into quarters. Four on the lower tier—a little circular stairway leading upward to four other chambers—a circular ladder into the upper tower. On the lower tier were the mechanism and control rooms, a storeroom of food and a sort of general lounge. The sleeping rooms were upstairs. In the tower were the observation instruments.

I gave little thought to these details. It was the dead which fascinated me.

We chanced to enter first the room where the food was stored. Here was evidence of strife! On the

floor lay another man's body. Under our lights his head and face showed gruesome where some heavy instrument had smashed it with a murderous blow.

Four other human bodies were on the ship—all of them in the lounge.

Upon a chair, with a small table before him, a young man sat slumped over a notebook and pencil as though he had been assiduously writing almost to the last. A handsome young fellow, with sensitive features—the face of a dreamer. Above the almost girlish face was a shock of waving black hair.

I gazed at the notebook in which he had been writing, its cover was inscribed:

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILIP THOMASSON

Old Dorrance touched me. "He had more money than was good for him. Only thing he ever did in life was finance Deely. And Hilda Deely was mad with passion—but not for her husband. Everybody knew it—except the husband. That's Hilda Deely over there—look at her!"

Strange contrasts! Thomasson sat so calmly. But across the lounge lay the body of a man who had not had the courage to die. His hands were tearing at his throat. An agony of terror was on his face. His thick tongue protruded.

There were two others—a man and a woman. The woman was young and slim and very beautiful, with a mouth made for love and eyes which even in death seemed to hold love like a torch to burn eternally.

This was Hilda Deely. She lay on a couch wrapped in a man's arms, with the long tresses of her black hair falling disheveled to envelope them both, and his arms protectingly holding her. Together, never to be separated, death had come to these two.

But what had happened? There is what we saw on the ship to guide me. And Thomasson's *Chronicle*, which he seems to have penned until almost the last. And there is my own fancy. Weaving what we saw, *CHRONICLE* and fancy together, we emerge with the narrative that follows—perhaps not literally factual but inevitably close to what actually occurred on the Ship of Doom—

THE moment of departure was at hand.

In the lower mechanism room of the Deely time-vehicle Brown the mechanic sat at his controls. Outside his glassite window he could see the awed and excited crowd which had assembled to witness the departure. But Brown wasn't interested in the crowd.

The throng was cheering, gazing up at the tower of the time-vehicle. Brown knew that Professor Deely and his wife were up there with Gerald Vane, commander of this time-flight. Vane grinned ironically to himself. Deely was a fool to bring his wife this close to a man like Gerald Vane.

At that moment Hilda Deely and her husband were in the tower, answering the plaudits of the crowd.

Deely's arm went around his wife. He was a frail studious-looking man of forty. His shock of prematurely grey hair made him seem older. He was an unworldly fellow. He sought for so many long hours each day to delve into the mysteries of Nature that the beauty of his young wife and her love for him became things he took for granted. Her inner life, her desires—the myriad illusions upon which a woman builds romance—all were mysteries of Nature to which Deely gave never a thought.

"Isn't it wonderful, Hilda?" he repeated. "Listen to them cheering us. This is the happiest moment of my life."

He did not notice that she involuntarily drew away from his encircling arm. Gerald Vane stood close behind them, darkly handsome, his broad athletic shoulders trim in the uniform and gold braid. Whatever his inner character, outwardly Gerald Vane was the sort of man upon which a woman may build her dreams.

The earnest tremblingly happy Ronald Deely did not notice that his wife's free hand went behind her so that Vane gripped her hand and briefly held it with a tender pressure while between them passed unspoken a reassurance of their love.

"Well," said Vane, "we're getting the publicity, Deely. Every newscaster in the world is covering this. Let's get started. This is a good dramatic time. Close that port."

"Yes, we'll start now. There will be a starting shock, Hilda. Don't be afraid—I'll hold you."

Vane closed the ports. In effect the little vehicle was a spaceship now, almost capable of withstanding an outer vacuum.

"Ready?"

"Yes!" Deely did not see the look which passed between his wife and Vane. For them this was a moment of crisis also, a moment of triumph. They would fling themselves out into the future. And in that world of the future she and Gerald would escape from the ship—together.

Gerald Vane pulled a lever. Down in the lower control room the phlegmatic. Brown calmly and efficiently responded. The little vehicle glowed and hummed, was flung into time.

In the lower lounge two other men sat, gripping their seats against the shock of starting.

"You all right, Thomasson?" "Yes, I'm still here!"

"My God! Where are we?"

Phil Thomasson half rose out of his chair, sank dizzily back. The ports of the lounge-room showed a grey luminous blur. The door to the little deck stood open but nothing could be seen save the reflected glow of a small deck light.

William Mink repeated, "Where are we?"

Thomasson smiled. "Just passing through day after tomorrow, I fancy."

It was romance to young Phil Thomasson. He knew nothing of the science of it, nor cared. With his inherited money he had financed all this as an adventure.

To the perspiring, frightened William Mink it was an adventure also. Mink was a thick-set, paunchy man of fifty. At forty he had thought to conquer the financial world. Now, at fifty, he was a pauper. His banks had failed and shattered his mind.

Mink was a good friend of Gerald Vane. He had indeed, upon many occasions loaned Vane money. He would have financed this Deely expedition had not his fortunes crashed and Phil Thomasson come forward and financed it instead.

Mink was here as an escape from his troubles. But Mink had also another idea. There were secrets in the future which he could learn. Secrets which, when he brought them back, would speedily make him rich again. But now he was terrified. Thomasson gazed at him with a sarcastic smile. "You're not much of an adventurer, are you? Brace up, Mink! We're still alive. That's a triumph, anyway."

REALIZATION of what the destiny of the flight might be came with a shock. Deely indeed, had thought of it as a possibility but hoped it would not come to pass. The realization that while they were whirling through Time, they were also hurtling through Space, brought to each of them a dilemma. Their secret plans were awry. *The vehicle had actually separated from the Earth.*

To Phil Thomasson it was less of a disappointment. He had thought to observe the follies of future generations and be amused. But after all it was amusing also to see the crazy swaying stars.

It was a blurred crazy Universe endowed optically with strange motion. The sun was drawing away. Saturn with his brilliant rings was coming forward.

"Don't you realize, my friends," Deely said vehemently. "We're explorers into the unknown of space and time. You think we're moving? We're not. This vehicle of ours has found absolute rest. We are in the future now. This is where the Earth will be at this time which we have already reached. And we are going fifty years into the future! What realms of starry space we will see—no man has ever penetrated those realms."

"A space trip!" murmured Thomasson. "We start for a time-trip and it turns out to be a voyage among the stars!"

"And what a trip," exclaimed Deely. "Think of it—"

Thomasson smiled ironically. "I am thinking of it. We can't gaze into the future of our earth! The future has always been hidden from us, it always will be."

"We're in no danger then," stammered Mink.

"Of course not," Deely reassured. "My time mechanisms are working perfectly. I have conquered the secret of time. When we return—think what new facts we will have to add to science."

"Well," said Brown, "if everything's all right I better get back to work."

He tamped out his pipe and clambered down the ladder. "Chief," he called, "if Mrs. Deely needs any help gettin' lunch I'm ready any time."

"Hungry," said Deely, "of course we all must be hungry. Hilda dear, you go down and start things. I *must* stay here and make notes."

"Yes. Yes, Ronald."

"I'll help her," said Vane."

They descended the ladder and he turned suddenly in the empty lounge and flung his arms around her. "Hilda!"

"Gerald, not so loud!"

They snatched another moment of madness. Or ecstasy? Or love? To Hilda, it was all of those.

And so tire strange journey went on. They went fifty years from their starting point—then sixty years. The journey consumed days of their life. And then Deely reversed the mechanism, retrograding through time so that all the universe was adjusting itself.

Deely's mechanisms worked perfectly. For him it was a triumph. The dials recorded the passage of absolute time. Sixty years forward. With a larger, more powerful, vehicle the time transition could be greatly accelerated.

BUT Deely, with the precision of a true scientist, was heading back for a landing upon Earth. The time the voyagers had experienced would be about two weeks. And Deely knew that the laws of nature—unnamable laws, but inexorable—would allow him successfully to land at a point of time on earth two weeks *after* his departure.

Deely was a careful man. No amount of enthusiasm now led him to want to take unnecessary chances. Two weeks was long enough for them to chance upon this voyage. And the batteries too, were safely adequate for no longer an operation than that.

It was just after they had passed the point at which they were still fifty years ahead of earth when Fate dealt to Deely a blow terrible, crushing—and yet perhaps merciful.

Gerald Vane and Hilda had been alone so much during the outward trip that Vane—playing always for safety—forgot his creed. Brown was generally in the lower mechanism room. Mink was always brooding and morose. Thomasson was gay when there was anyone to listen or immersed in an interminable chronicle for own amusement. And Deely slept, ate and worked upon his scientific data.

It left Hilda and Vane with many stolen hours. And then came the moment of the return flight when Deely received his crushing blow.

One night he found himself strangely wakeful. The problem on which he had been working after supper was unfinished and now the solution—seemed ready.

He slipped from his bed, into slippers and outer robe and left the small triangular room. It was glowing with the strange iridescence of the time-current. The upper tier of the small vehicle with its four cabins, had a narrow corridor bisecting it like a diameter line.

Deely, in his grey cloth gown and his rumpled white hair, moved along the corridor toward the spiral ladder leading to the tower, where he knew Phil Thomasson would be on watch. He mounted the ladder. He might have heard soft voices from one of the rooms off the corridor had he stopped to listen but he did not.

Thomasson greeted him. "Well, Deely, shouldn't you be asleep?"

"I woke up with that accursed problem tormenting me. Stay where you are, Phil—I'll sit here. Or would you rather go to bed?"

"I'll stay," said Thomasson. "What is sleep to me? I've been watching those crazy lurching stars."

But Deely was already immersed in his formulae, with Thomasson watching him thoughtfully. A nice fellow, this Deely. Too impractical for a hard world of reality.

It seemed to Thomasson that there was a sudden stillness about the vehicle. Voices in a soft murmur came floating up the ladder to the tower room.

"Gerald dear, I must go—if he should awaken—"

"Nonsense, Hilda. You know he sleeps for hours."

"Gerald, please— Kiss me once more. Hold me close."

There seemed a strange blankness on Deely's face. And slowly the blood drained so that he was white to the lips.

"I say—" began Thomasson. But Deely's vague gesture silenced him. The murmuring ceased momentarily. There was an interval while Deely stared blankly with his pencil still poised over the paper. Then Deely was fumbling with his chair, trying to rise to his feet.

Thomasson found his voice. "Where are you going?" "Downstairs."

"I wouldn't do that." He put a hand on Deely's thin shoulder. "Take it easy, old fellow. Give it thought. Don't go down there now."

Deely sank back. "I guess you're right."

FOR minutes Deely sat staring.

His pale blue eyes stared through the metal walls of the little tower. Then at last they focused upon Thomasson.

"You knew this thing?"

"Yes. I knew it."

"And Mink—he knew it?" "I suppose so."

"And even Brown?"

"But, Deely, look here—"

"And now I know it—at last. You'll go down to bed now, won't you, Thomasson?" It was a gentle plea. "I want to stay here alone—to give it thought."

Thomasson was glad to escape. Deely's gentle white face was blank as Thomasson went down the ladder. The sleeping rooms were quiet. Thomasson, seeking his own, peered into the opened door-oval of Deely's as he passed it. Hilda lay there on her own couch, apparently asleep. Thomasson sighed, entered his own room and drifted into uneasy slumber.

A sudden lurching shock awakened him. Something was wrong with the ship. The time-mechanism was not operating!

As he gained his feet Thomasson heard the distant shouts of his companions. In the corridor he ran into Hilda, a white specter in her long filmy nightrobe.

"Mr. Thomasson? What's wrong? Where is Ronald? I woke up—" Gerald Vane dashed toward them. "Where is Deely? What happened?" Vane was as white as the woman. In a nearby door-oval Mink appeared. "What is it? Are we in danger, Vane?" He clutched at the door casement. "In danger . . ." From the lower tier Brown was shouting, "It's gone dead! Everything's off! What'll I do?"

Vane rushed toward the tower ladder. Slowly the figure of Deely came down. His voice was calm.

"Don't get excited. I stopped our time-flight."

Brown arrived. "But Professor, the controls—"

"What matter, Brown? Come to the lounge, all of you. I want to show you the stars through the window there." His gaze went to his wife. "Ah, Hilda—have you slept well?" "Look here," shouted Vane. "Stopped our time flight? Why?" In Deely's mild eyes a sudden fire shone. "Do as I tell you, Vane. All of you—come down to the lounge. Stop that sniveling, Mink. Hilda, you go ahead with Gerald. Don't let her fall, Vane."

The vehicle was at rest, poised in the void of infinite space. Through the windows they could all see the motionless firmament, freed now from the distortion of their time flight—a vast bowl of black velvet and everywhere the motionless blazing worlds.

Brown found his voice. "We can't stop here like this! We have no air or water! We'll certainly all be killed."

Vane gasped, "Start the mechanism, Brown."

"But I can't! Nothin' works!" Vane turned upon Deely. "What have you done?"

Deely faced them with even greater calmness. "I thought it would be a wise thing to smash the mechanism. I have no need of it any longer."

"Death!" Only Mink could find voice.

Gerald Vane stared with dumb amazement, then leaped upon Deely. "*Wrecked* us? You—"

"It was you who wrecked us." Deely sat down on the couch, with pale eyes surveying them all. "You and the woman wrecked us. All of you saw it—all but me, and no one bothered to tell me. Go to him, Hilda. There's nothing to stop you now."

But she only stood staring. Mink, still screaming, rushed away. Brown, cursing to himself, dashed for his control room. Vane whirled. "You—crazy—fool!"

"Hold her in your arms, Vane. Don't you see she's frightened?"

Thomasson gasped. "Hadn't we better try to repair the controls?"

"No use," Deely interrupted. "You can't repair it. Our air is leaking out. We've a few hours—two or three. Hilda, I shouldn't waste time if I were you. A few hours isn't very long for loving."

She swayed toward Vane but his terrified glare and his words stopped her. "You brought this on me! You rotten little—" Vane staggered from the room.

But Deely said, "Come back, Thomasson! Don't bother. Sit down, Hilda—it's too bad if you're going to lack the comfort of his love at the end—but I guess you are."

IT BLURRED for a moment to Thomasson's shocked senses. He heard, vaguely, the running footsteps of Vane and Brown as they dashed around the ship, trying to accomplish the impossible.

Thomasson stared across the starlit lounge at Deely and his wife. They sat gazing numbly at each other. All of them were mad. Perhaps they were all their real selves for the first time since childhood.

Thomasson was aware of the shouts of Vane and Brown—thudding blows of metal against metal—then a horrible agonized death-scream from Mink. . . .

"He's locked himself in the food room!" Vane gasped. "Brown, get him out of there!"

They stood by the closed metal door. Mink was inside. They could hear him babbling to himself.

"All this for me. Nobody can have any of it but me. Food and drink— that's life. Nobody can die with all this food and drink."

Vane's fist thudded against the door. "Mink, open here!"

Brown shouted, "Open this door!" But there was only silence.

Vane pounded harder. The door resounded with the blows of the heavy iron wrench Brown was carrying, suddenly went inward as the water casks and boxes which were piled against it were shoved backward. Over the litter, Vane and Brown tumbled forward. The dark triangular room was scattered with broken boxes of food, wet with spilled water.

As Vane recovered his balance the frenzied Mink was on him, clawing at him, gouging at his eyes. Vane stumbled and fell. Brown raised his heavy wrench and crashed it upon Mink's head. Vane lifted himself from the gruesome thing on top of him. "Did it, Brown! He's dead—what of it? We've saved the food and water."

But Brown stammered, "That—looks awful. The brains—that—" "Come outside."

They stumbled to the corridor. Brown found himself still holding the wrench. He dropped it with a shudder. He wavered away, muttering to himself. Vane dashed to the lounge, gasped, "Mink went crazy. Wrecked our storeroom—Brown killed him with a wrench. Stark, raving mad—the fool."

DEELY barely moved. "Sit down, " Vane. Close that door first. You're wise to come in here—this is the best place. We can hold the air a little longer in here."

Thomasson could feel that the air was going. His head was humming—or was the roar in his ears?

Vane slammed the door. "I don't want to die! Deely, can't you do something?"

"Nothing now," Deely said calmly.

Vane whimpered like a child. "Hilda, tell him to fix it. Tell him, Hilda." But Hilda Deely only stared. It seemed to the watching Thomasson that there was a faint smile on her lips,

"You'd better sit down," Deely said. "Save your strength—the air is getting very thin."

At that moment the air began escaping still faster. Brown, clinging to a chair on the curved starlit deck-corridor could hear the silence broken by the faint hiss and whine of the air as it went out.

He found himself sitting on the deck by the small outer port. Mink was dead. Soon the others would

be dead. From inside he could hear the whimpering Gerald Vane. "I don't want to die! Deely, please—" But he was going to die.

Brown thought again how much better it would be to die all at once. He found the port lever beside him. His hand slowly pulled at the lever. The door slid partly open. The rush of wind as the deck-air went out seemed like a graceful summer breeze. And then a gale.

Brown's head slumped down on his updrawn knees. He was dead... Deely gazed across the lounge toward the closed corridor door. "Going fast now. Something outside must have broken."

Vane collapsed in a chair, whimpering, then, he began screaming, "Stop it! I don't want to die!" Thomasson thought it foolish to rail like that. Vane was a pitiable object. He looked stricken of all his manhood now.

On the couch Deely himself was gasping. "Hilda—in a moment—we'll be gone."

"I know." She tried to rise but the room must have whirled before her. "Ronald! Where are you?" She wavered, with hands outstretched, across the few feet that separated them. And on the couch his eager arms caught her. "Hilda!"

"If only you could forgive me, Ronald."

"I do! I do, Hilda!"

The roaring in Thomasson's head drowned their murmured words.

Vane's dead body seemed hideous, there in the chair. But on the couch, Deely and Hilda were lying together, wrapped in each other's arms. They were tranquil, peaceful in death.

It blurred swiftly before Thomasson's fading senses—and then it slid away into a great silence. . . .

Thus we found them, their frozen bodies preserved through the years. We did not attempt to take the Deely time-ship back to earth. We left it there with its six passengers untouched. As young Dorrance turned us back and set out course toward earth, I was at a rear turret window. I watched until it was lost among the blazing stars.