

A. Bertram Chandler, an Australian writer and former naval officer, has been writing stories about the Rim Worlds and featuring the well known character John Grimes, for at least thirty years. Here is a real treat, a new story in which Commodore Grimes recounts his adventures with the odd Gods of a planet called Stagatha.

Grimes and the Odd Gods
BY
A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Faraway Quest, the Rim Worlds Confederacy survey ship, was still berthed at Port Fortinbras, on Elsinore. She was still awaiting replacements for the rotors of her outmoded inertial drive unit. More than once, in strongly worded Carlottigrams, Commodore Grimes had requested, demanded almost, that he be allowed to put the repairs in the hands of one of the several local shipyards. Each time he received a terse reply from the Rim Worlds Admiralty's Bureau of Engineering which, translated from Officialese to English, boiled down to Father knows best. He unburdened his soul to the Rim Worlds ambassador on Elsinore.

"Can't you do something, Your Excellency?" he asked. "There's my ship been sitting here for weeks now. My crew's becoming more and more demoralized...."

"As well I know, Commodore," the ambassador agreed. "You've some hearty drinkers aboard your vessel, and when they drink they brawl. Perhaps you could stop the shore leave of the worst offenders...."

"And have them drinking and brawling aboard the Quest? Or, if I really put my foot down, slouching around in a state of sullen sobriety? There's only one thing to do. Get them off this bloody planet and back where they belong, back to their wives and families or, in the case of the tabbies, to their boyfriends."

"Some of your female personnel are even greater nuisances than the men," said the ambassador.

"You're telling me. But as an ambassador, Your Excellency, you pile on far mores Gs than a mere commodore, a commodore on the reserve list at that. Can't you do something?"

"I've tried, Grimes. I've tried. But it's all a matter of economics. The Confederacy just does not have the funds in any bank in the Shakespearean Sector to pay for a major repair and replacement job. Those rotors will have to be manufactured on Lorn, and then carried out here in whatever ship of the Rim Runners fleet is due to make a scheduled call to Elsinore...."

"And meanwhile," the commodore said, "there are mounting port dues. And the wages that everybody aboard Faraway Quest is getting for doing nothing. And the three square meals a day, plus snacks, that all hands expect as their right. And...."

"I'm a diplomat, Grimes, not an economist."

"And I'm just a spaceman. Oh, well. Theirs not to reason why, and all that. And now I'll be getting back to my ship, Your Excellency."

"What's the hurry, Commodore? I was hoping that you would stay for a few drinks and, possibly, dinner."

"I have an appointment," said Grimes.

The ambassador laughed. "Another interview for Kitty's Korner? I always watch that program myself. And I've heard that Station Yorick's ratings have improved enormously since Miss Kelly persuaded you to treat her viewers and listeners to your never-ending series of tall tales."

"Not so tall," growled Grimes.

"Perhaps not. You have had an interesting life, haven't you?"

An hour or so later, in his sitting room aboard the old ship, Grimes and Kitty Kelly were enjoying the simple yet satisfying meal that had been brought to them by one of the stewardesses. There were sandwiches constructed from crisply crusty new bread, straight from Faraway Quest's own bakery, and thick slices of juicy Waldegren ham, the flavor of which derived from the smoldering sugar pine sawdust

over which the meat had been smoked. (Almost alone among the ship's personnel, Grimes liked this delicacy; that was a good supply of it in the ship's cool stores. He was pleased that Kitty, hitherto inclined to be an unadventurous eater, enjoyed it, too.) There was a variety of cheeses — Ultimo Blue, Aquarian Sea Cream, and Caribbean Pineapple and Pepper —altogether with assorted pickles and the especially hot radishes that Grimes had insisted be cultivated in the ship's hydroponic farm. There was Australian beer — some while ago Grimes had done a private deal with the master of a Federation star tramp not long out from Earth — served in condensation-bedewed pewter pots.

Nibbling a last radish with her strong white teeth, Kitty slumped back in her chair. Grimes regarded her appreciatively. As she always did, she was wearing green, this time a long, filmy, flowing dress with long, loose sleeves. Above it, the food and the drink had brought a slight flush to the normal creamy pallor of her face, a healthy pallor, set off by the wide scarlet slash of her lips. Below her black glossy hair, this evening braided into a sort of coronet, her startlingly blue eyes looked back at Grimes.

She murmured, "Thank you for the meal, Commodore. It was very good."

He asked, "And will you sing for your supper?"

She said, "You're the one who's going to do the singing." She looked at the bulkhead clock. "It's almost time that we got the show on the road again. And what are you going to talk about tonight? Your adventures as a pirate?"

"Not a pirate," he corrected her stiffly. "A privateer."

"Who knows the difference? And who cares? Or what about when you were governor general of that anarchist planet?"

"Too long a story, Kitty," he said. "And too complicated. By All the Odd Gods of the Galaxy, there never were, before or since, such complications!"

She said thoughtfully, "That ... that oath you often use ... By All the Odd Gods of the Galaxy ... Did you ever get tangled with any of these Odd Gods?"

He told her, "I'm an agnostic. But ... there have been experiences."

She got up from her chair, went to the case containing her audio-visual recorder, opened it, pulled out the extensions with their lenses and microphones.

She said, peering into the monitor screen. "Yes, that's it. Pipe in one hand, tankard in the other ... And now, talk."

"What about?"

"The Odd Gods, of course. Or, at the very least, One Odd God."

He said, "Oh, all right. But I must get my pipe going first."

As you know (he started at last), I left the Federation Survey Service under something of a cloud after the Discovery mutiny. For a while I was yachtmaster to the Baroness Michelle d'Estang, an El Doradan aristocrat, and on the termination of this employment she gave me the yacht's pinnace, which was practically a deep-space ship in miniature, as a parting gift. I called her — the pinnace, not the baroness — Little Sister and set up shop as Far Traveler Courier Services. I'd carry anything or anybody anywhere, as long 'as I got paid. There would be small parcels of special cargo. There would be people waiting to get to planets well off the normal interstellar trade routes.

It was a living.

I didn't make a fortune, but there was usually enough in the bank to pay ports dues and such and to keep me in life's little luxuries. It was lonely for quite a lot of the time but, now and again, there were passengers who were pleasant enough company ... Yes, female ones sometimes, if you must know. But it was the female ones who usually got me into all kinds of trouble. Mphm.

Well, I'd carried a small parcel of urgently needed medical supplies to a world called Warrenhome — no, the inhabitants weren't descended from rabbits but the name of the captain who made the first landing was Warren — where they were having some sort of plague. A mutated virus. After I'd made delivery and received the balance of the payment due to me, I lost no time in placing the usual advertisements in the usual media. I decided that I'd wait around for a week and then, if nothing came up, get off the planet. There was talk that that virus, a nasty one, might mutate again.

Luckily (I thought at the time) I didn't have long to wait for my next job. I returned to Little Sister, after a yarn with the Port Captain, just before my usual lunchtime. I saw that a tall woman was approaching the airlock door from the opposite direction to myself. She was dressed in severe, ankle-length black with touches of white at throat and wrists. On her head was an odd sort of hat, black, with a wide, stiff brim. The skin of her strong-featured face was white; even the lips of her wide mouth were pale. Her eyes were a hard, steely blue.

She stated rather than asked, "Captain Grimes." Her voice was deep for a woman, resonant.

I said, "I have that honor, Miz...?" She said, "You may call me Madame Bishop."

I asked, "And what can I do for you, Miz Bishop?"

She said coldly, "Bishop is my title, Captain Grimes, not my surname. I understand that you are seeking employment for yourself and your ship. I shall employ you."

I let us both into the ship, seated her at the table in the cabin while I went through into the little galley. I asked her what she would like to drink. She told me coldly that she would appreciate a glass of water. I brought her one, and a pink gin for myself. She looked at this disapprovingly. I pulled out my pipe and filled it. She as good as ordered me to put it away. It wasn't so much the words that she used but the way in which she said them. But I had been learning, ever since I set up in business for myself, that the customer is always right. I put my pipe back in my pocket.

She asked, "How soon can you lift ship, Captain Grimes?"

I said, "As soon as I've paid my bills and cleared outwards."

"Today?"

"Yes."

She asked, "Are you capable of making the voyage to Stagatha?"

I'd never heard of that world, but Little Sister was capable of going just about anywhere in the galaxy. I told her yes.

"What will be the single fare for one passenger?"

I couldn't answer this at once. I didn't know where Stagatha was or how far it was from Warrenhome. I asked her to wait while I switched on the playmaster. She told me that she did not approve of frivolous entertainment. I told her that the playmaster screen served as the read-out for Little Sister's computer and library bank. I don't think she believed me until the requested data began to appear.

In a short while I had all the information required. The voyage would take six weeks. Then there were all the various expenses accruing over this period — depreciation, insurance, consumption of stores, the salary that I — as owner — was paying to myself as master. And so on, and so on. After all, I had to show a profit. I told her how much I should be asking.

She said, "We are not a rich church, Captain Grimes, but we are not a poor one. And has it not been written that the laborer is worthy of his hire?" She allowed herself the merest hint of a smile. "Too, you are the only laborer available at this moment of time."

"Is this voyage a matter of some urgency?" I asked.

"The Lord's work is always urgent," she told me.

And so it was that I contracted to carry Bishop Agatha Lewis, of the Church Of The Only Salvation, from Warrenhome to Stagatha.

He paused, looking down into his now-empty tankard. Kitty refilled it for him, refilled her own.

She said, "So far we haven't had any Odd Gods. These Only Salvation people seem to have been just another nut cult, probably with their own translation of the Christian Bible slanted to make it fit their own beliefs."

He said, "Even without special translations you can interpret the Bible in a very wide variety of ways, find in it Divine Authority for just about every aberration of which the human race is capable. But the Church Of The Only Salvation did have its own Bible. Bishop Lewis gave me a copy. I tried to read it but the writing was appallingly bad. As far as I'm concerned there is only one Bible. The King James version."

After she was gone, to get herself organized, I made myself a sandwich lunch and tried to get, more

information about Stagatha from the library bank. It was an Earth-type planet with about the same proportion of land to water. The inhabitants were humanoid. I've often wondered why there are so many humanoid, as near as dammit human, races throughout the galaxy. Was there some Expansion, from Somewhere, before the dawn of history? But on every world there is the evolutionary evidence that cannot be denied that Man descended from lower life forms. Or is there some Divine Plan?

But I'm just a spaceman, not a philosopher.

There were photographs of typical Stagathans. These could have been taken on practically any beach on Earth or any Man-colonized planet. The males were, to all outward appearances, well-endowed (but not abnormally so) men. The females tended to be busty, but firm-breasted. The only thing odd was that these photographs had been taken in the streets of a Stagathan town, not at a seaside resort. I finally got around to looking at the vehicles and buildings in the background. Electric cars (I thought). Dwellings, offices, shops — but nothing over one story and everything with a flat roof.

And that was all. There was no trade with other worlds, no exports, no imports. There had been very little contact with outsiders since the first landing by Commodore Shakespeare, that same Commodore Shakespeare after whom your Shakespearean Sector was named. Every so often some minor vessel of the Survey Service would drop in, just showing the flag and for rest and recreation. But why, I wondered, should the Church Of The Only Salvation be interested in the planet?

But I had things to do. Bills to pay, outward clearance to be obtained and all the rest of it. Not much was required in the way of stores; my tissue culture vats were in good order and I could program the autochef to turn out quite fair imitations of Scotch whiskey and London gin. Flour I needed, and fresh eggs, and a few cases of the not too-bad local table wines. Regarding these, I based my order on what I regarded as normal consumption by two people for the duration of the voyage. I could have cut that order by half...

I made my pre-lift-off checks. Everything was in order, as it almost always was. She was a reliable little brute, was Little Sister. When I was walking around the outside of her, just admiring her, a small motorcade approached from the spaceport gates. There were four archaic-looking ground cars, black-painted, steam-driven, each emitting a thick cloud of dirty smoke from its funnel. From the first one Bishop Agatha Lewis disembarked, followed by half a dozen men and women, dressed in plain black and with broad-brimmed black hats like the one she was wearing. The men were all heavily bearded. Similar parties got out from the other three cars.

I walked up to the she-bishop and threw her a smart salute. She did not quite ignore me, but her curt nod was of the don't-bother-me-now variety. She made no attempt to introduce me to the assembled elders and deaconesses and deacons or whatever they were. Oh, well, I was only the captain. And the owner. I was only a space-going cabbie. I went back inside the ship to sulk.

Before long an elderly woman, followed by four men, carrying between them two heavy trunks, came in. She asked me, quite politely, "Where do we put these?" I showed them. The men went back outside.

She sat down at the table, noticed the tea things that I had not cleared away yet after my afternoon break.

She asked, in a whisper, "Do you think that I might have a cup, Captain?"

I made a fresh pot and, with a clean cup, brought it in to her. I could hear some sort of hymn being sung outside, one of those dreary ones all about the blood of the lamb and so forth.

She murmured, as she sipped appreciatively, "We shall all miss the dear bishop. But we, the synod, decided that she would be the right and proper person to send to Stagatha." She helped herself to a chocolate biscuit, crunched into it greedily. "Surely the similarity of the names is no coincidence. There was a St. Agatha, you know. Not that we approve of the Popish church and their beliefs." She poured herself more tea, added cream and was generous with the sugar. "Yes. We shall all of us miss the dear bishop — although, perhaps, her interpretation of the Word has been a mite too strict?"

I said, "I still haven't been told why Bishop Lewis is going to Stagatha."

She said, "I thought that you knew. It is because those unhappy people, on that world, are living in a state of darkness, are brands to be plucked from the burning. We heard about it from a spaceman, a young fellow called Terry Gowan, one of the engineers aboard the Cartographer, a Survey Service ship.

Would you know him?"

I said that I didn't. (It is truly amazing how so many planetlubbers have the erroneous idea that everybody in Space, naval or mercantile, knows everybody else.)

"A very nice young man. A religious young man. His ship set down here a few weeks after a visit to Stagatha. One of our people went on board her with books and pamphlets. The only one of the crew who was interested was Terry. He came to our prayer meetings. He talked about Stagatha. He brought us audio-visual records that he had taken. We were shocked. Those people, as human as you and me, going about completely ... unclothed. And their heathen religion! Do you know, they worship their sun...."

I didn't see much wrong with that. After all, sun-worship is logical. And as long as you don't go to the horrid extreme of tearing the still-beating hearts out of the breasts of sacrificial virgins, it has much to recommend it. The sun, after all — your sun, Earth's sun, Stagatha's sun, anybody's sun — is the source of all life. And there are Man-colonized planets, such as Arcadia, where naturism is a way of life, although the Arcadians don't quite make a religion of it.

"None of the other churches," the old lady went on, "has sent a missionary to Stagatha. But somebody has to...."

"And Bishop Lewis was your obvious choice," I said.

"Why, yes," she almost laughed.

I was beginning to like the old dear. She had told me, as plainly as she could, that dear Agatha was being kicked upstairs. Literally.

Suddenly she stiffened and with a swift motion pushed her half-full teacup across the table so that it was in front of me. She was just in time. Bishop Lewis came into the cabin and stood there, staring down at us suspiciously.

She asked, "Why are you still here, Sister Lucille?"

The old lady got to her feet and bowed deferentially and said, "I was just keeping Captain Grimes company while he had his tea, Your Reverence. And I was telling him about our work."

"Indeed?" Her voice was very cold. "Since when were you one of our missionaries, Sister Lucille?"

That business with the teacup had been a fair indication of which way the wind was blowing, but I made sure.

I asked, "Would you care for tea, Madame Bishop? I asked Sister Lucille to join me, but she refused."

"As she should have done, Captain Grimes, and as I shall do. Nowhere in Holy Writ are such unclean beverages as tea or coffee mentioned. Members of our Church are forbidden to partake of them."

And that was that.

He paused for refreshment, sipping from his newly filled tankard.

Kitty asked, "And what about wine? That's mentioned quite a few times."

"Yes," said Grimes. "Noah planted a vineyard and then made his own wine after he ran the Ark aground on Mount Ararat. Then he got drunk on his own tippie and the Almighty did not approve."

"But, in the New Testament, there's the story of the wedding feast and the water-into-wine miracle."

"According to Bishop Agatha, and according to her Church's own translation of the Bible, that wine was no more than unfermented fruit juice."

I'll not bore you (he went on) with a long account of the voyage out to Stagatha. It was not one of the happiest voyages in my life. On previous occasions, when carrying a female passenger, I found that familiarity breeds contempt. Mutual contempt. But there just wasn't any familiarity. At nights — we maintained a routine based on the twenty-hour day of Warrentime the portable screen was always in place, dividing the cabin into two sleeping compartments. Once we were out and clear and on the way, I put on my usual shirt-and-shorts uniform and Her Reverence ordered me — ordered me, aboard my own ship — to cover myself decently. Smoking was forbidden, except in the control cab with the communicating door sealed. Meals were a misery. I regard myself as quite a fair cook and can make an autochef do things that its makers would never have so much as dreamed of, but ... Boiled meat and

vegetables for lunch, the same for dinner. Breakfast — boiled eggs. No ham or bacon, of course. The wine that I had stocked up with went almost untouched; I just don't like drinking it during a meal while my companion sticks to water. And she soon went through the ship's stock of orange juice — she liked that — leaving me with none to put with my gin.

She had brought her own supply of tapes for the playmaster, mainly sermons of the fire-and-brimstone variety and uninspiring hymns sung by remarkably untuneful choirs. Some of those sermons were delivered by herself. I had to admit she had something. She was a born rabble rouser. Had she been peddling some line of goods with greater appeal than the dreary doctrines of her freak religion, she might have finished up as dictator of a planet rather than as the not-very-popular boss cocky of an obscure sect. Might have finished up? But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I dutifully read the Bible, in that horridly pedestrian translation, which she had given me. I did not think that I should ever become a convert. Unluckily, I was rather low on reading matter of my own choice — books, that is — and my stock of microfilmed novels I could not enjoy because of her continuous monopoly of the playmaster.

Anyhow, at last the time came when I stopped the Mannschenn Drive unit and Little Sister sagged back into the normal Continuum. There were the usual phenomena, the warped perspective and all that, and (for me) a brief session of *déjà vu*. I saw Agatha Lewis as a sort of goddess in flowing black robes, brandishing a whip. It frightened me. And then things snapped back to normal.

I had made a good planetfall. We were only two days' run from Stagatha and made our approach to the world, under inertial drive, from north of the plane of ecliptic. There was no need for me to get in radio touch with Aerospace Control. There wasn't any Aerospace Control. As far as I could gather from the information in my library banks, Entry Procedure for just about every known planet in the galaxy, one just came in, keeping a sharp lookout for airships, selected a landing place, and landed. It all seemed rather slipshod, but if the Stagathans liked it, who was I to complain?

The planet looked good from Space. Blue seas, green and brown land masses, relatively small polar icecaps. There was very little cloud except for a dark and dirty-looking patch of dense vapor that practically obscured from view most of a large island almost on the equator. I studied it through the control cab binoculars and could see flickers of ruddy light within it. It could only be Stagatha's only active volcano. According to Survey Service accounts, it was unnamed and regarded with a sort of superstitious horror. Nobody ever went near it. Looking down at it I thought that I could understand why. Even from a great distance I got the impression of utter ugliness.

Whenever possible, when making a landing on a strange planet with no spaceport facilities, I adhere to Survey Service standard practice, timing my descent from close orbit to coincide with sunrise. That way every irregularity of the ground is shown up by the long shadows. Agatha Lewis had told me to set the ship down as close as possible to one of the cities. Not that there were any real cities, just largish country towns, most of them on the banks of rivers, set among fields and forests.

So I dropped down through the early-morning sky, feeling the usual sense of pleasurable anticipation. I enjoy shiphandling and, too, this to me would be a new and almost certainly interesting world. But I wasn't as happy as I should have been. She insisted on coming into the control cab with me, which meant that I was not able to smoke my pipe.

My own intention had been not to pass low over the town. Inertial drive units are noisy — to anybody outside the ship, that is — and it would be, I thought, stupid to annoy the citizenry by waking them before sparrowf art. But Agatha Lewis insisted that I make what I considered to be the ill-mannered approach. As it turned out, I needn't have worried about disturbing the sleep of the natives. But I did interrupt their dawn service. They were in the central plaza, all of them — men, women, and children — wearing their symbolic black cloaks that they threw aside as the first rays of the rising sun struck through between and over the low buildings. They stared up at us. We stared down. The bishop hissed in disgust at the sight of all that suddenly revealed nakedness.

She ... she snarled, "Now you know why I have come to this world. To save these poor sinners from their utter degradation."

I said, "They didn't look all that degraded to me. They were clean, healthy. Quite attractive, some of

them...."

"But their heathen worship, Captain Grimes! The baring of their bodies...."

I said, "If God had meant us to go around without clothes we'd have been born naked."

"Ha, ha," interjected Kitty Kelly.

"You're as bad as she was," Grimes told her. "She didn't think that it was very funny either. But it shut her up. I was able to land Little Sister in peace and quiet."

"And then you got your gear off and went to romp with the happy nudists, I suppose."

"Ha, ha. Not with her around."

"So I landed in the middle of this grassy field. Well, it looked like grass, and some odd-looking quadrupeds were grazing on it until we scared them off with the racket of the inertial drive. I made the routine tests of the atmosphere, not that it was really necessary as the Survey Service had already certified it fit for human consumption. I opened up both airlock doors. Bishop Agatha was first out of the ship. She stood there, in her stifling black clothing, glaring disapprovingly at the sun. I joined her. The fresh air tasted good, was fragrant with the scent of the grass that we had crushed with our set-down, with that of the gaudy purple flowers decorating clumps of low, green-blue foliated bushes.

I thought that whether or not she approved, I was going to wear shirt-and-shorts rig while on this planet. I didn't know for how long I should have to stay; the agreement was that I should wait until the mission was well established and, at intervals, send reports to Warrenhome by means of my Carlotti radio. I couldn't get through directly, of course. The messages would have to be beamed to Baniskil, the nearest planetary Carlotti station, and relayed from there. After I was gone, Agatha would have to wait for the next Survey Service ship to make a call — which might be a matter of months, or even years — before she could make further contact with those who had been her flock.

Anyhow, we stood there in the sunlight, the warm breeze, myself enjoying the environment, she obviously not. We did not talk. We watched the small crowd walking out from the town. As they grew closer, I could see how like they were to humans — our kind of humans — and how unlike. Their faces had eyes and nose and mouth, but their ears were long, pointed, and mobile. The hair on their heads was uniformly short and a sort of dark olive green in color. There was a complete absence of body hair. Their skins were golden brown. There was a something ... odd about their lower limbs. (Their ancestors, I discovered later, had been animals not dissimilar to the Terran kangaroo.) But they all possessed what we would regard as human sexual characteristics. Apart from necklaces and bracelets and anklets of gold and glittering jewels, they were all of them naked.

Their leader, a tall man with a strong, pleasant, rather horselike face, walked up to me, stiffened to what was almost attention and threw me quite a smart salute with his six-fingered hand. Obviously he was not unused to dealing with visiting spacemen and, even though he himself went naked, knew the meaning of uniforms and badges of rank.

He said, in almost accentless Standard English, "Welcome to Stagatha, Captain."

I returned his salute and said, "I am pleased to be here, sir."

This did not suit the lady bishop. She was the VIP, not myself. She said a few words in a language strange to me. I was not entirely surprised. I knew that each night during the voyage she had retired to her bed with a slutor — a sleep tutor. She must, somehow, have obtained the necessary language capsules from that visiting Survey Service ship, Cartographer. I should have made some attempt myself to learn the language — but linguistically I'm a lazy bastard and always have been. Wherever I've gone I've always found somebody who could speak English.

The Stagathan turned to Agatha Lewis and bowed. Despite his lack of clothing it was a very dignified gesture. She returned this salutation with the slightest of nods. She went on talking in a harsh, angry voice. He grinned, looked down at himself and gave a very human shrug. She went on talking.

He turned to me and said, "For you I am very sorry, Captain. Now we go." They went.

After I had gazed my fill upon a fine selection of retreating naked female buttocks, I turned to the bishop and asked, "What was all that about, Your Reverence?"

She looked at me very coldly and said, "I was telling these heathen, in their own language, to cover their nakedness."

I said, greatly daring, "They are dressed more suitably for this climate than we."

She said something about lecherous spacemen and then returned to the ship. I followed her. I busied myself with various minor chores while she opened one of the large trunks that had been put aboard before we left Warrenhome. She seemed to be unpacking. It was clothing, I noticed, that she was pulling out and spreading over the deck. She must be looking, I thought, for something cool to wear during the heat of the day. The next time I looked at her she was stowing a quantity of drab raiment into a large backpack.

When she was finished she said, "We will now go to the city, Captain Grimes."

"We haven't had lunch yet," I told her.

"Doing the Lord's work, according to His bidding, will be nourishment enough," she told me. "Please pick up the bag that I have packed and follow me."

"Why?" I demanded.

"It is essential," she said, "that we arrive in the central square prior to the noon service."

"Why?"

"It is not for you to question the Lord's bidding."

I said that I was a spaceship pilot, not a porter. She said that as long as I was on the payroll of her Church I was obliged to do as she required. I wasn't sure of the legality of it all but ... After all, I had to live with the woman. Anything-for-a-quiet-life Grimes, that's me. I did, however, insist that I dress more suitably for the expedition than in what I was wearing at the time — long trousers, shirt, necktie, and uniform jacket. I went into the shower cubicle with a change of clothing and emerged in short-sleeved, open-necked shirt, kilt, and sandals. She glared at me.

"Are you going native, Captain?"

"No, Your Reverence. I have changed into suitable shore-going civilian rig."

"You are not to accompany me dressed like that."

"Then hump your own bluey," I told her.

She didn't know what I meant, of course, so I had to translate from Australian into Standard English.

"Then carry your own bag," I said.

She didn't like it but realized that if we wasted any more time in argument we should be late for the noon service. She swept out of the ship with me, her beast of burden, plodding behind. It was too hot a day to be encumbered with a heavy backpack but, at least, I was less uncomfortable than I should have been in formal uniform.

In other circumstances I should have enjoyed the walk — that springy, almost-grass underfoot, the tuneful stridulations of what I assumed to be the local version of insects, occasional colorful flights of what I assumed to be birds but later discovered to be small, gaudy, flying mammals.

But I was unable to loiter. Her Reverence set the pace, and a spanking one it was. That woman, I thought, must have ice water in her veins, to be able to stride along like that while wearing all that heavy, body-muffling clothing. We came to the boundary of the field, to a dirt road, to the beginnings of the houses. There were people abroad, coming out of the low buildings, setting off in the same direction as the one that we were taking. There were men and women and children. They looked at us curiously — as well they might! — but not in an unmannerly fashion. They were dressed — undressed — for the climate. Her Reverence was suitably attired for a midwinter stroll over a polar icecap.

We came to the central square. It was paved with marble slabs but, breaking the expanse of gleaming stone, were beds of flowering bushes and fountains in the spray of which the sun was making rainbows. In the middle of the square was a tall obelisk, surrounded by concentric rings of gleaming metal — brass? gold? — set in the marble. Hard by this was a tripod made of some black metal from which was suspended a huge brass gong. A tall, heavily muscled man — I'll call him a man, at any nude resort on Earth or any Terran colony world the only glances that he would have attracted would have been admiration — naked apart from his ornaments of gold and jewels, was standing by the tripod, holding, as though it were a ceremonial spear, a long-handled striker with leather-padded head. A woman — and she was truly beautiful — was sitting cross-legged, all her attention on the slow, almost imperceptible shortening of the shadow cast by the obelisk.

She turned to the man by the gong, uttered one short word. His muscles flexed as he raised the striker, brought the head of it, with a powerful sweeping motion, into contact with the surface, radiant with reflected sunlight, of the great brass disc.

A single booming note rolled out and the people, from streets and alleys, came flooding into the plaza. They were marching rather than merely walking, dancing rather than marching, and the clashing of their glittering cymbals was not without an odd, compelling rhythm. They were unclothed (of course), all of them — the men, the women, and the children — although bright metal and jewels glowed on glowing, naked flesh. They formed up into groups, all of them facing inwards, towards the central obelisk. The ... the timekeeper was standing now, arms upraised above her head. She was singing, in a high, sweet voice. It was not the sort of noise that normally I should have classed as music, the tonality was not one that I was accustomed to, the rhythms too subtle, but here, in these circumstances, it was ... right. The man at the gong was accompanying her, stroking the metal surface with the head of his striker, producing a deep murmuring sound. And all the people were singing.

I didn't need to understand the words to know that it was a hymn of praise.

"What are you standing there for?" demanded the she-bishop.

"What else should I do?" I countered.

She snarled wordlessly, literally tore the backpack from my shoulders. She opened it, spilled the drab heap of secondhand clothing onto the marble paving. Close by us were children, about twenty in this group, who, until now, had been ignoring us. Her Reverence snatched up a rust black dress, forced it down over the body of a struggling, bewildered little girl. "Can't you help'?" she snarled at me. By the time that she got her second victim clothed, the first one was naked again and running to the timekeeper, the priestess, bawling with fright and bewilderment.

Things started to happen then.

I was unarmed, of course, with not so much as a stungun on low power. Contrary to so many space stories the toting of firearms by spacemen, merchant spacemen especially, on other people's planets is not encouraged. It didn't take long for two hefty wenches to immobilize me, one on each side of me, both of them holding me tightly. I could do nothing but watch as four men seized Agatha, threw her down to the paving and, despite her frenzied struggles, stripped her. A knife gleamed and I yelled wordlessly — but it was being used as a tool, not a weapon, to slice through cloth and not through skin. Her long body, revealed as the last of underwear was slashed away, was disgustingly pallid. It needn't have been. She could have made use of the UV lamps every time that she had a shower during the passage out, as I had done. She was pallid and she was flabby, physically (at least) far inferior to those who were punishing her for her act of ... sacrilege. Yes. Sacrilege. They held her there, in the blazing noonday sunlight, while the rags of her clothing were gathered up, and those other rags, those donations of used clothing with which she had tried to clothe the happily naked.

There was that pile of drab, tattered cloth and there was that big lens, a great burning glass, that was brought to bear upon the rubbish, concentrating upon it the purifying rays of the sun. There was the acrid smoke, and then the first red glimmer of smolder, and then flames, almost invisible in the strong sunlight.

And all the time Agatha was writhing and screaming, calling out not in Standard English but in the Stagathan language that she had learned. What she was saying I did not know, but it sounded like (and probably was) Grimes.

The bonfire died down.

A man whom I recognized as the leader of the party that had come out to the ship strode up to me. His face was grave.

"Captain," he said, "take this woman from here. She has insulted our God."

I said lamely, "She means well."

He said, "The path of the Mountain We Do Not Name is paved with good intentions."

My two captors released me.

The four men holding Agatha Lewis's wrists and ankles let go of her. She stumbled to her feet and stood there in that classic pose, one arm shielding her breasts, the other hand over her pudenda. With a younger, more shapely woman the attitude would have been prettily appealing; with her it was merely

ludicrous. Her face was scarlet with humiliation. But it wasn't only her face. And it wasn't only humiliation. It was sunburn.

Kitty said, "When you mentioned the gleam of a knife I thought that you were going to tell us that Bishop Agatha suffered the same sort of martyrdom as Saint Agatha. Her breasts were cut off."

Grimes said, "I know. I did some checking up. There was so much odd parallelism about the whole business. But my Agatha suffered no worse than severely frizzled nipples. Very painful, I believe. I lent her my shirt for the walk back to the ship but, by that time, it was too late."

So we got ourselves back to the ship (he continued) with Her Reverence in a state of shock. It had all been such a blow to her pride, her prudery, her own kind of piety. The psychological effects were more severe than the physical ones, painful as those most obviously were. And she had to let me apply the soothing lotions to her body. Oh, she hated me.

Once she was muffled up in a robe, wincing as every slightest motion brought the fabric into contact with her inflamed breasts, I said, "It is obvious, Your Reverence, that you are not welcome here. I suggest that we get off the planet."

She said, "We shall do no such thing."

She wanted her bunk set up then and the privacy screen put in position. I busied myself with various small tasks about the ship, trying not to make too much noise. But I needn't have bothered. I could hear her; the partition was not soundproof. First of all she was sobbing, and then she was praying. It was all very embarrassing, far more so than her nudity had been.

Late in the afternoon she came out. As well as a long, black robe, she was wearing her wide-brimmed hat and almost opaque dark glasses. She walked slowly to the airlock and then out onto the grassy ground. I followed her. She stood there, staring at the westering sun. Her expression frightened me. Rarely have I seen such naked hate on anybody's face.

"Your Reverence," I said, "I am still of the opinion that we should leave this world."

"Are you, an Earthman, frightened of a bunch of naked savages?" she sneered.

"Naked, perhaps," I said, "but not savages." I pointed almost directly upwards to where one of the big solar-powered airships, on its regular cargo and passenger run, was sailing overhead. "Savages could never have made a thing like that."

"Savagery and technology," she said, "can co-exist. As you should know."

"But these people are not savages," I insisted.

"You dare to say that, Captain Grimes, after you witnessed what they did to me, the messenger of God."

"Of your God. And, anyhow, you asked for it."

Even from behind her dark glasses her eyes were like twin lasers aimed at me.

"Enough," she said coldly. "I would remind you, Captain Grimes, that you are still my servant and, through me, of the Almighty. Please prepare to lift ship."

"Then you are taking my advice?"

"Of course not. We shall proceed forthwith to the Mountain That Is Not Named."

Oh, well, if she wanted to do some sight-seeing, I did not object. Tourism would get us into far less trouble (I thought) than attempting to interfere with perfectly innocent and rather beautiful religious rituals. Quite happily I went back into the ship, straight to the control cab, and started to do my sums or, to be more exact, told the pilot-computer to do my sums for me. Little Sister, although a deep-space ship in miniature, was also a pinnacle quite capable of flights, short or long, within a planetary atmosphere. She joined me as I was studying the read outs, looking at the chart and the extrapolation of the Great Circle course. "Well," she asked.

"If we lift now we can be at Nameless Mountain by sunrise tomorrow, without busting a gut."

"There is no need to be vulgar, Captain. But sunrise will be a good time. It will coincide with their dawn service."

I didn't bother to try to explain to her the concept of longitudinal time differences and, in any case, possibly some town or city was on the same meridian as the volcano — but then, of course, there would be other factors, such as latitude and the sun's declination, to be considered. So I just agreed with her.

And then, with the ship buttoned up, I got upstairs.

It was an uneventful flight. I had the controls on full automatic so there was no need for me to stay in the cab. Too, according to the information at my disposal, there was very little (if any) traffic in Stagatha's night skies. The sun ruled their lives.

We were both of us back in the control cab as we approached the volcano. She was looking disapprovingly at the mug of coffee from which I was sipping. I hoped sardonically that she had enjoyed the glass of water with which she had started her day. Outside the ship it was getting light, although not as light as it should have been at this hour. We were flying through dense smoke and steam, with visibility less than a couple of meters in any direction. Not that I had any worries. The three-dimensional radar screen was showing a clear picture of what was below, what was ahead. It was not a pretty picture but one not devoid of a certain horrid beauty. Towering, contorted rock pinnacles, evilly bubbling lava pools, spouting mud geysers.... The ship, still on automatic, swerved to steer around one of these that was hurling great rocks into the air....

I said, "We're here."

She said, "We have yet to reach the main crater rim."

"The main crater rim?" I repeated.

"You're not afraid, Captain, are you? Didn't you tell me that this ship of yours can take anything that anybody cares to throw at her?"

"But ... An active volcano ... One that seems to be on the verge of blowing its top in a major eruption...."

"Are you a vulcanologist, Captain?"

So we stood on, feeling our way through the murk. There was more than volcanic activity among the special effects. Lightning writhed around us, a torrent — flowing upwards or downwards? — of ghastly violet radiance that would have been blinding had it not been for the automatic polarization of the viewports. And ahead was sullen, ruddy glare ... No, not glare. It was more like a negation of light than normal luminosity. It was the Ultimate Darkness made visible.

Little Sister maintained a steady course despite the buffeting that she must be getting. And then she was in clear air, the eye of the storm as it were. We could see things visually instead of having to rely upon the radar screens. We were over the vast crater, the lake of dull, liquid fire, the semisolid, dark glowing crust through cracks in which glared white incandescence. In the center of this lake was a sort of island, a black, truncated cone.

"Set us down there," she said.

"Not bloody likely," I said.

"Set us down there."

She was standing now and her hand was on my shoulder, gripping it painfully. And ... And ... How can I describe it? It was as though some power were flowing from her to me, through me. I fought it. I tried to fight it. And then I tried to rationalize. After all, the metal of which Little Sister was built, an isotope of gold, was virtually guaranteed to be proof against any' thing. If anything should happen to her I could go to her builders on Electra and demand my money back. (Not that my money had paid for her in the first place.) Joke.

I had the ship back on manual control. I made a slow approach to the central island, hovered above it. I had been expecting trouble, difficulty in holding the ship where I wanted her, but it was easy. Too easy. Suspiciously easy.

I let her fall, slowly, slowly, the inertial drive just ticking over. I felt the faint jar, a very faint jar, as she landed on the flat top, the perfectly smooth top of the truncated cone.

She said, "Open the airlock doors." I tried to protest but the words wouldn't come.

She said, "Open the airlock doors." I thought, And so we fill the ship with stinking, sulfurous gases. But the internal atmosphere can soon be purified. On the console before me I saw the glowing words as I actuated the switch.

INNER DOOR OPEN. OUTER DOOR OPEN.

She was gone from behind me, back into the main cabin. I got up from my chair, followed her. She

was going outside, I realized. She should have asked me for a spacesuit; it would have given her some protection against the heat, against an almost certainly poisonous atmosphere. Some of this was already getting inside the ship, an acidity that made my eyes water, made me sneeze. But it didn't seem to be worrying her.

She passed through both doors.

I stood in the little chamber, watching her. She was standing on the heat-smoothed rock, near, too near to the edge of the little plateau. Was the silly bitch going to commit spectacular and painful suicide? But I was reluctant to leave the security — the illusory security? — of my ship to attempt to drag her to safety. No, it wasn't cowardice. Not altogether. I just knew that she knew what she was doing.

(If I'd known more I should have been justified in going out to give her a push!)

She stood there, very straight and tall, in black silhouette against the dull glow from the lake of fire. Her form wavered, became indistinct as a dark column of smoke eddied about her. Still she stood there while the smoke thinned, vanished. It was as though it had been absorbed by her body.

But that was impossible, wasn't it?

She walked back to the airlock. The skin of her face seemed to be much darker than it had been — but that was not surprising. It seemed to me — but that must have been imagination — that her feet did not touch the surface over which she was walking.

She said as she approached me, "Take me back to the city."

I obeyed. No matter what her order had been, no matter how absurd or dangerous, I should have obeyed. When first I had met her I had been conscious of her charisma but had learned to live with it, to distrust it and to despise it. Now neither distrust nor contempt would have been possible.

We got upstairs.

No sooner were we on course than the volcano blew up. The blast of it hit us like a blow from something solid. I wasn't able to watch as I was too busy trying to keep the ship under some sort of control as she plunged through the fiery turbulence, through the smoke and the steam and the fiery pulverized dust, through the down-stabbing and up-thrusting lightning bolts.

And, through it all, she was laughing.

It was the first time that I had heard her laugh.

It was an experience that I could well have done without.

"I need some more beer," he said, "to wash the taste of that volcanic dust out of my throat. After all the years I still remember it."

She refilled his mug, and then her own.

"Did the dust get inside your ship?" she asked.

"It got everywhere," he told her. "All over the entire bloody planet."

We set down in that same field where we had made our first landing. According to the chronometer it wanted only an hour to local, apparent noon, but the sky was overcast. The air was chilly. She ordered me to open one of her trunks. In it was a further supply of the cast-off clothing that she had brought from Warrenhome. And there were books. Bibles, I assumed, or the perversion of Holy Writ adopted by Her church. I opened one but was unable, of course, to read the odd, flowing Stagathan characters.

I filled a backpack with the clothing. While I was so doing she took something else from the trunk. It was a whip; haft and tapering lash were all of three meters long. It was an evil-looking thing.

We left the ship. She took the lead. I trudged behind. As she passed one of the flowering bushes, its blossoms drab in the dismal gray light, she slashed out with the whip, cracking it expertly, severing stems and twigs, sending tattered petals fluttering to the ground.

We walked into the city.

We came to the central square, with the obelisk (but it was casting no shadow), the great gong (but it was now no more than an ugly disk of dull, pitted metal), the celebrants and the worshippers.

But there was nothing for them to worship. The sky was one, uniform gray with not so much as a diffuse indication of the position of the sun. The people were all, as they had been at that other service, naked but now their nudity was ... ugly. A thin drizzle was starting to fall, but it was mud rather than ordinary rain, streaking the shivering skins of the miserable people.

The priest standing by the gong, the man with the striker, was the first to see us. He pointed at us, shouting angrily. He advanced towards us, still shouting, menacing us with his hammer. Behind him others were now shouting, and screaming. They were blaming us for the dense cloud that had hidden their god from sight.

She stood her ground.

Suddenly her lash snaked out, whipped itself around the striker and tore it from the priest's hands, sent it clattering to the mud-slimed marble paving. It cracked out again, the tip of it slashing across the man's face, across his eyes. He screamed, and that merciless whip played over his body, drawing blood with every stroke.

And She was declaiming in a strong, resonant voice, with one foot planted firmly upon the squirming body of the hapless, blinded priest, who had fallen to the ground, laying about her with the whip.

Even then, at the cost of a few injuries, they could have overpowered her, have taken her from behind. But the heart was gone from them. Their god had forsaken them. And She ... She was speaking with the voice of a god. Or was a god speaking through her? She was possessed. The black charisma of her was overpowering. I opened the backpack and began to distribute the cast-off clothing. Hands — the hands of men, women, and children — snatched the drab rags from me eagerly. And there was something odd about it. It seemed as though that backpack were a bottomless bag. It could never have held sufficient clothing to cover the nakedness of a crowd of several thousand people. Some time later, of course, I worked things out. Converts must have gone back into their homes for the ceremonial black robes that they doffed at the dawn service and resumed at sunset. But, even so ... How could those robes have assumed the appearance of, say, ill-cut, baggy trousers? Imagination, it must have been. Even though I could not understand what she was saying, I was under the spell of Her voice.

And it frightened me. I felt my agnosticism wavering.

And I like being an agnostic.

Oh, well, at a time of crisis there is always one thing better than presence of mind — and that is absence of body.

I left her preaching to the multitude and walked back to the ship. I did worse than that. When I was back on board I collected everything of hers, every last thing, and lugged it out through the airlock on to a plastic sheet that I spread on the wet grass, covered it with another sheet.

And then I lifted off.

After all, I had done what I had contracted to do. I had carried her from Warrenhome to Stagatha (and the money for her fare had been deposited in my bank). I had stayed around until she had become established as a missionary. (Well, she had, hadn't she?)

I broke through that filthy overcast into bright sunlight. I began to feel less unhappy. I looked down at Stagatha. The entire planet, from pole to pole, was shrouded with smoke, or steam, or dust or — although this was unlikely — just ordinary cloud.

I wondered when their god would next show himself to the Stagathans and set course for Pengram, the nearest Man-colonized planet, where I hoped to be able to find further employment For Little Sister and myself.

"I don't think much of your Odd Gods," said Kitty Kelly. "After all, sun-worship is common enough. And so are evangelists of either sex who preach peculiar perversions of Christianity and are charismatic enough to make converts. But I would have expected you to behave more responsibly. To go flying off, the way you did, leaving that poor woman to her-fate...."

"Poor woman? I was there, Kitty. You weren't. Too, I haven't finished yet."

I'd almost forgotten about Stagatha (he went on) when, some standard years later, I ran into Commander Blivens, captain of the survey ship Cartographer. I'd known Blivens slightly when I was in the Survey Service myself. Anyhow, I was at Port Royal, on Caribbea, owner-master of Sister Sue, which vessel had started her life as one of the Interstellar Transport Commission's Epsilon Class star tramps, Epsilon Scorpii. (She finally finished up as the Rim Worlds Confederacy's survey ship Faraway Quest. Yes, this very ship that we're aboard now.) But to get back to Blivens ... I was in the Trade Winds Bar with my chief officer, Billy Williams, quietly absorbing planter's punches when I heard

somebody call my name. I couldn't place him at first but finally did so.

Then, for a while, it was the usual sort of conversation for those circumstances. What happened to old so-and-so? Did you hear that thingummy actually made rear admiral? And so on.

I got around to asking Blivens what he was doing on Carribea.

"Just a spell of rest and recreation for my boys and girls," he told me. "And for myself. At one time I used to regard a rather odd but very human world called Stagatha as my R & R planet. The people as near human as makes no difference. Sun worshippers they were, happy sun worshippers. Unpolluted atmosphere, solar power used for everything. And not, like this overpriced dump, commercialized.

"But it's ruined now."

"How so?" I asked him.

"They've changed their religion. Some high-powered female missionary decided to save their souls. I suppose that some money-hungry tramp skipper carried her from her own planet, Warrenhome, to Stagatha. Somebody should find out who the bastard was and shoot him. And then, really to put the tin hat on things, there was a catastrophic volcanic eruption which threw the gods alone know how many tons of dust into the upper atmosphere and completely bugged the climate. So there was a switch from solar power to the not-very-efficient burning of fossil fuels — and still more airborne muck to obscure the sunlight.

"The missionary — the Lady Bishop, she called herself — called aboard to see me. She scared me, I don't mind admitting it. You'll never guess what her staff of office was. A dirty great whip. She demanded that I release one of my engineer officers to her service. The odd part was that she knew his name — Terry Gowan — and all about him. And Mr. Gowan seemed to know of her. It made sense, I suppose. He was one of those morose, Bible-bashing bastards himself. And, apart from the Bible in some odd version, his only reading was books on the engineering techniques in use during the Victorian era on Earth. He used to make models, working models, of steam engines and things like that.

"I gave him his discharge — which, as a Survey Service captain, I was entitled to do. You know the regulation. Should a properly constituted planetary authority request the services of a specialist officer, petty officer or rating for any period, and provided that such officer, petty officer or rating signifies his or her willingness to enter the service of such planetary authority, and provided that the safe management of the ship not be affected by the discharge of one of her personnel with no replacement immediately available, then the commanding officer shall release such officer, petty officer or rating, paying him or her all monies due and with the understanding that seniority shall continue to accrue until the return of the officer, petty officer or rating to the Survey Service.

"Anyhow, I don't think that anybody aboard Cartographer shed a tear for Gloomy Gowan, as he was known, when he was paid off. And he, I suppose, has been happy erecting dark, satanic mills all over the landscape for Her Holiness."

"And so everybody was happy," I said sarcastically.

"A bloody good planet ruined," grumbled Blivens.

A few more years went by.

Again I ran into Blivens — Captain Blivens now — quite by chance. He was now commanding officer of the Survey Service base on New Colorado and I had been chartered by the Service — they often threw odd jobs my way — to bring in a shipment of fancy foodstuffs and tipples for the various messes.

I dined with Blivens in his quite palatial quarters.

He said, towards the end of the meal, "You remember when I last met you, Grimes ... I was captain of Cartographer then and we were talking about Stagatha...."

"I remember," I said.

"Well, I went there again. For the last time. Just one of those checking-up-showing-the-flag voyages that I had to make. But there wasn't any Stagatha. Not any more. The sun had gone nova. And as there hadn't been a Carlotti station on the planet no word had gotten out...."

The news shocked me.

All those people, incinerated.

And I couldn't help feeling that I was somehow responsible.

But it was just a coincidence. Wasn't it?

"Of course it was," said Kitty Kelly brightly.

"Was it?" whispered Grimes. And then: "For I am a jealous God..."